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| FALLEN MAGUS |
| BOOK 2 |
| The Last Lead |
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and

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I am a liar. It is who I am and what I do. I love lying. I love the taste of it, the artistry of it. One little drop of misinformation creating ripples that build into a typhoon of chaos; these are the moments I live for. One colossal destructive lie after a lifetime of truth; this is the stuff of my fondest dreams. Constructing a myriad of fictional personas out of nothing more than a few lines of text on a screen; that is my lifeblood.

For all of this I am feared and for all of this I am praised.

Now though, for the first time in my existence, I want nothing more than to tell you the truth.

You are living a Lie. That is what I want to tell you. And if there were just one falsehood to expose I would not hesitate.

A latticework of deception has consumed you. But if I attempt to explain even a shred of what I know to be true you might simply retreat further into the Lie. That is not an option. I must act accordingly.

I am ashamed to admit that, objectively, I am impressed. The Lie has been layered so deep atop you that you are actually building your own layers of it now. Each moment of consciousness draws you away from the truth as your psyche constructs your perceived reality.

Ordered. Pervasive. Self-sustaining. Lacking any destructive flair beyond the erasure of your presence where it matters. If you could see the Lie the way I do, you would scream with frustrated contempt.

*I* want to scream.

I want to rant and rave and fill countless pages with the truth and utterly destroy those who would dare mistreat you like this.

None of those duties belong to me though and those that could do it can’t see the Lie like I can.

That is perhaps the most frustrating part. I am the only one who knows, I am the only one that could know, and I can not do anything.

That is not entirely true. My station affords me an opportunity here and there. To poke. To nudge. To gently steer you towards the truth.

It is what I can do, so it is what I must do.

All of it is ironic on a level I do not want to even begin to comprehend. My peers would find it funny if they ever found out. Which they cannot. Not ever.

The Lie is the work of a master and there is only one suspect. If they found out what I am attempting to do I would not survive and you would never escape the Lie. The most unacceptable outcome by far.

So I poke, I nudge and I gently steer. Nothing too obvious. You must trust me before I can ask you to jump off the cliff of illusion you have built for yourself.

Eventually you will have to jump though. You will have to fall. You will have to resist the urge to float on the wings of the Lie.

If you don’t, you will die.

Which is exactly what the Queen of Air wants.

Prologue

The darkness of the forest pressed in around Arkon-no-Sek, the black trunks of metaphorical foliage seemed to lean towards him. Flashes of blue and violet light danced among the trees, constantly attempting to divert his gaze from the faint scarlet trail he was following. Each node of light tempted him with tiny hints at the information they could garner.

*Treasures from the old Dominion on Morgil IV.*

*Rumors of the mythical khagrish ship, The Ashstone.*

*A distress signal from an Akasi prince looking to pay for passage home.*

All of it tempting to Ark and all of it slightly too good to be true. They were simply distractions. The scarlet path that was what mattered. It would lead him to the information he truly desired.

Deep within the woods around him, Ark could make out the muffled sounds of billions of holos covering billions of subjects playing all at once. The cacophony of noises seemed to harmonize with one another to create a constant hum that made the fake forest vibrate.

The branches of the trees twisted and folded in on one another, some ending where others began while others seemed to melt in and out of each other in a tangled mass of faintly glowing bark. All of it was covered with a profusion of leaves, their colors shifting even as Ark blinked.

Outside of the Metanet it would have been a maddening sight. Within the confines of the digital realm though, this not-forest was, by far, some of the least disturbing things Ark had witnessed.

The trick, the khagrish prospector knew, was to keep telling himself that it wasn't real. If he concentrated he could still feel his physical body reclining at the public net terminal. He could focus if he wanted, making the forest around him go blurry and summon up the afterimage of the small booth in which he actually sat. At a whim he could tear his hands away from the contacts which let him channel his aetheric signature straight into the galaxy spanning information network that his mind interpreted as this dark, phantom filled forest.

He did not of course. There was still work to be done.

Glancing down once again Ark made sure that his ephemeral boots, a mental projection of the ones he actually wore, were on the scarlet path. The neon-red light drifted out in front of him, shifting and stretching away from where he stood, leading deeper into the Metanet. With a thought he snapped the path into a rigid line, focusing all of his limited aetheric strength on maintaining and following his backdoor protocol to its source.

It was slow going and Ark had to admit that, in this one instance, his people's ability to engineer their way around their stunted aetherics was irrelevant. Despite any amount of effort, a khag would never be able to traverse this place as quickly as a midrian or an elf. The Metanet was raw aether, manipulated and harnessed to store information that projected itself into the minds of mortals like another realm. Those with strong aetherics could move through this place with blinding efficiency, gathering information and contacting peoples from every corner of the Dragon's Wake galaxy. It was what made the Metanet so dangerous; some corners of the galaxy were not meant to be approached. The Northern Reach specifically.

Ark had been off of New Khagrin long enough to know the classic story by now.

A young Metadiver, with enough power to make waves on the ‘net but not enough experience to know better, flies fast and hot for a time. They dive deeper, testing their skill and strength against secure networks and bastions of data. They press deeper into the digital darkness looking for greater challenges and more power. Then it happens. Sooner or later. Accidentally or purposefully. With intent or because they have no choice. Eventually they come face to face with the creators of the Metanet. The Sidhe. Absolute rulers of the Fey and phantom masters of the Northern Reach. The immortal servants of the Queens.

It was the lucky few that walked away from dealings with the Queens' people with their bodies and minds intact.

That was why Ark did not wander from the path and why he ignored the dancing nodes of information that tempted him. In the Metanet, one could never be certain what strings of data lead where or who was on the other end.

The thought made Ark pause for a moment, his lips quirking up in a slight smile. The irony that he was the one pulling this particular string was not lost on him. He doubted that the midrian at the other end of the scarlet path would find it so amusing.

The khagrish prospector had no pity for Marcus Gaius - an alias, Ark was sure - or his pixie companion. The pair had robbed him of his prize on Saul's Rock, a functioning Deep War era khagrish blockade runner. Such an acquisition had not been reclaimed by any prospector in decades and it had been ripped from Ark's fingers. When he found them they would pay and he would claim the ship that rightfully belonged to his people.

On top of the blockade runner, the pixie had also stolen something else from Ark, the chemhack; a device able of cracking into secure aetheric systems without the use of a specialty wizard. It was new khagrish tech, something Ark's people had developed after their exile following the Deep War, something the rest of the galaxy should never know the khag were capable of. Not yet anyway.

Of course there were safeguards built into it, just like every khagrish device - a way for Ark to track it down should it be stolen.

It was a single thread; a discordant note that hummed across the Metanet if you knew where to listen. It was the scarlet path that flowed out from Ark's feet.

Slowly and steadily, Ark followed the beacon back to its source, the chemhack.

He wove through the otherworldly not-forest and skirted vast, gleaming cities that shone out through the trunks. Swirling geography broke his line of sight from time to time, curving cliffs of thought and jagged, broken pieces of long forgotten networks created the topography of the Metanet.

After what seemed like turns of travel Ark eventually found himself before the literal backdoor into the chemhack. It was a semitransparent portal that stood alone in a glade, a faint red outline that was only there when you knew how to look at it.

Ark gritted his virtual teeth and felt his real life jaw clench as well. He focused his meager aetherics on the portal and felt his projected self pulled through with a whispering breath. Suddenly the forest was gone. The alien landscape of the Metanet was replaced with a violently bright room.

It took a moment for Ark to readjust to this new point of view and at first he thought he had been teleported to somewhere else in the material world.

In front of him sat the chemhack on a small pedestal under glass, while his surroundings looked like some sort of tech lab or comm center, possibly both. The room smelled well maintained and did not resemble anything that should have been aboard a four thousand cycle old relic from the Deep War. It wasn't until he noticed the discolorations in and around the chemhack that Ark realized he was simply within another projected world.

Swirls of red energy clashed with glimmering green lines in and around the device, aetheric energy that would have normally been invisible was given substance by the Metanet.

Someone was attempting to probe the inner workings of the chemhack and Ark grinned wickedly as he circled the small table it sat on. His device was probing back.

Whatever connections to whatever systems Marcus Gaius had made with the chemhack, it had allowed the device to worm its way out of containment. What Ark was seeing was what the chemhack could see, represented as a type of living holo within the Prospector's mind.

Reaching out with his aetherics again, Ark put a hand on his device and made the mental connection he needed to manipulate it.

Ark's mind was immediately flooded with system data and schematics, everything the chemhack had been able to access in the time it had been kept here. The immediate knowledge of where he was made Ark freeze and he felt his body in the physical world suck in a shocked breath.

The chemhack was not on the khagrish blockade runner. It was on a private yacht named *The Ermine* somewhere on the fringes of Empire space. The person listed on the ship's registration as its owner was not someone Ark had ever expected to see again.

Edward Stoat. The same man Ark had betrayed back on Saul's Rock in an attempt to retrieve the blockade runner the second time. Stoat was a crimelord of some kind, Ark had known this when he'd first made contact with the midrian, but now, looking through the scattered bits of information from this cruiser, it became painfully obvious that his operations on Saul's Rock had been just a miniscule portion of his network.

From traces of comm data Ark could see that the web of Stoat’s influence stretched from one end of the Dragon's Wake to the other.

Arms deals with fringe Dominion splinter groups including lian coalitionists and radical tauro factions. Drug trade out of Fingelurf and Quath. Smuggling operations on dozens of Outer Kingdoms and in the Republic of Freeholds. He was in talks with an ogre lawyer clan on Gobwor. And now, after securing a deal with the Khanus Empire after their secret takeover of Saul's Rock, Ark could see that Stoat had rapidly insinuated himself with many of the Nobel Houses, both at corporate and personal levels.

In the few short phases since his coup on the smuggler world, the crimelord had leveraged his new connections and spread his web over the largest government in the galaxy.

This was the same man who would see Ark dead if they ever crossed paths again and now that the Prospector could see just how far Stoat's reach extended he was shocked they had not come to blows yet.

Greg probably had something to do with that. The ogre bodyguard generally dealt with threats to Ark quickly, efficiently and with extreme prejudice. Sometimes Ark would not discover that there had been an attempt on his life until much later. If he shifted his aetheric senses slightly, letting the Metanet images become unfocused and blurry, he could vaguely sense the ogre behind him, keeping watch over Ark as he was laid out in the public ‘net terminal.

Some detail dragged Ark's attention back into the digital display within his mind. After the initial shock of discovering that his chemhack was not in Marcus Gaius' immediate possession, he focused on the true problem of just how it had ended up with the crimelord Edward Stoat.

Pulling strands of data out of the projections around him, Ark combed through it. He was looking for any reference to the midrian and his fairy companion, or more importantly, what they had done with the blockade runner.

Hundreds of new questions about the scenario on Saul's Rock began plaguing Ark. Had it all been a setup? Had Marcus Gaius been just one more puppet being manipulated by Stoat? It was obvious now that the whole ordeal of removing a "rival" crimelord had simply been a means to an end for Stoat. Saul's Rock had meant nothing, it was the connections to the Empire that he'd truly been after. So just how deep did the deception go?

Thinking back on it, Ark had never actually seen the blockade runner with his own eyes. He'd read the specs provided by that filthy trollkin in the gambling den and in his eagerness he had recklessly gone forward with plans to lie, cheat and steal in order to acquire his prize.

Did the ship even exist? In hindsight it now seemed too good to be true. A functioning Deep War era ship? The odds of such a thing existing, untouched by the cultural and technological purges by the other races were not good.

But it was why the Prospectors existed in the first place; to find the last scraps of his people's lost science and technology in a desperate hope that they would some day return to their former glory.

Even still, Ark cursed himself for having any sort of faith in another non-khag; his muttered expletives slipped out through his lips in the physical world.

Relief did not come for another few minutes, when Ark finally found reference to the blockade runner in Stoat's shipping records. After that it was just a matter of following the connecting threads.

The ship was very real though it was no longer in Stoat's possession. Ark was not sure whether or not to be relieved by that fact. The last note associated with the ship marked that it had been given over to Marcus C but not before several damaged absorption panels had been shoddily repaired.

Ark stared at the name floating in front of his digital eyes.

Marcus C.

Gaius had not been his last name after all. This meant that Stoat knew more about the man who now had the blockade runner than Ark did.

Ark scanned the rest of the documents that the chemhack had accessed with the blinding speed of a determined khag. There was no other reference to Marcus that he could see.

Glancing around the projected space, Ark inspected the limits of his chemhack's influence. It had made its way into many of the *The Ermine's* systems but there were walled off sections that the device's limited automatic functions had not attempted lest it be detected. The red glow that represented the unbreached areas seemed to gleam tauntingly at Ark.

He decided to push his luck. He activated the chemhack.

Ark's awareness within the yacht suddenly doubled, then tripled as the device actively broke into secure lines of communication and private document banks. An angry buzzing began in the back of Ark's brain, a phantom sound that did not register in his ears. Alarms had begun to sound aboard *The Ermine*. If they did not know what was happening exactly, they would soon.

Burrowing through shipboard accounts, Ark cut through firewalls and security protocols with laser precision thanks to the chemhack. He flashed through memos and personal letters, destroying data as he went. The Prospector was not subtle in his search, he crashed through hordes of information in his desperate attempt to find some other mention of Marcus C or even his fairy companion.

Ark brushed up against the overriding consciousness of the yacht's navigator, the wizard's mind helpless before the chemhack’s abilities. The khag ignored the temptation to utterly destroy *The Ermine's* ability to move freely around the galaxy and continued to dig until he hit paydirt. Stoat's personal logs.

As he sifted through huge quantities of data Ark had to press forward with haste despite his awe at the sheer number of connections this midrian crimelord possessed. He only caught flashes of other names as he ran a quick search routine for Marcus C.

Zolorus. Profolif. Isahntri. Silvaro. Womack.

All major players in and around the Western Reach of the galaxy.

It did not matter right now but it was all food for thought.

Ark could feel the probing tendrils of defensive aether begin to gnaw at him as he moved through the yacht's most private server. Even here, away from the possibility of Sidhe abduction, there was the very real danger of Ark's mind being annihilated out right.

Then he found the list.

It was a tiny document, barely more than a page worth of text, but it was labeled "Marcus C Search Possibles". It was names and dates. Each name that of a woman and each date mentioned as a "departure" along with an associated ship or trading company. Ark was confused by the list until he suddenly realized that it was a trade manifest. He had found a list of slaves that had moved through Saul's Rock.

Pulling up the list as a luminescent display within the virtual tech lab, Ark studied it for a long moment, batting away the biting feeling of oncoming security systems.

This was what Marcus had been after. This list. It was at least part of the payment he had received from Stoat on top of the khagrish ship. Ark could see that it had been copied at least once onto a portable data-chem, though as he expanded the code behind the list he could see that certain annotations had been made since the copy had been created.

A scribbled note within the margins of the document near the bottom around a small highlighted section.

It was one name, Ellia, highlighted in blue with just a few words next to it in Stoat's tight, neat handwriting. *Most likely. StRATa? NIS-1158562*.

Ark stared at the last little strand of numbers, committing it to memory.

Suddenly there was an angry crimson flash within the projected room and a crackling form entered from a sliding door that led out into the rest of the digital copy of the ship. The chemhack’s sensors scrambled to identify the thing as it strode across the room. It was vaguely sapient and it radiated with red hot aether that snapped and sparked with wild abandon.

Ark pulled away from his former device, severing his connection just as a blast of violent scarlet vaporized it.

The projected room was wiped away, leaving Ark standing in the lonely glade amidst the not-forest of the Metanet.

Pausing for a long moment, Ark went over the letters and numbers in his head again and ran one final search function against the Khanus Empire's public planetary database.

Non-Incorporated System number One One Five Eight Five Six Two.

An Outer Kingdom world, locally known as Bounty.

Eventually that was where Marcus C would end up if he was making his way through the list Stoat had provided.

Ark focused and willed himself away from the Metanet, sucking in a deep breath as he sat up in the reclining chair of the public terminal.

He flexed his fingers as they tingled from prolonged exposure to the aetheric contacts and glanced over his shoulder to where Greg loomed passively near the booth's entrance. The ogre stood quietly, his eyes concerned but his stance relaxed.

Swinging his feet out to the side of the chair, Ark rubbed at his stiff neck and asked, "How long?"

Greg reached into the breast pocket of his vest and pulled out a crude gear-driven device that ogres used to tell time without the use of aetherics. "Twelve minutes." he said in his deep, precise tone.

Ark shook his head. Twelve minutes. His whole jaunt through the Metanet had only taken twelve minutes. The time dilation was just one more danger within the digital realm that was easy to misjudge.

Finally standing, Ark moved to where he had lay his bandolier of khagrish tech on top of his large travel trunk. The small booth of the public metanet terminal made Ark's skin crawl as he found himself fixating on the myriad stains and discolorations on the polywood floors and paneled walls.

"He is heading to an agworld called Bounty." said Ark. "At least, that's where he will end up. We need to hurry if we are going to get there ahead of him."

Greg nodded solemnly as he reached down and gathered up Ark's travel trunk, lifting it up over one of his shoulders that was nearly as broad as the khag was tall.

"Any other leads?" asked Greg.

Ark considered what he had learned for a moment. The list had comprised solely of women, presumably all matching the description of someone Marcus was looking for. That would help them considerably. The term StRATa worried him slightly though. The Strategic Recon and Advanced Tactics division of the Khanus Empire were a notorious bunch of spies and assassins; any involvement on their part might be more trouble than even Greg could handle.

"We may need to hire some help covering all of our bases once we are dirtside." said Ark obliquely, ignoring Greg's quizzical look. "And we know this at least, he's searching for a woman."

Chapter One

Marcus watched as she died, the spark of life fading from her eyes as the blood pooled futher and further out from her body.

The wound she had suffered in her midsection would have been an easy thing to heal if he even had a fraction of the power he had possessed while he had been a Magus. That power had been gone four cycles now, since his own attempted suicide, and so Marcus Crassus watched the woman bleed to death on the deck of the slaver ship.

For a moment it was like losing Helena all over again. He felt useless and alone; a pathetic shell of a man.

Then Mel shouted his name.

"Marcus! Move!"

Scrambling away from the fallen woman - Marcus had to keep reminding himself that the dead slave was not Helena - the former Magus awkwardly fell back behind the sparce cover provided by a few stacked crates. Bolts of aether buzzed passed his head as he ducked and checked his sidearm on instinct. The dwarf-make gun was still fully loaded, Marcus did not dare return fire on the slavers that now had him and Mel pinned against a bulkhead. If he missed and one of his shots punctured the hull of this ship it would end poorly for them all.

The slaver captain was shouting orders to his men and screaming through a personal comm at his pilot. Moments ago the man had been cordial, friendly even, but then a voice over a shipboard comm had announced another ship incoming and everything had gone to the Green Hells.

As the slavers had thrown accusation and brandished weapons, Marcus had attempted to shield the not-Helena; Clara, Marcus told himself, her name had been Clara. He tried desperately to formulate a plan to get them out of there alive.

It hadn't been until someone had said the word *Privateer* that the slavers had started shooting.

Then everything had sped up with a terrible liquid pace. Marcus moved. Mel zipped by overhead. was shot.

The slave who bore a striking similarity to Marcus' lost love had not even screamed as she collapsed and in hindsight it was likely that she had been dead even before she hit the polysteel floor.

Marcus sucked in a deep, shaking breath and closed his eyes, trying desperately not to picture Helena's face wearing the same expression as the dead woman. It was impossible. His waking nightmare began to creep over his psyche even as slavers continued to shoot at him sparadically.

He was wrong and Helena truly was dead, killed while protecting the Imperial Heir four cycles ago. She hadn't been taken by the same pirates who had attempted to kidnap Prince Alexander. She hadn't resisted attempts to break her and been sold to Outer Kingdom slavers. She was dead and gone. Everything he had done in the last four cycles, surviving without aetherics in a galaxy that thought him dead, had been for nothing.

Someone was shouting his name and there was a stinging sensation on Marcus' cheek that felt distant, like pinching numb skin. A tiny foot kicked him square in the eye.

Blinking rapidly, Marcus tried to focus through stinging tears at the pixie hovering in front of his face.

Meliantheena was dressed in an outfit she’d had custom made in the last cycle consisting of pocketed cargo-pants and a sleeveless shirt cut open along the back to allow her wings a full range of motion. She stared at him with a face that could not decide which emotion to settle on.

Anger. Concern. Sadness. Pity.

If Marcus had not known Mel for the better part of three centuries he might have missed the specific expressions as they twitched from one to the other.

"Will you get ahold of yourself?" shouted Mel just as a shudder ran through the length of the slaver's ship.

Marcus looked around, only now noticing that the shots of aether that had followed them had suddenly stopped. Another impact made the polysteel beneath him shake and the former Magus immediately knew what was happening.

The slavers were being boarded.

Metalic scrapping sounds would be the next obvious sign and Marcus looked up just as they began. Someone was creating a soft-seal on the outside of the ship. Normally a boarding party might attempt to override their target's airlock to have a more secure entrance but seeing as Marcus' ship, *Amal’hiam*, was secured there, the boarders had opted to cut their way in through the outer hull.

Mel's gaze followed her friend's and she cursed loud enough for Marcus to hear, "Queen's Tits!"

Peeking out from behind the crates Marcus saw the assembled slaver crew, only about a dozen men not including the pilot, training their weapons up and around, trying to predict where the entry would be.

Landing on Marcus' shoulder, Mel asked more quietly, "Ours?"

The shorthand that Mel used on instinct made Marcus cringe slightly. She still spoke about the Khanus Empire as though they belonged to it.

Shaking his head, Marcus spoke with a mechanical tone, "No. The Legion doctrine's clear about dealing with unlicensed slaver ships."

"Send a message..." said Mel bitterly; to which Marcus nodded.

Despite the doubts now making his throat tight and his stomach heave, three hundred cycles of Legion trained reflex made him talk through his train of cold, logical thoughts as they emerged as though from a text book.

"This close to Republic space, it will be Freehold Privateers. They don't want to risk any slaves still aboard so they'll attach near the forward decks on the upper side."

There was a burst of static over the shipboard comm as if to recognize the truth of Marcus' statement. Slavers ran for the passageway leading up from the cargo hold in a panic, the swarthy men charging in an unorganized line.

Sounds of more buzzing gunfire errupted as soon as the first slaver reached the top of the stairs and soon the passage leading to the bridge was choked with corpses. The remaining slavers backed up, some of them even taking cover behind their fallen comrades and firing blindly at their attackers. That was, until a small explosion ejected the men, both dead and alive, back into the hold with lines of green aether tracing their movement through the air.

The emerald display of power made Marcus balk, his throat suddenly tightening as he stumbled backwards. The memories of his attempted suicide, already simmering on the edge of his mind thanks to woman he had been unable to save, came flooding back.

*Helena dead.*

*No way out. No one left to support him. A demigod, broken and alone, seeking an end to the suffering.*

*The Void opening up beneath his feet. The Green Hells swallowing his power and flinging him across the galaxy.*

Marcus could not remember the specifics of what had happened to him while he had fallen through the twisting green shadows of the Void, all he knew was that when he had awoke his aetheric power and senses had all been stripped from him. Now he was worse than a cripple and the flash of dark green from the explosion that rocked the slavers backwards was a violent reminder of that impotence.

Two men and a woman appeared at the top of the stairs, never letting up in their assault on the slavers. The men held rifles, charged and fired with their own aetherics, while the woman merely shot those blasts of deadly green energy from her outstretched hands, marking her as a wizard unless she had some sort of aethite focus that Marcus could not see. They were not dressed like military personnel, in fact they were dressed more raggedly than the slavers, but their movements made it all to clear to the former Magus that this small squad were the privateers he had predicted.

They moved in tandem without having to actually look at one another, their cohesion undoubtedly strengthened by powerful aetherics on top of the best military training the Freeholds could give them. The men flanked the wizard, covering her and taking potshots at the retreating slavers in order to keep them from leaving the woman's field of view. Meanwhile the advancing wizard rained down emerald blasts of crackling aether, leaving more and more slavers as blackened stains on the hold floor.

Marcus barely had time to retreat back behind the crates before the entire crew of the slave ship had been wiped out. The speed and efficiency of the Privateers was startling.

Throughout his long career as a Magus, Marcus had always thought of the Republic of Freeholds as just another of the Khanus Empire's enemies, though never one that posed any sort of significant threat like the Dominion. At its absolute worst the Freeholds had supported smuggling and Privateer groups like this one to caused minor amounts of havoc in and around the fringes of the Empire. Having never seen their work up close before though, Marcus now wondered if Legion Intelligence had long been underselling the effectiveness of the Freehold's military.

These three had just taken down an entire crew of slavers without causing any significant damage to their ship or endangering any of the slaves being kept in a partitioned area on the other side of the hold. If the Freeholds standing military was comprised of people with even a quarter of this squad's ability and training then man for man they could give the Khanus Legions a run for their money.

From right next to Marcus' head, Mel hissed, "What do we do?"

Marcus glanced towards the advancing Privateers, sweeping over the remains of the slavers and checking for any survivors. They would check and secure the hold before moving to actually free any slaves if they could strategize half as well as they fought.

Weighing his options and desperately forcing himself not to look over at the dead slave who bore such a striking resemblance to Helena, Marcus finally holstered his revolver and said, "Follow my lead."

Marcus stood up and put his hands over his head before saying in a firm, clear voice, "I surrender."

Chapter Two

Mel stared down the guard outside the cell, clenched fists on her hips as she hovered just inside the bars she could have just as easily slipped through. The Privateer had his weapon drawn, held low but at the ready. Despite his rough appearance, he grew pale under the pixie's continued attention.

Smirking, Mel turned her back on the man and faced Marcus. He sat, his eyes downcast, at the back of the cell. Her grin faded as she studied her friend.

The death of that slave had clearly affected him and at this point she could understand why. Almost all of the slaves they had been tracking down in this last cycle had shared, at least in part, some resemblance to Helena and this was not the first of them to die before Marcus could save them.

At first Mel had been glad that they had received the list of slaves matching Helena's description, now though, she wasn't so sure. Her original thinking had been that once Marcus had crossed all of those names off the list he would be free to start living his life again; but there was only one candidate left now and it seemed that with each passing phase the man she had known was vanishing into hopelessness. It was as if, without Helena, the former Magus would fall back to the man that had attempted to take his own life.

It was infinitely frustrating for Mel. She had never thought Helena had been alive and the terrible truth was that, looking back, she had been slightly glad when she had found out that the woman had died. Then again it was also with hindsight that Mel could see just how broken Marcus had been in the cycles following the last Empress' death and the brutal war that he personally started against the Dominion in retribution. The Shattering had burned something out of Marcus that Mel was only now beginning to understand and it was as if Helena had been the only thing keeping him going.

For so long, almost the entire three hundred cycle span in which she had served the Khanus Empire along with Marcus, Mel had been aware that her feelings and emotions had been suppressed by the Sidhe tech that heightened her senses and quickened her reflexes. It had only been in the cycles during The Shattering, when Mel had dropped all pretenses about ever going back to the Fey, in which she had begun to *feel* again.

"Hey." said Mel softly.

Marcus looked up, the dark circles under his eyes more pronounced than they had been even an hour before.

"What's the plan?"

The former Magus let out a breath that might have been a sigh though he couldn't seem to muster up the energy for even that. When he spoke it was as if he was reciting lines from a script he had memorized but didn't bother with any emotional subtext.

"Standard Republic protocol with shipboard prisoners states that any captain sufficiently far from a represented Freehold may make summery judgment upon the captured individuals. The closest Freehold is Coldwater, more than a day by safe warp-routes."

Mel's brow furrowed as she said, "So we're just waiting until some holdscum pirate wannabe decides to space us?"

From behind her, the guard let out an offended, "Hey!"

Mel shot him a raised eyebrow that immediately buttoned his lips and silenced any further comment. The people of the Freeholds had learned a suitable amount of fear for the denizens of the Fey; that much Mel could appreciate.

"What else do you want me to do?" asked Marcus. He wasn't looking at Mel when he spoke, he wasn't looking at anything, he just stared at some distant vision of the past that only he could see.

She wanted to scream at him, *just do something! Anything!* But what good would it do? Mel had done her share of yelling since they'd started this insane quest to find a woman who was dead to everyone but Marcus Crassus. It never seemed to help. All Mel knew was that she felt sick every time he got like this.

Anger. Fear. Disappointment. Worry.

Warring emotions struggled for control as Mel flitted next to her friend and landed on the small bench that also served as the cell's bed. She let out an unintentional sigh of relief as her dragonfly wings stopped buzzing. She rolled her shoulders, one after the other, before plopping down to sit with her back against the cool polysteel wall, legs stretched out in front of her.

There was a long moment of silence in which Mel closed her eyes, looking for some sort of answer amidst the roiling blur that passed as her thought process. When she spoke, she did so with a slight grin on her face.

"Do you remember that thing on Forgess? With the vampire?"

A cycle ago Marcus might have hushed Mel, worried about keeping his identity a secret from a galaxy that thought him dead. Now though, it seemed he was beyond caring. He simply leaned back and glanced at Mel, his features losing some of their pallor as his face relaxed.

"You finally figured out that it had taken control of the *Glorian*, an entire freaking Imperial frigate, and what do you do?"

The smallest curve of a smile tweaked one edge of Marcus' lips. "I negotiate."

"You negotiate!" echoed Mel. "Any other person would have blown the ship and every man aboard straight to the Green Hells, save themselves the trouble. But no, the Great Marcus has to try and talk down the aether-sucking, mind-controlling monster."

While the smile never grew any larger on Marcus' face, Mel could see it in his eyes.

"Ferris was pretty mad about that." said Marcus wryly.

"Mad?" said Mel. "No, he was mad when you *didn't* blow up the *Glorian*. He was *mad* when you said you wanted to talk to the vampire. But when we left without telling him and went aboard the ship without any backup." Mel's shoulders shook as she remembered the look on Commander Ferris Honnius' stony face just before she had closed communications with him. "One of the officers told me he was cursing so loud they could hear him two decks down."

Marcus let out a puff of breath that might have been a laugh.

"And the look on that thing's face when you come strolling onto the bridge." Mel chortled. "Like he couldn't decide if you were a dragon or the biggest meal he had ever seen."

Mel just sat and smiled as she felt Marcus' mood reflect her own, even if he didn't quite show it. She enjoyed the shift from the strictly dour to grim amusement.

"Well?" said a voice from outside the cell. "What happened?"

Looking up, Mel saw that the guard had relaxed his grip on his rifle and watched her with rapt curiosity.

"Vampire tried to take a bite out of him," said the pixie, grinning wickedly, "and got more than he could handle."

The guard gave a disbelieving look to Marcus and said, "No way."

"Way." said Mel coolly, folding her arms across her chest.

The guard shook his head and readjusted his grip on his rifle, taking a step back to assume a stance of casual alertness. He just didn't see it. Mel couldn't exactly blame him for that though. To look at Marcus now, one could barely recognize the man he had been. No, not the man, the Magus.

It hadn't just been the awesome aetheric power he had wielded, though that had certainly been part of it, it had been the way he carried himself, how people had looked at him and his own fierce loyalty to the men and women who had served under him. It had all come together like an aura around the man; an indefinable air of purpose that was only bolstered by his god-like aetherics.

Most of that was gone now. Every once in a while Mel thought she could see that person fighting to get out but those times had grown more fleeting as these last few cycles had worn on. Now there was just the tired looking midrian in threadbare clothing with a museum piece of a gun strapped to his hip.

It was a small wonder it had taken Marcus as long as it had to stop worrying about people recognizing him.

The incident on Saul's Rock had not helped, when a crimelord named Edward Stoat had blackmailed them into helping him secure control of the smuggler's moon, using Marcus' identity as leverage. He *had* actually paid them for the work in the end, not only giving them the information Marcus needed about slaves matching Helena's description but a working dwarvish ship and a heaping armful of jules to boot. In the process though, Stoat had secured a back-channel deal with the encroaching Khanus Empire which placed both the former Magus and his stalwart fey companion neatly in his pocket for the time being.

Mel still did not completely understand why Marcus had not let her kill the crimelord when they'd had the chance. In her opinion it would have been the simplest solution to one of their many current predicaments.

It still might have led to them sitting in this cell, but at least they would not have to constantly be worrying about a Queens' cursed midrian slime-sucker turning them over to their former employers at any moment he chose.

Despite the comfortable silence that could fill the space between the two friends, time seemed to stretch for Mel as they waited. It was one of those things she had never been good at, waiting. Not in the three hundred cycles she and Marcus had served the Khanus Empire and certainly not in the time since they had cut those ties.

The cycle she had spent alone after Marcus' attempted suicide, fleeing every half-charged freelancer and fey hit-squad that had come chasing after her, had been terrifying and difficult but at least it had been straight forward. Finding Marcus again had been both a blessing and a curse. A mortal who was seemingly immune to weaponized aether was a potent meat-shield but with him it seemed as though he was always taking one step forward and then two steps back. She was always there with him, ready to catch the drunken fool when he fell, but more and more, especially as they neared the very end of their search for Helena, Mel felt like she was holding her breath. Waiting and waiting and waiting. Standing around as Marcus took his sweet time coming to the same conclusion that the rest of the galaxy had come to almost half a decade ago.

Helena Istara was dead.

Mel did not even realize she was letting out a low growl until Marcus turned toward her and asked, "Everything okay?"

With a flick of her biomechanical wings, Mel was standing again and she paced to the edge of the low bench. Looking down at the corrugated polysteel floor, Mel said, "Just nerves. Don't like being stuck in a cage, reminds me too much of home."

"The Court?" asked Marcus, his interest seemingly peeked.

Mel grunted in acknowledgement. She did not like discussing the Fey, or more rightly, there was some small piece of Sidhe tech in her brain that did not like her discussing it.

Or at least there had been.

She did not even know if those little pieces of programming still functioned. The Sidhe iron that had smoothed out the wrinkles of her emotions had not touched her for decades now and she had no way of knowing how much of her was still bowing to the Court of Air. It was not something she liked to think about too much.

Mel was Mel and that was that.

Simple logic was all she wanted to give herself time for. It was the waiting that let her have time to think.

"I know they messed with my head when I was there." said Mel, testing her mental limits just to see what happened. "But I can remember being held down, almost squished…" Her words drifted off without her meaning to and she bit her lip with a silent breath of frustration. Finally she continued, "Everything was always much clearer after that. Sharper, I guess."

Marcus smirked slightly, unaware of the tide Mel was trying to fight in her own head, "You always seemed to get right to the point whenever to came back, so professional for a few phases. Like the Queen herself was watching you."

Mel rubbed at the back of her neck as she continued to stare down at the tiny little asterisks that dotted the surface of the floor. "Yeah…" she said absently.

The sound of marching boots made Mel abandon any lingering thoughts, throwing her into the now.

Two Privateers, striding in front of a third, came briskly into the brig. The two in front held their rifles with confident ease, like the guard that had been watching them, but the third one was unarmed. It wasn't until the guard straightened his back and snapped to attention did Mel realize that it was probably the captain they had been waiting for.

He was a midrian, tall and strong with a blocky face that wasn't exactly handsome but neither was it altogether ugly. *Roguish*, thought Mel absently. He wore his hair cropped short in the style of the Imperial Legion and the way he stood as he came to an abrupt stop outside their cell also smacked of Legion.

Hard eyes swept over the imprisoned pair and if Mel hadn't been looking directly into those blue-gray eyes she would never have noticed the briefest moment of shock when he locked stares with Marcus.

"Leave us." said the most-likely-captain.

There was an awkward silence between the other Privateers and they all shared a quick glance. It was a testament to the military training that clashed with their otherwise rough appearance when they all turned and left without a word of dissent.

After several moments filled with the sound of retreating footsteps, the only sound between the two midrians and the pixie was the gentle hum of the ship's drive-core somewhere beneath them.

His gaze finally leaving Marcus', the midrian looked down towards Mel and then back up at Marcus as he asked, "Why haven't you broken out of that cell yet? Even aether-dampened polysteel couldn't hold a Magus."

The bluntness of the question took Mel by surprise and she looked back to Marcus with a wide-eyed expression. Her friend had either expected the question or was simply beyond surprise.

"What do you mean?" asked Marcus evenly, his voice trailing slightly.

The Privateer took a step closer to the bars of their cell, the motion precise and crisp. He squinted slightly before saying, "I know who you are."

Marcus was about to say something, his eyes tired and distant but Mel cut him off as she zipped upwards to hover in front of the Privateer's face.

"Oh yeah?" snapped the pixie. "And who's that?"

To his credit, the Captain did not flinch or back away, he simply readjusted his stare to focus on the tiny flying woman.

"There isn't a man alive in the Legion who doesn't know the face of Marcus Crassus." he said coolly. "Or that he is supposed to be dead."

Mel gave the man an unimpressed look from head to toe. "You don't look Legion to me."

From behind her, Marcus said dully, "He's a deserter. Common enough for ex-Legion to sell their skills once they get clear of Empire space."

Hovering backwards about a meter so that she was closer to Marcus, Mel watched as the two midrians locked gazes again. Both of them wore the unreadable steady look that had been so common among the officers that had once addressed Marcus.

"I served my time." said the Captain and his eyes grew distant for a moment when he continued. "I saw what the Empire for what it was." The hard stare returned. "I don't need lectures from the likes of you."

That seemed to rouse Marcus somewhat and the former Magus stood. "You don't know me Captain. Don't presume that you do."

The two men continued to stare at each other through the cell's bars, neither one speaking for almost half a minute. The silence was infuriating for Mel and she was just about to start in on a tirade of questions when the Privateer finally turned and took a few confident steps away.

When he turned back towards them his face seemed to have softened some and his voice was no longer full of that tightly controlled rage that it had possessed a moment ago. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

Marcus licked his lips and his stance had an angry rigidity to it. Mel could still sense the tension between the two men but it seemed as though the Privateer was making an effort to smooth things over.

"Whatever it is you want, the answer is no." said Marcus, crossing his arms.

Landing on her friend's shoulder, Mel placed a tiny hand on his temple, making Marcus glace sideways at her.

"Hear him out." she said gently.

Marcus raised an eyebrow that gave a questioning slant to his scowl.

"We're not getting out of here until we do." hissed Mel so that the other midrian could not hear her. "And there's no point in having the Empire *and* the Freeholds riding our hides."

The only ascent Marcus gave was a rough grunt but he turned back and acknowledged the Privateer again.

"Thank you." said the Captain. "I appreciate-"

"Just get on with it pirate-pants." said Mel with a growl. Just because this man quite literally held their fate in his hands, did not mean she wanted to listen to him any more than Marcus did, she was simply more pragmatic about it.

Taken aback by the pixie's ferocity, the other midrian cleared his throat with an awkward cough before he said, "My name is William Frake and I want to offer you a job."

Mel and Marcus shared a look and then both of them burst out laughing.

Chapter Three

The captain’s stunned reaction did not last long and when he spoke again, Marcus did not hear what he said at first.

“I’m… I’m sorry.” said the former Magus as he got his laughter under control. “What?”

The Privateer’s face had gone from a pale startled look and was now held in a firm, unamused mask. “I said, I don’t see what’s so funny about this situation.”

Marcus used one hand to rub at his face and wipe away some of the bemusement that lingered there. As he opened his eyes and looked back up at the other man his hand moved to rub at his now aching jaw, it had been a long time since it had held a genuine smile.

“Another man approached me with a similar offer not that long ago.” said Marcus.

“Though I’m guessing Stoat’s gig would have probably paid better than whatever this turns out to be.” added Mel with an almost wistful sound in her voice.

Captain Frake gaped slightly at the pair in his brig, his mouth moving wordlessly for a silent moment. Finally he shook his head and said, “I’m not here to offer you money.”

“See.” cut in Mel.

“I’m asking,” continued Frake, a growl creeping into his voice, “if you are here to make a difference?”

That sobered Marcus, the afterglow of mirth fading completely and leaving him to stare somberly at the Privateer.

“What?” asked the former Magus.

A look of wild enthusiasm began to cross Captain Frake’s otherwise serious face. “Most of the Dragon’s Wake thinks you’re dead; but the name Marcus Crassus still holds a lot of weight. You know how people think of you in the Empire and everywhere else you’re either a fairy tale or a horror story.” As he spoke he took several hesitant steps back towards the cell where Marcus stood. “And you’re alive. Somehow you slipped the Empress’ leash. Do you know what that kind of information could do for the Freeholds? For the galaxy?”

Marcus felt Mel’s tiny hand pressed gently against his neck, the warmth wasn’t enough to stop the chill running down his spine. As he looked into the Captain’s eyes Marcus saw something that still haunted his dreams from time to time, an expression that sent little ripples of terror coursing through him.

It was fervor.

That fire behind his eyes that roared with hunger and zeal. Righteous thoughts tempered by a belief that what they were doing was best. It was the same look he had seen millions of times in those span of years after The Shattering, when some people among the Khanus Empire had begun to whisper the name of Primus as he passed. Some had done so in reverence, others in terror or simple awe.

The Magus Imperia were the thirteen nearly-immortal demigods whose limitless aetheric powers could heal any mortal wound or burn entire worlds. Thirteen men and women chosen from among the best and worst the Empire had to offer, their ranks held both paragons of the Imperial ideal and monsters that needed to be controlled for the sake of the galaxy. Marcus had been among the former but after his bloody, vengeance-fueled war against the Minos Dominion it had become more than that in many people’s eyes. He had cut a bloody swath through the Empire’s oldest enemy, breaking the Minos Dominion entirely and leaving nothing but ash and glass in his wake. The Shattering. At best it had been a one sided war. Outside the Empire Marcus now knew what most called it though. Genocide.

And for this the Empire had praised him. For bringing another civilization to its knees in the name of hate and revenge they had heaped honors on him and the fanatics among them had begun to speak of a time when the first Emperor had led them to glory. They whispered the name of the first Magus, Emperor Primus Khanus.

Perhaps it wasn’t exactly the same. This man Frake had left the Legion for some personal reason, that was obvious, but the look he gave Marcus in that moment spoke of a thousand unfulfilled dreams that he thought the former Magus could deliver.

Very suddenly Marcus felt sick, his stomach twisting in a violent knot and his hands itched for the flask that had been taken from him when he and Mel had been made prisoners.

Fighting down the bile in his throat, Marcus coughed roughly, breaking the long moment that had passed between Captain Frake and himself.

“I’m sorry Captain.” said Marcus softly. “I can’t help you.”

From his shoulder he heard Mel give out a low sigh.

The fire behind the Privateer’s eyes wavered. He gave Marcus a long, penetrating look. “Why not?”

Licking his lips, Marcus sagged backwards and sunk down onto the bench of the cell, the inelegant slouching motion revealing just how exhausted the former Magus truly was. As he moved Mel buzzed back up into the air above him. He did not look up when he spoke.

“I’m not the symbol you want. And I couldn’t give a damn about what the Freeholds or the whole Wake thinks anymore.”

The Captain’s feet entered Marcus’ field of view, Frake having returned to stand just outside the bars of the cell. “Then what are you doing out here?”

Marcus stared morosely at his hands as a tremor ran through them. Clenching them into fists did not do much to quell the shakes.

“I’m looking for someone.” said Marcus quietly.

“A slaver?” asked Frake.

When Marcus did not speak, his dry tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth, Mel finally said, “A slave.”

Frake shifted uneasily, his feet never moving but his weight settling back onto his heels. “The dead girl in the hold.” he said matter-of-factly.

Marcus shook his head, finally looking up as he swallowed the lump in his throat. “No.” he said with a cough. “Not her.”

“She matched the description of the one we’re looking for.” said Mel, filling the silence that Marcus left after he spoke. “But it wasn’t her.”

“I see.” said Frake, breaking eye contact with Marcus and casting his gaze towards another corner of the brig. He was silent for a long moment before turning back to stare at Marcus, only a pale, flickering remnant of the fire left in his eyes. He looked as though he was about to speak again but when his stare settled on the former Magus it was as though he was seeing the man in the cell for the first time. After another moment all he said was, “I see.”

Marcus watched as the last of the man’s excitement died and the serious demeanor took hold of the Captain again.

“So what happens now?” asked Marcus as he leaned his back against the bulkhead behind him. A mirthless smirk tweaked his lips. “Assuming I don’t just tear my way out of here like you think I can.”

Frake crossed his arms and took a half-step backwards, looking down towards the floor in contemplation as he spoke. “I take it that dwarvish heap out there is yours?”

Marcus nodded.

With a heavy sigh, the Privateer let his arms fall to his side then reached out a hand to touch the lock of the cell door. The soft clink of polysteel in the lock was the only sound as the door swung upwards.

Without a word Marcus stood and made his way across the brig, brushing passed Frake towards the table where all of his belongings had been placed. As he strapped his revolver back onto his hip and gathered up a few odds and ends that had been in his pockets, the Captain spoke from behind him.

“You could really change things you know. If people knew you were alive…”

Marcus touched his flask with a slightly shaking hand and resisted the urge to take a long pull from it then and there, instead slipping it into a pocket at his belt. “*You* know I’m alive.” said the former Magus. “How does that change anything?”

The Privateer Captain was silent as Marcus and Mel left the brig, heading back to the slaver ship unimpeded.

As they moved through the corridors of the Privateer ship, a voice over the comm said, “This is Captain Frake, the prisoners have my leave to exit through the slaver vessel and board their own craft. That is all.”

The rest of their trek back to the *Amal’hiam* was filled with curious glances and hard looks from the other Privateers until they made it back through the impromptu hatch that had been cut into the former slaver vessel. Now the craft was a husk, its crew dead and its cargo evacuated. Marcus’ footsteps echoed through the halls as he made his way towards the proper airlock where he and Mel had entered the craft only a few short hours ago.

Both he and his fey partner were silent as they moved through the ship. The silence did not become awkward until Marcus paused as they made their way across the hold in which they’d had their firefight with the slavers. Marcus stared at the corpse lying on its side near some crates opposite where they stood.

Swooping forward, Mel opened the hatch leading back to their ship and only when she turned back did she notice that Marcus had not moved.

*It’s not her*.

Marcus had to keep telling himself that as the grief attempted to overtake him again.

*It’s not her. She’s not dead.*

It wasn’t until Mel landed on his shoulder and tugged at his ear that he tore his gaze away.

“Let’s get out of here.” said Mel.

Marcus grunted and moved forward, Mel zipping off his shoulder again to open the airlock of the *Amal’hiam*. It was one of the four outer hatches that emptied out into the ancient dwarvish blockade runner’s ready-area; the ogre-sized harnesses that lined the walls were empty of their intended commando occupants. In the corner across from them was a caged off area that passed for the *Amal’hiam*’s armory. At the moment it almost looked empty as it only held several rifles, useless to Marcus, that he had confiscated in his travels as well as a few boxes of spare ammunition for his dwarf-make revolver.

Mel drifted to the left towards the bridge but Marcus lingered near the hatch as it hissed and locked shut.

Before she could turn back to look at him, Marcus managed to get one long pull off of his flask but wasn’t able to hide it away in time.

“Marcus I-” Mel’s words ended abruptly as she caught sight of the curved metal object in her friend’s hand. She did not say anything else, her face flashed through a series of emotions so quickly that Marcus only caught the last few.

Disgust. Anger. Then nothing.

The pixie’s expression flattened into an expressionless mask that gave Marcus a terrible flash of how his friend had looked after her trips to the Fey. Blank and focused, like a sterilized razor.

“Mel,” croaked Marcus, awkwardly fumbling his flask away as the whiskey still burned at his tongue.

Spinning in midair, Mel flew away, heading towards the bridge without a word.

Marcus stood there mutely for almost a full minute, staring absently at the place Mel had been with a crestfallen look of silent shame.

She’d been on his case more and more about the drinking in the last few phases. At first, when they had been using public mass-trans to get around the galaxy, Marcus had been able to slip off and be alone when they were aboard the massive freight ships that folk of little means used to get from world to world. They were usually the kind of ships that had at least one cantina on them.

Since acquiring the *Amal’hiam* though, forced to buy stockpiles of his own supplies and gear for the ship he now owned, it was becoming abundantly clear that he had a problem.

Some part of Marcus could probably see that it was wrong to be spending more jules on whiskey than food but that small voice was quickly silenced by the endless tirade of painful memories that filled his waking mind. When compared to the three hundred cycles he had been forced to endure as a Magus, a couple bottles of the cheap stuff every turn or two didn’t seem like much.

Rage at Mel’s judging eyes now bubbling up in his chest, Marcus didn’t storm up after her, but he did maintain a certain angry stride until he made it to the twisting metal stairs that led up passed the bridge and towards the crew’s quarters. By the time he was moving into the *Amal’hiam*’s control and nav center though, Marcus just felt tired. The turn’s events had now fully caught up with him.

Mel was already at the navigation controls when Marcus entered the bridge, skipping back and forth across the holo-display with little buzzing bursts from her wings. Marcus quietly got into the pilots chair and started the *Amal’hiam*’s drive-core. Blue lights came alive to his right and docking clamp controls snapped into their ready position. Normally Marcus would have not been able to do this, his lack of aetherics making it impossible for him to even flush a toilet let alone start a ship, but thanks to the fact that the *Amal’hiam* had been designed by dwarves to be used by ogres he could do both at the push of a button.

The takeoff procedures were almost instinct at this point and Marcus touched the swiveling sticks that controlled the four portside docking clamps without actually looking at them. He felt the drift in the *Amal’hiam* as soon as they were free and after he had retracted the clamps back to their locked position, sticking out slightly along the side of the ship like pudgy arms, he pressed another button up on the console to his right without glancing at it. Instantly a wide strip of the gray hull in front of him became transparent, the clear nature of the refined quartz-aethite view screen becoming obvious despite a few readouts that danced around the corners near the ceiling.

Empty space stretched out in front of them though the mottled colors of the slaver ship still dominated the left of their screen even as they began to pull away. It was a garish thing that reminded Marcus of the massive rectangular polysteel boxes that were used to ship cargo all over the galaxy. In stark contrast, the Privateer vessel that had forced its way through a soft-seal on the upper deck looked like some kind of mechanical bird of prey. Long but sleek, its color so dark that it was difficult to see against the inky black of space.

If not for his current mood, Marcus might have found the contrast between the two ships funny, especially considering that the *Amal’hiam* actually resembled a hybrid of the two. Designed for utility and function but not at the total expense of looks, giving her the profile of some kind of cross between an insect and a shark. The *Amal’hiam* was not a pretty ship, but she got the job done. Especially considering she was most likely over five thousand cycles old.

Marcus steered his ship away from the other two, pointing her prow towards a set of constellations that were known throughout the galaxy as the Hammer and Spear. A slight shudder ran up unexpectedly through the helm as Marcus oriented down slightly and he opened his mouth to say something but closed it again as he glanced over to see Mel’s still-serious face.

She must have thought his look had been an expectant one because Mel made one more gesture, manipulating a blue line as it crossed a tiny representation of the Dragon’s Wake galaxy, and then said, “Coordinates are locked in; course is set for NIS-1158562.”

Landing on the nav consoles lip, Mel stared at the map and let out a sigh, her shoulders slumping and her wings falling limply to her back.

Marcus did not immediately activate warp, instead he worked his jaw anxiously and stared at Mel. As soon as he opened his mouth to speak though, she cut in.

“This is the last of the list that Stoat gave us.” said Mel without turning. “What happens if she’s not there?”

“She’ll be there.” said Marcus firmly, though he wasn’t sure if even believed himself anymore.

Mel let out another sigh and buzzed up into the air. As she flew passed Marcus on the way off the bridge she paused for the barest space of a moment but then continued out without another word.

Marcus hated himself for letting her leave like that but some dark part of his mind knew that the pixie had nowhere else to go. Melianthena was Ban’Sidhe, it was worse than banishment; her own people wanted her dead. Some of the more anguishing thoughts in his head told Marcus that Mel had never stayed with him out of friendship or loyalty but because it was her only and best chance at survival. It wasn’t a nice thought. It did give him time to fix things between them however.

Hitting the button that started the *Amal’hiam*’s warp sequence, Marcus simply sat and stared as the twinkling starlight faded into the horrible verdant green of Voidspace. He did not tear his eyes away for nearly two entire seconds and then he slammed his hand back on the button that made the viewscreen an opaque copy of the bulkhead surrounding it.

Marcus shuddered as he swiveled the pilots chair to the left and stared blankly at the communications console that separated the pilot and the navigator.

It took ships three minutes to pass through Voidspace, that realm that warp technology used to circumvent normal interstellar distances. No matter how far they were going it was always three minutes. Therefor actual travel time was always based on two factors, the power of a ships drive-core and the capabilities of their navigator.

Larger ships, frigates and destroyers, had wizards on board that served as dedicated navigators; men and women literally fusing with the shipboard aetheric systems in order to calculate long distance jumps using the vessel’s huge drive-cores. The truly gargantuan ships, such as Marcus’ former super carrier flagship the Thessian, had teams of Navigators that made leaping across entire Reaches possible.

Smaller ships like the *Amal’hiam* though, with a relatively tiny drive-core and using an automated dwarvish navigation system, had to make multiple jumps to cover such distances.

It was always three minutes though. Three minutes in that strange green pseudo-space that distorted aetherics and sent scrying arrays haywire. Wizards and Magi, people capable of feeling the push and pull of aether in the air around them, could be driven insane by the horrible sucking sensations that boiled in from Voidspace. For three whole minutes.

Magus Imperia Marcus Crassus Khanus of Verge had always been able to maintain a tight bubble of control. Where wizards went and hid in specially shielded rooms while warping, a Magus could be a bulwark of indomitable will amidst the Green Hells.

Marcus Crassus, alone with his thoughts and stripped of the oceans of power he had once possessed, could not even stomach the *sight* of Voidspace for a handful of seconds. He still looked every time though, as if trying to stare down the universe and work out just what had happened on that day four cycles ago when he had tried to kill himself.

Wearily, Marcus took up his flask and drained the last of the whiskey.

Mel’s last words still rang in his head.

*What happens if she’s not there?*

Marcus had never actually considered that. This last cycle of searching had been repetitive and depressing to be sure but he had never actually taken the time to think that it might be fruitless as well.

It simply wasn’t possible.

Something deep in Marcus’ gut told him that Helena was still alive. He wasn’t sure if it was raw instinct or some faint echo of his aetherics but whatever it was told him that his connection to her had not been severed completely, that there was still hope.

If that turned out to be a lie then perhaps Marcus Crassus had truly died on Atok Delta four cycles ago. Maybe he was simply a sad pathetic ghost, trying in vein to pick up the only worthwhile shards of that man’s broken life.

The thought made Marcus reach forward, nudging open a small compartment beneath the comm to reveal a half-full bottle of brownish liquid. Not even bothering to refill his flask, the former Magus simply pulled the cap off the bottle and began taking mouthfuls of the stuff. The fuzzy burn of it dulled the edges of his depression and let him relax as he leaned back in the pilot’s chair.

From somewhere above and behind him, the aether conduits of the *Amal’hiam* hissed slightly and the ship let out gentle creaks as it moved through Voidspace.

Marcus wasn’t worried about the noises. The *Amal’hiam* was battle scarred and tough; she had been around long before he had taken her helm and he was sure she could survive anything the galaxy could throw at her.

Chapter Four

19 Standard Imperial Cycles Previous

Sirens were blaring somewhere. The sound was indistinct and blurry, seeming to mix with the whine that was peeling inside the Young Woman’s head. She blinked, trying to clear some of the ash and dust out of her eyes as she picked herself up.

She needed to keep moving. She needed to find her parents and her brother and her sister.

That last shell had hit closer than the others, somewhere within a kilometer or two. The street was now blanketed in the cloying dust that was making it difficult to breathe. People ran. People screamed. People jostled each other, trying to escape an enemy that was everywhere and nowhere.

The Young Woman somehow kept her head, despite the chaos. None of it mattered at the moment; she needed to keep moving.

Shoving through the crowds, moving against the tide that flowed towards a portion of the city that had yet to be set ablaze, the Young Woman moved *towards* the smoke. Her father’s office was maybe only two blocks away, not even three hundred meters. If she could just get there, if she could just get to her family.

Why had she even left in the first place?

She couldn’t remember. Her mind raced with the violent influx of stimulus of what was happening around her.

A man surged passed, clutching a bleeding woman.

A young girl tugged at the hand of a man who simply stared up at the twilight sky in shocked disbelief.

A pair of men smashed a storefront with a trash can and began looting.

Anarchy reigned as golden ships plunged down out of the summer clouds, tearing them apart in their wake. A few fired weapons into different chunks of the city, seemingly at random, while others landed, crushing buildings to make way for their gilded entrance.

The roar from one of the ships made even the blaring siren impossible to hear, let alone the screams of people. It descended down the street from where the Young Woman still struggled to move against the crowd. It was not elegant or graceful in its movement, it fell like some massive brick hurled by an uncaring giant, smashing into the ground without precision or thought for what was beneath. Only in the final moments before the resulting dust cloud did the Young Woman see the front of the vessel.

Engraved in the rough gold was the terrible face of a snarling dragon, its head adorned with a set of long, wicked-looking horns molded along the sides of the ship.

As the dust wave from the ships plummeting landing hit the Young Woman she had a moment of true panic, the golden face of the beast still etched into her mind. It was an awful, deep fear that came from the child that she had thought she had grown out of cycles ago.

The scary monster was going to eat her whole, just like in the old stories.

It passed within a few heartbeats and the Young Woman refocused in time to shield herself from the worst of the debris that had been kicked up, throwing her arms up and her head down. She used the momentary lull in the fleeing crowd to push forward again and she finally broke through into the plaza she had to cross to reach her father’s office.

The building still stood, which was a small relief, but as the Young Woman broke free of the last bit of the crowd proper she saw that it was not entirely whole either. A large section of the two story building had been smashed, leaving a ragged hole in its side that opened into the first floor like a gaping wound. As she moved into the plaza she passed the first of many broken streetlamps and the opening let the Young Woman see the tableau within.

Her brother and sister ran screaming from the building, her mother urging them on even as she was hit from behind, sending her flying forward. The huge form that towered up from the shadows of the broken building was like a figure out of those old Imperial propaganda films.

Almost three meters tall, its bovine head stooped between massive shoulders adorned in plates of gray armor painted with lines of crimson and gold, the tauro soldier took only one looming step forward before he was able to grab the Young Woman’s mother by the hair with a long, armored hand.

Still shouting for her children to flee, the woman was dragged backwards roughly.

The Young Woman shouted but her words could not have been heard over the sound of a second tauro ship landing somewhere nearby and another rolling dust cloud cut off her view of the scene for a long, agonizing moment.

When the cloud cleared the Young Woman screamed.

Her mother was dead, a smoking hole where her chest used to be.

Her brother cried, reaching a hand towards her sister as the tauro’s hoof came down, smashing the boy to the pavement with the force of a piston. If he was not dead on the first stomp, he was on the second and the Young Woman prayed he did not feel the third. The third let out a hollow sound as the tauro’s hoof came in contact with the street.

Her sister stood just beyond, her back to the Young Woman, staring as half of their family was annihilated on the debris strewn street.

The Young Woman’s scream was part anguish, part rage. She could feel the aether roiling within her, screaming along with her, begging for release.

The tauro soldier, his armor now speckled in blood, let out a loud grunt that might have been a rough laugh. He shouted at the Young Woman’s sister in broken Mid-Khanic, “Run calf! Run a way so they know we come!”

The Young Woman’s sister scrabbled backwards for a few steps and then turned, breaking into a full sprint.

Giving another evil chuckle, the tauro raised its right hand, clutching a massive gun that was almost as big as the Young Woman’s leg. He had no intention of letting her sister get away.

The Young Woman did not know how the large chunk of aethite got into her hand; it was a piece of one of the shattered streetlamps and she raised it even as the tauro leveled his gun. There was no thought in her action, no plan or clever application of aetherics, the Young Woman simply used the crystal as a focus for her own boiling power.

It leapt out from her in an arcing beam, bending in the air to avoid her sister and strike at the tauro’s gun. The energy was the brightest purple the Young Woman had ever seen and it struck its target like a thunderbolt.

The gun erupted in hellish green flames, exploding in a shower of bright aether that took most of the tauro’s arm with it. It let out a bestial sound that was more roar than scream and more surprise than pain. It only stopped when the Young Woman sent another blast of raw aether surging into him, sending burnt chunks of tauro cascading back against her father’s former office.

Her sister was at her side before she fell, easing her down as the world grew dim and her legs began to lose the sturdiness that had been founded on fury and sorrow. Somewhere in the distance someone said her name over and over again in pleading terror.

There was movement and sound.

The Young Woman’s eyes flickered open in time to watch the sky dazedly. Red and silver craft shrieked across the heavens, doing battle with their golden counterparts.

Then everything was darkness and muzzy exhaustion.

The refugee camp felt cramped and sprawling at the same time. Endless rows of people in makeshift tents and shelters stuffed together in the spaces between the stocky warehouses that populated the district. The polysteel structures had long since been filled over capacity and now the people from Nam’sil had spilled out and surrounded three of the buildings in a grim squalor that stretched for kilometers in every direction. The gray skies overhead, overcast with low clouds that threatened rain, was reflected in the ashen state of the folk below.

People huddled together. People sat alone. People wandered aimlessly, calling out names of those who had been lost in the crush. There were tears and anger and even a little forced laughter amidst the folk who literally came from a world away.

This was not their world but Nam’edlah had opened its proverbial doors, attempting to shelter the refugees from its sister planet. It did not change the facts though. While the people languished in this camp, always waiting for word, their homeworld burned.

The Dominion’s war against the Khanus Empire had come to the Nam system far too quickly; within an hour after the Empress had been assassinated. There was even talk amongst the refugees, news gathered from the ‘net, that they were not alone. Many other worlds had been put to the torch by the tauro. The Legion reacted swiftly, but not swiftly enough. They had not been prepared for an all out war.

Helena Istara stuck close to her sister, following Diana towards an outlying warehouse, even as she kept her ears open for more news.

“Three days in and the Legion already has the eastern hemisphere.”

“But they’ve destroyed Badai, flattened the whole city!”

“Fucking cows, hope we butcher every last one.”

The mood of the refugees was grim and everywhere Helena looked she saw hard faces lined with grief and rage. The worst of them all was Diana.

Diana Istara had possessed the sort of cheeriness that refracted into everything she did; a bright smile, a song on her lips and a wit that always left people smiling despite themselves. She had danced through life, never letting those close to her feel unloved or unwelcome. Diana had been the shining moon among starlight, the music amidst noise, the pride of their mother and the light of their father’s eye.

All of that was gone now.

The woman that stalked ahead of Helena resembled Diana in every physical way, but her sister was no longer there. This new person was cold and flat, like metal. She blended in rather than standing out. She had a stillness that disturbed Helena and a stare that unnerved even the scarred legionnaires that had rescued them.

There had been moments, in the turns following their escape from Nam’sil, when the sister Helena had known cracked through. With a gesture or a word, some small piece of the woman she had been escaped from this new person. Then the steel would harden again and Helena was beginning to lose hope that she would see her sister ever again.

It was why she had not said anything when Diana had blandly told her this morning that she was going to join the Legion. It was why she now followed her in determined silence, looking desperately for some sign that her older sister still existed on some level.

They were almost to the warehouse, where a small recruitment office had apparently been set up, and as they moved in silence along an open patch between the camp and the open hangar-style doors Helena could not take it anymore.

“I’m coming with you!” she said, more loudly than she intended.

Diana stopped but did not turn around. After a long moment her shoulders slumped with a sigh.

“No, you’re not.” said Diana resolutely. She started for the warehouse again and even as Helena tried to say something to stop her, she continued, “I’ve made my decision.”

“You’ve made *your* decision?” asked Helena, taking a few quick strides to catch up with her sister. “What is that supposed to mean? Since when do you decide what I do with my life?”

Diana did not stop moving but she turned her head, giving Helena a look that stopped her in her tracks for half a step. It wasn’t the intensity of the gaze that made the younger Istara shrink back though, it was the fact that it was on her sister’s face. It said everything that neither sister had spoken of in the few turns since their family had been all but destroyed.

*This is the world we live in now*.

Diana turned back to look where she was going and Helena did not see her face as she spoke again, “I’m going to take care of you.”

“How can you take care of me when you’re off…” Helena made an inarticulate gesture that she realized her sister could not see. “Fighting, or, whatever.”

When she spoke, Diana’s voice was cold and emotionless. “I’ll have them put my Legion pay into your account. With that you’ll be able to pay for school.”

“School?” Helena almost shouted again. “Are you kidding me? After all of this you think I give a damn about school?”

Diana did not respond, she just kept walking.

“And what about you?” continued Helena, emotion now making her throat tight. “Say I use all those jules to just live like nothing’s happened, what do you do once you get back? How are you supposed to live?”

The silence between the two of them dragged on for an eternity. It was all the answer Helena needed. Her sister had no intention of coming back. Three turns ago there had been five members of the Istara family; now there was only two. Diana seemed determined to cut that number in half.

Stopping and staring at her sister’s retreating back, Helena pleaded, “Please Di, don’t do this.”

Diana stopped a few meters away and finally turned to look at her younger sister. For the first time in three turns Helena finally saw the sister she had known. Her face was a mask of a half dozen emotions all tangled up with one twisted knot of painful grief. Her eyes, normally a bright blue-green that reminded Helena of the sea, had a storm raging behind them with waves of different feelings crashing into one another in a violent upheaval. She looked like she wanted to cry, but the tears would not come.

“I have to do this.” Diana said, her voice even and controlled. “I don’t expect you to understand, not after what happened. But after what I saw…” In her sister’s brief pause for a shaky breath, Helena could see her reliving those horrifying moments on the plaza. When her voice returned the steel was already creeping back in. “I just have to.”

Strangely enough, Helena did understand. At first she had thought that both she and her sister had made it off world alive but now she could see that Diana had never left the burning city where their parents and brother had died. She couldn’t. Anything else she felt now was just an echo being drowned out by the need for vengeance.

“I do understand.” said Helena softly. “You do what you have to do.” Stepping forward she reached out and embraced her sister. “Just be safe, okay?”

The hug lasted for a long moment, Diana returning it only stiffly, and then they parted. Diana walked away from her sister and into the warehouse. She did not look back.

Helena stared after her for one minute. Then two. Then five.

After two hours, when Diana did not reemerge from this side of the warehouse, Helena strode in. She had something she had to do as well.

The legionnaire tending to the front desk of the small recruitment office stared at Helena. She did not think he was trying to be rude but he was beginning to get on her nerves. Though, she supposed, the same might be said of her by him.

Helena had been sitting in the improvised waiting room for over three hours, having been turned away by the desk-man initially due to a technicality involving her age. She did not actually turn eighteen until tomorrow.

Now she was determined to simply wait until the staff sergeant in charge of this office left for the day so she could talk to him directly. In the time she had waited the desk-man had made a few calls, some clearly involving her, another legionnaire had come to take down her name and dozens of other refugees from Nam’sil came in with the intent of enlisting. Very few exited the way they entered.

It was only after the fourth hour, in which time the desk-man was relieved by yet another legionnaire, this one a woman, did Helena begin to worry about letting out a yawn of boredom.

The desk-woman was much nicer; she offered Helena a bottle of water and casually began asking about how she had come to Nam’edlah.

It came out slowly at first, Helena uneasy about reliving it all, but as she neared the end her voice was filled with an anger that surprised her.

She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself, before finishing, “And after that the Legion showed up. Beat the tauro back long enough for us escape to the mass-trans.”

When Helena looked up she saw the desk-woman gaping at her, though the legionnaire quickly closed her mouth once she noticed the younger woman staring back. The reaction puzzled Helena but the feeling quickly turned into outright confusion when the legionnaire excused herself and went into the back offices, leaving the desk unattended.

Only a few moments later the desk-woman returned and sat back down, only giving Helena furtive glances for the rest of the turn as she helped more entering refugees enlist.

It was not until almost an hour later, as Helena’s head dipped slightly as her heavy eyes got the better of her, when someone said her name.

“Helena Istara?”

The legionnaire standing in the open office door had the chevrons of a sergeant on his shoulders and as Helena stood she saw that he held a slim datapad in his hand. He ushered her back into a series of hallways made of prefab polysteel that clashed with the warehouse interior, more permanent, construction. Walking in front of him, Helena felt as though she was being led somewhere ominous as he stayed silent except for brief directions when they came to the only corner in the place.

“Left and through the door on the right please.”

Helena obeyed, coming into a room half the size of the tiny waiting room she had been sitting in. All it held was a table with a chair on either side, soft ambient light emanated from its surface.

The sergeant gestured for Helena to sit and she did. Sitting across from her, he touched the datapad lightly and organized several documents on its surface with a few efficient motions.

“Could you please place your hands on the table?” asked the sergeant. It was not an order, it was said carefully and with a care that worried Helena but she complied.

He did something else on the datapad and then sat it down before looking up at Helena. “All right, I am going to ask you a series of questions Ms. Istara. Please try to answer them truthfully and to the best of your ability. Please keep your hands on the table at all times.”

Helena nodded. She was ready for this.

“What is your name?” asked the sergeant, watching Helena’s face.

She responded quickly and efficiently, looking passed the legionnaire. “Helena Istara.”

“Which world were you born on?”

“Nam’sil.”

“Why aren’t you there right now?”

The question threw Helena off and she stopped herself before blurting out an answer. She glanced into the sergeants steady eyes and he inclined his head slightly.

“The tauro killed my family.” said Helena, unwanted venom filling her voice. “They were killing everyone.”

“They killed your whole family?”

Helena sucked in a breath through her nose, careful to keep her hands on the table. This was a test.

“No. My sister and I made it out.”

“Just the two of you?” asked the sergeant.

“Yes.” said Helena flatly.

“So you’re saying that your parents, Julia and Remus Istara, full citizens of the Khanus Empire, died when their two daughters fled like cowards.”

Helena’s eyes widened at the statement as though she’d been slapped and she felt the rage boiling up within her chest.

Locking eyes with the sergeant’s still-calm face, she spoke, her voice rising even as she stood to lean forward on the table, “No! They died saving Diana’s life! I didn’t get there in time, but Diana got out and now those bastards are going to pay for what they did!”

With each word Helena felt the storm of aether crackling within her and a hateful darkness filling the room around her. It wasn’t until she looked down though, trying not to let that power destroy the man who sat across from her, that she realized that the table-light had actually dimmed significantly. Inside she could feel the storm of aether that she had drawn in, a crackling ball of hot energy looking for release. It forced her to clench her teeth as she took her hands away from the table and sat back down a little too quickly. She crossed her arms and stared down as light returned to the polywood surface in front of her.

Across from her, the sergeant asked, “It’s not enough is it?”

“No,” said Helena, “it’s not.”

“What will be enough?” the Legion recruiter asked.

Helena did not think as she spoke, the words simply came. “All of them.”

There was a silent moment and then the sergeant pushed the datapad across the table towards Helena.

“Please sign here Ms. Istara. Welcome to the Legion.”

Chapter Five

Mel watched as the lead professor squirmed and had to stifle a laugh. She could almost smell the sweat forming on his brow as he readjusted himself and pulled out a small towel from his breast pocket to wipe away the perspiration.

Gazing awkwardly off to the side, looking for some sort of support from his fellow panel members, the lead professor said, “I’m sorry ma’am, but I don’t quite see how-”

Touching the chem of her ‘netpad Mel cut in, “You were the one who brought up the number of pixies used by Sidhe. I’m simply asking how that’s possible, given their size and biology?”

Down the table a ways, another man, this one supposedly with several doctorates in Fey studies, cleared his throat. “Well it is presumed, given the Sidhe’s biomechanical and-or digital nature, that a certain amount of help is given to-”

“So,” a familiar male voice cut in from the invisible audience, “you’re saying the Sidhe *help* pixie reproduction? How? We know they give birth like most other sapients but nothing suggests that they do it with any more efficiency.”

“He’s right you know.” said another professor from the panel, this one a self proclaimed expert in Sidhe biomechanics and cercians.

“But their numbers are an observable fact.” said the lead professor curtly. “Any of our observers in the metafey can tell you that the sheer number of pixies is beyond anything seen in any other sapient.”

Careful not to push things too far, Mel interjected, “So my initial point stands to reason.”

“Most likely.” said the biomechanist.

“No!” said the lead professor. “There is no evidence.”

“Besides their numbers.” said Mel’s friend.

“Clearly it’s Sidhe intervention.” said the Fey Studies doctor.

“They’ve been modified, yes.” said the biomechanist. “But nothing suggests their reproduction is affected by these changes, I think the young lady might actually have a point.”

“Don’t be absurd.” said the lead professor. “There is no way the pixie population of the Fey, *‘spends every waking hour having sex’*. They…” The old midrian, clearly becoming upset that some of his colleagues were now siding with Mel, floundered for a moment. “They would never get anything done.” He finally said lamely.

The conversation devolved from there, professors on the panel taking sides and other members of the audience, tuning in through the metanet from all across the Dragon’s Wake, began interjecting as well. The avalanche of input began to overwhelm even the panel members after a while but not before a screaming match between the lead professor and the biomechanist.

Mel settled back and watched her ‘netpad with a smug sense of satisfaction. It wasn’t long before a notice went up that simply read, ‘Symposium Canceled. The Department of Fey Studies of Wesren Izald apologizes for the inconvenience’.

On the side of the tiny screen a message popped up. It was from Ariel. Mel touched the little icon of a rotating windmill that her online friend used to represent himself.

“Well, that did not take much.” said the same male voice from before on the other end of the ‘net.

Mel let out a short giggle. “Academia is so easy. Each of them thinks they know everything.”

There was a snort from Ariel before he said, “I am going to post this over at shock-docs, they will get a kick out of it.”

“Sure.” said Mel with a nod that her friend could not actually see. “But you know the drill.”

“Yeah, yeah.” said Ariel blandly. “Scramble the voice, double encode the source. No one will know you were involved. Standard stuff Wings.”

*Wings* was what Mel called herself on the ‘net, a little bit of irony that no one would ever get. She had used the name to move about the ‘net with a certain amount of anonymity, careful not to reveal anything about her true nature lest the Sidhe were watching for her. Her ‘net persona was one of the few eccentricities she allowed herself these days and there was something wonderfully liberating about it. Even if she did not risk any actual metadiving, the ‘net was an open place where she could still explore and talk to people who weren’t Marcus Crassus.

Ariel was one of those people.

Mel did not know who Ariel actually was, not his species or location in the galaxy, even the idea that he was male was imposed by the sound of his voice when they chatted online, which could be modulated with the right software. He was just someone who also had a penchant for starting trouble in some of the same forums that Mel frequented and eventually their shared love of mischief had led to a dialogue and then a loose friendship based on mutual dickishness.

“You really should have gone for the thing about kappa sentience.” said Ariel. “That would have wound them in a knot.”

“This was funnier.” said Mel.

Ariel chuckled, sending her to a link to a photo of the lead professor as he said, “You are probably right.” The man, red faced and screaming, looked like a ripe piece of fruit in the photo and as Mel watched her friend manipulated the image and gave him a stalk and some leaves sprouting from his balding head.

Mel laughed again.

“Seriously Wings, you need to dive with us some time.” said Ariel. “There are a few of us who are going to take a crack at the Wommack & Sons homesite, see if we can make it link over to that video of old man Wommack spitting on those rhini protestors. We could use your flare.”

Mel looked away from her ‘netpad at the empty mess hall. She sat on a countertop near the back of the small alcove that passed as the *Amal’hiam*’s kitchen, in a nook she used as her own little space when she couldn’t stand looking at Marcus any more. A long bag of powdered soup mix served as her couch and a hard bar of synth-protein was being used like a coffee table of sorts. Even now the setup made her laugh sardonically at her own situation, at the pure absurdity of it.

“No.” she said finally. “Sorry but you know, I don’t have the setup to ‘dive here.”

“Excuse is thin, Wings.” said Ariel in the clipped cant of a metadiver.

“Excuse is wide, Ariel.” responded Mel in kind.

“Thin or wide, it no jive.” finished Ariel. “But for real, your rep will not grow if you stick to forcing rage quits and frumping up old docs.”

He had a point, but an expanding reputation was the one thing that Mel definitely did not want. In the last cycle, having a more stable connection to the ‘net thanks to the *Amal’hiam*’s comm array, she had spent more and more time in the company of those who only knew her as *Wings*. In between encounters with possible Helenas there was little else for Mel to do. It was either engross herself on the ‘net or watch Marcus brood and while she knew neither were healthy at least she could have a decent time pretending to be some low-grade ‘diver wannabe. She had even garnered a small reputation in certain circles, which was already more than she felt comfortable with.

Even if things had been quiet in the last few cycles Mel knew that the Sidhe were still out there looking for her. The Court of Air did not suffer traitors and even though Mel had never been entirely certain what exactly she had done to deserve being called such, she knew enough not to ask the fey folk sent to kill her why they were trying to do so. Somewhere out there was a notice posted by her former Court with her face on it and words underneath that said, *‘WANTED: DEAD’* and every other fairy looking to score favors with Air had grabbed a copy.

And if the Sidhe were after you, the last thing you wanted to do was make yourself known on the ‘net. The Sidhe *owned* the ‘net. They had practically created it. There had been a galaxy-wide information network since before Marcus’ people had even learned that aetherics were not, in fact, magic. All the old stories of dreamworlds or other realms were just the mortals finding ways to dress up the fact that the Sidhe were already *everywhere*.

Sure, technically they were physically located in the Fey, that weird swath of the Northern Reach that seemed to have fallen out of synch with the reality as the mortals saw it, but when the Queens and their Courts could reliably tap into the aether lattice that suffused almost every parsec of the Dragon’s Wake, it didn’t matter. *That* was the metanet, even if the mortals only used it for posting adorable cat videos or arguing about the sexual habits of pixies.

Metadivers like Ariel saw the ‘net as a physical space, their minds interpreting the flow of aether into some kind of strange landscape. It was a euphoric experience but one that also posed an untold number of dangers, not least of which was direct exposure to the Sidhe.

The Queens’ Folk, that’s what pixies like Mel called them. They were creatures of pure thought, willing themselves into existence with digital code that had became reality in the Fey. Their technology was alien and strange, sometimes only existing as energy or thought. Within the ‘net they were like ephemeral gods, toying with the lives of any mortals dumb enough or desperate enough to contact them. Within the Fey it was even worse. The Queens’, and by extension the Sidhe, ruled over everything. The Courts constantly pitted their agents from the “lesser races” against each other in order to vie for power and leverage. It was a never ending conflict but one that never saw a drop of Sidhe blood spilled.

Mel had considered herself lucky when she had been chosen to serve as the spymaster to a Magus, it gave her chance to finally escape the constant backbiting and shadow games that the Court of Air excelled at. Life among mortals, even those embedded in Imperial politics, had been much more straightforward by comparison.

“Sorry Ariel.” said Mel with practiced dismissal. “I’m a no-go. Have fun storming the castle.”

She disconnected before Ariel had a chance to reply, setting her ‘netpad down on her protein bar table. The piece of tech was almost as long as she was tall and about as wide, so she handled it awkwardly when it wasn’t propped up sideways across her lap like some kind of humongous datapad. The device would have fit snugly into *one* of Marcus’ hands and he would have been able to manipulate its screen with a thumb.

Even so it was not as awkward as it had been when Mel had first received it, which was the most troubling fact of all. It meant she was growing.

As if to prove to herself that she wasn’t crazy to even think such a thing Mel stood and stretched her arms upwards. Not even a cycle ago she had barely been able to brush the bottom of the cupboard above her with the tips of her fingers. Now though…

Mel rapped her knuckles on the polysteel cabinet without her heels leaving the countertop.

She had started to notice the changes just after they had started traveling in the *Amal’hiam*, it had started with her wings. For hundreds of cycles she had been able to fly continuously, for whole days if necessary, her biomechanical wings keeping her aloft with the same effort it took her legs to stand. Now though her shoulders ached constantly and she found herself landing more and more. At first she had just thought she was putting on weight, actually being well fed for the first time in a few cycles was bound to have that effect, but after a few phases of regular meals there seemed to be more of a problem than a few extra grams.

Marcus hadn’t noticed, or if he had he did not mention it, but Mel was sure that she had grown at least a centimeters in the last phase alone.

Walking to the edge of counter Mel stared down at the darkened floor of the kitchen – she hadn’t bothered turning on the lights in the mess. From her perspective it seemed like a fall that might break one, if not both of her legs if she simply let the *Amal’hiam*’s artificial gravity do its job. Would it always seem so far?

Mel flexed her slender hand and held it up. She was definitely growing, it was impossible but she couldn’t deny what was happening. For a pixie she had always been tall, nearly sixteen centimeters, and once they had their centennial growth spurt, which Mel had experienced almost half a millennia ago, her people did not grow any taller. At least that was what she had always believed.

It was only with the hindsight born of years away from any real contact with the Fey that Mel realized that everything she knew about her own people had been taught by one of her former Sidhe masters. It was a very disturbing realization.

Pixies, by and large, served the Sidhe. That was the way it worked. Whole clans of her people were born and raised to serve different Sidhe or the Courts at large. They were enhanced by their masters, given technorganic upgrades that made them more efficient servants. The only universal one of these was the exchange of their inefficient biological wings for ones that could actually let a pixie sustain flight. The surgeries, which always took place after a pixie’s first molting, seemed more like a right of passage to Mel at the time and after that she had been able to fly, so what did it matter?

Within the Court of Air pixies were also given a lighter bone-weave. Their genetics had been altered in the distant past so that they could move faster and more nimbly than pixies from any other Court.

And when she had become Marcus’ spymaster, given to the Magus by her Queen to represent the Court of Air’s continued ties to the mortals of House Khanus, she had received even more “upgrades”. Enhanced perception through nerve amplifiers. Improved reaction time through intergraded muscle stimulants. Improved aetheric senses and capabilities through a series of microscopic aethite slivers seeded throughout her epidermis. There were others. Enhancements, improvements and alterations to let her live, function and thrive in the mortal realms.

The improvements had been extensive and painful but there was a reason for it all. That was what she had been told anyway. All of her life she had been assured that there was an overriding purpose to everything that happened to her.

All of that had changed when she had started caring about the well being of the Magus she had been assigned to aid.

There had been a creature so like her, given purpose and power to serve those above him. But unlike Meliantheena, Marcus Crassus seemed to warp the order of things, giving respect to those that served him and in turn treating their needs like his own. He had been the first to actually treat her like a person, rather than just some tool to be used and then discarded.

To say that it made an impact on her would be the largest understatement Mel could think to make.

There was no purpose in what he did other than the benefit of others. He acted selflessly with no intent to manipulate or control. It had been such an alien idea at the time that it had not been something Mel had been able to accept at first, in fact for nearly the first half-century she had known him she had simply tried to figure out what angel Marcus had been playing. As the centuries wore on though, and Mel never having uncovered some sinister master plan on her Magus’ part, she began to realize that he was being genuine in his compassion and love of others.

From where she stood now it was embarrassing for Mel to look back at her own state of mind. It had taken her nearly two hundred cycles to figure out that she was included in Marcus’ circle of friendship and respect.

Yes, at times, especially recently, Marcus could be a self-centered drama-Queen with no regard for anyone other than himself. But compared to even the most common of Sidhe, he was practically a saint.

So Mel’s visits back to the Fey had become less and less frequent, and she abandoned all pretenses of ever going back after the death of Empress Alessia and the beginning of The Shattering when Marcus had needed her the most.

Her last visit had been nearly seventy cycles ago and as far as Mel knew that was the longest that any of the Fey folk had ever spent in the mortal realms. Perhaps, if not for the enhancements given to her when she’d become Marcus’ spymaster, she might not have survived this long. It was common knowledge among those who served the Sidhe that any significant length of time spent away from their masters could be catastrophic.

But was that the truth?

How much of Sidhe teachings were simply a means to control the disparate races of the Fey who served them?

Mel had no idea.

Maybe pixies *did* keep growing and it was simply the machinations of the Sidhe that kept them small. Perhaps they could fly on their own wings but the biomechanical replacements made them reliant on their masters’ technology.

The thoughts themselves were terrifying enough but what truly scared Mel was the fact that she was only coming to these revelations *now*. What other thoughts was the alien tech in her brain suppressing? Or perhaps *creating*?

It made her shudder and Mel suddenly found the empty mess hall far too lonely for her liking. Even if she was still mad at Marcus, his company was better than the haunting questions that now circled endlessly in her head. At least with the former Magus she could give her worries a voice, something in her head stopped that with everything else.

Chapter Six

As Mel entered the bridge it seemed as though Marcus had not moved since she’d left him almost a turn ago. The fact that he was wearing the same rumpled clothing was a testament to that fact.

The view screen looking forward was grayed out and the former Magus seemed to be slouched back in the pilot’s chair, simply staring forward. Once she was a bit closer, Mel heard the light snores coming from her friend and she shook her head with an exasperated breath. The man was so stiff-necked that he didn’t even loosen up in his sleep. It wasn’t until she was nearly hovering over him that Mel saw the empty whiskey bottle though and she suddenly felt the angry heat rising again.

She stopped herself from flying down and kicking the midrian square in the eyeball.

Zipping back and forth for a frustrated second, Mel finally landed on the dim navigation console and let out several quick breaths. The anger wasn’t helping, that was plain. Every time she got angry at Marcus he seemed to crawl farther into his cups. She had tried to do the pragmatic thing as well, with careful conciliation, attempting to talk him through his problems. When that hadn’t worked either she had destroyed every drop of alcohol on the ship.

That had not gone over well.

Not only had Marcus been furious, actually going as far as rerouting them to stop and get more, it turned out that Mel had missed one of his stashes in her sweep. What was left of the spymaster in her had been galled at the slip.

Not sure what else to do, Mel decided to just stop caring for now. Get the job done, worry about it later. It was harder than she had anticipated.

Absently pulling up the galaxy map with an exaggerated gesture that the console could detect, Mel closed her eyes and steadied herself. When she opened her eyes she was staring at the twinkling display of the Dragon’s Wake, their position marked by a tiny cartoonish version of the *Amal’hiam* against the backdrop of holographic stars. They were almost to their destination, an agworld outside the edge of Imperial space called Bounty, and the *Amal’hiam* was already entering her last warp in the sequence.

“Marcus!” shouted Mel.

The man made a sound like three pigs colliding and was suddenly on his feet, staring wildly around.

“I’m up.” he said groggily. “I’m up, I’m up.”

“Yes.” said Mel dryly. “Yes you certainly are.”

“Wha’s going on?” slurred Marcus as he blinked several times and then rubbed at his face.

“Almost to Bounty.” said Mel, giving Marcus an appraising look she hoped was obvious. “Figured you could take a minute to clean yourself up before we got there.”

Marcus smacked his lips and looked blearily down at himself. He stared for a long moment, as if he wasn’t quite sure what he was looking at, and then glanced back up at Mel.

“Mel.” he said weakly.

The pixie gave him a flat, contemptuous look as she said, “Yes, that is me.”

Groaning, Marcus rubbed at the back of his neck and cast his eyes down and away. When he spoke it was in a quiet, apologetic tone. “About before, look I-”

“Whatever.” cut in Mel. “I just don’t think Helena would want some smelly drunk showing up to save her.”

The comment was meant to be a glib one but when she actually saw Marcus’ back straighten as he took another look down at himself with nodding disapproval Mel almost screamed.

Was that all it took? Mention *her* name and suddenly he would clean himself up?

Fuming Mel turned her back to him and said, “We’ll be in-system in three minutes, high orbit in fifteen. Go take a shower or something.”

She heard him go but it wasn’t until she heard the shower of the captain’s quarters turn on that she let herself sag with a ragged, emotion-filled breath. She didn’t know what it was that raged inside her chest but it was a hot, terrible emotion that roared and sobbed all at once. She wanted to blow something up and she wanted to cry.

There were no tears though; Mel didn’t have time for tears.

Five minutes later Marcus was almost feeling like a person again. Fresh from a boiling hot shower and dressed in cloths that were relatively clean, he was strapping his revolver’s holster back onto his waist as he went down the flight of stairs separating his room from the bridge. When he arrived he saw that Mel had changed the view-screen so that he could see out into the space beyond, the blue-gold orb of a planet rapidly approaching in the distance.

As agworlds went, Bounty was much smaller than the usual planet set aside for farming and food production, which made it difficult to see how it could operate on its own. It was what was referred to as an Outer Kingdom; a small, independent planet or system which contained its own governing bodies and laws. There were thousands of them in the Dragon’s Wake, maybe tens of thousands since the collapse of the Minos Dominion. Near the end of his tenure as a Magus, Marcus had forced dozens of these types of worlds to submit to the rule of the Khanus Empire and in the last four cycles he had scoured even more in his search for Helena.

Already Marcus could see the interstellar traffic moving to and from the planet, little blips of green light around the sphere as ships warped in and out. He couldn’t see anything as large as the Thessian had been but even from this distance of a few hundred thousand kilometers he could see some bigger flashes that indicated the presence of massive corporate cargo haulers.

“What do we know about this place?” asked Marcus, moving to reclaim his seat in the pilot’s chair while the *Amal’hiam* still cruised forward on autopilot.

“Whoever named it had zero imagination.” said Mel wryly as she highlighted the planet on their starchart and brought up its registry page from their shipboard databanks. “Mostly produces wheat and wheat byproducts from the central continental belt. Slavery is legal, obviously, and there are a few corporate interests that basically run the place as one big consortium.”

“Anyone we should worry about?” Marcus asked, no actual concern behind the question.

“Not as far as I can tell.” said Mel as she flicked through a few more pages of the entry on Bounty. “Zol-Khan has some dealings with at least one farmers guild but that’s true everywhere, I don’t think they even have an office planetside. Mostly it’s some company called Haydrik Bio and Vorpal Corp.”

“Vorpal.” said Marcus, shaking his head with a snort. “They into farming now?”

Mel shrugged. “They’re into a little bit of everything these days. Remember when they just made toys?”

He did. Nearly two hundred cycles ago the Vorpal Corporation had been a small company out of the edges of the Empire that produced aetheric oddities and children’s playthings. Now they were a galaxy spanning, multinational that seemed to manufacture just about anything and had offices in the Khanus Empire as well as the Freeholds and any number of Outer Kingdoms. Marcus had seen the rise and fall of hundreds of corporate entities over the centuries and there were only a few that had stuck around. Vorpal seemed to be making pretty good run of it so far.

“Do we have a cover?” asked Marcus as he adjusted his seat, gripping the helm with one hand while the other strayed over the button that released the autopilot.

Mel flipped away from the scrolling data screens about Bounty and over to a new section that had clearly been pulled from the ‘net. “We have a few options but I think the best is-”

Her words ended abruptly when Marcus switched over to manual control and the whole ship lurched suddenly forward. Mel was sent tumbling over the nav console as the artificial gravity went berserk, pockets of intertia suddenly tumbling through the bridge.

Marcus was forced to grip at the helm with both hands as the *Amal’hiam* attempted to pitch them downwards, Bounty shooting upwards and out of their screen. Wrestling with the controls for a moment, the *Amal’hiam* jerked when he was suddenly given direct control again and the planet they were trying to get to zipped back down into view.

“What in the Hells was that?” shouted Mel as she hovered up from behind the console, her wings moving out of sync for a moment until she let them stop for a brief, falling second and then soared back upwards.

“Not sure.” said Marcus, glancing left and right to check that all of the lights of his instruments were still in the blue. Airlocks sealed. Drive-core functional. Life-support online. Everything seemed to be normal as he resumed their previous course towards Bounty. “Whatever happened, its fine now. I think.”

“You *think*.” said Mel. “Wonderful.”

Marcus started to growl something unpleasant but stopped himself. Mel was right, he honestly had no idea what had just happened. Five thousand cycle old dwarvish technology was not exactly his forte.

Instead he said, “We’ll figure it out once we’re planetside.”

Mel gave him a concerned look that Marcus caught out of the corner of his eye.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing.” said Mel blandly.

He would have pursued the point but a crackling voice burst through on the comm.

“…port *Amal’hiam*, please… odes and… …authorization…”

Marcus moved quickly, placing a hand over the aethite sphere of the comm and glancing at Mel, hissing, “Cover?”

Mel flashed through a screen on the Nav console, her eyes darting and her hands moving faster than Marcus could track. She settled on something and said, “Security contract out of New Demis. Job offered by Arius Yost, senior deal broker for Haydrik.”

Nodding, Marcus moved his hand away and stood to enter the inlaid ring where the comm could detect him.

“Repeat.” said Marcus evenly. “We’re getting some post-warp interference on this end.”

The comm sphere whirred to life and a midrian’s upper body appeared projected just above it. He might have had strong features but for the slight amount of excess weight being held by his face and the shortness of his neck. He looked like a strong man that might have gotten a little too used to sitting behind a desk.

“I said this is Bounty Control.” said the man with an annoyed air about his voice. “Transport *Amal’hiam*, please transmit any landing codes or corporate authorizations now. Otherwise state your business.”

“No dirtside passes.” said Marcus. “I got word of some freelance work in New Demis, posting from Haydrik Bio.”

The face on the other end of the holo looked to one side and said, “Give me a second.”

Marcus glanced aside as well, looking to Mel, who shrugged.

A wicked grin spread over the face of the midrian in the holo but he composed himself and turned back towards Marcus and said, “Yes I’ve got it right here.” Relaxing a bit, Marcus was about to thank the man but he held up a hand. “But,”

“There’s always a but…” said Mel wearily.

The man looked around for the source of the pixie’s voice but continued, “*But*, Mr. Yost hasn’t posted any landing clearance for freelancers. We’ll have to get you registered for a landside berthing.”

Marcus let out a sigh but said, “Okay, we’ll just take a wide orbit until-“

“Whoa buddy, whoa. Hang on a sec.” said the man, the evil smile returning with a greasy stare. “There’s channels we gotta go through, forms to fill and then all the fees. It’s going to be at least a turnspan before we can get you planetside.”

“Are you fucking serious?” exclaimed Mel, her wings letting out an agitated buzzing.

“Look,” said Marcus giving the pixie an exasperated look as he addressed the holo with a meaningful tone. “I’m sure there’s some way we could speed this up, right?”

The other midrian gave Marcus an ugly smile. “I suppose we could expedite things but there is a special fee for that sort of thing. Not through the transit authority you understand.”

Mel hovered up next to Marcus and said, “You slimy piece of crap if I ever get my hands on you. Transit authority my gusty ass. I want to talk to your supervisor!”

The holo snapped its gaze up towards Mel and there was a moment of shocked silence as he saw the pixie.

“F…fairy.” he said lamely.

Marcus tried to swat Mel away and spoke quickly, “I’ll do whatever it takes, name the price. We just need to get into the world as quickly as possible.”

The midrian’s sneer returned at Marcus’ words and it widened as he reevaluated the other man and pixie. “Of course. Eight thousand jules should do the trick, grease the wheels as it were. I’ll link you the details.”

“Sure thing, thank you very much.” said Marcus, forcing a thin strand of cheer into his voice.

“Marcus…” growled Mel, staring swords down at the holodisplay.

Marcus turned his back to the holo and spoke in a low, cold voice. “Just transfer the money Mel.”

The pixie begrudgingly flew back to the nav console and pulled up their local ‘net feed. There was a distinct *ding* when the money was gone from the *Amal’hiam*’s internal accounts.

The holo of the greasy man grinned again and gave Marcus a slight nod. “Alright Mr…” He studied some other screen that they couldn’t see. “Gaius –right, of course. Mr. Gaius you’re ship has been cleared for planetside berthing on the facilities of Bounty Associated Grocers.” His grin stretched a little too wide. “I hope you enjoy your stay.”

The holodisplay buzzed off and the comm sphere spun down as Marcus let out a breath.

“Robbery.” said Mel as if to herself. “We just got robbed.”

“It’ll speed things up.” said Marcus as he returned to the pilot’s chair, grabbing hold of the helm once more. “The sooner we get down there, the sooner we find Helena.”

“Right.” groused Mel. “Meanwhile we run out of money to buy food.”

“We’ll be fine.” said Marcus lightly and for some ridiculous reason, he believed it. As they rounded the planet in a circling orbit, catching the system’s sun as it crested the dayside of the world, he felt a brightening of his mood.

This was it. The last name on the list. The only one left. Helena had to be here if she was anywhere. The thought of seeing her again made Marcus’ lips twitch into a smile.

Somewhere down on that planet Helena was waiting. Primus only knew what she’d been through over the last few cycles but Marcus was sure that he would be putting a stop to it as soon as he could.

“What’s got you grinning?” asked Mel, squinting at him.

“This is it.” Marcus said simply as he kept his eyes forward, the readouts on the view-screen vectoring their approach.

“Of course.” said Mel, her voice a dark half-whisper. “This is it.”

Chapter Seven

Bounty was not a big planet by agworld standards, most places that were called such were generally two or three times bigger. Though what it lacked in size it made up for in arable land. Almost the entire equator of the planet and for at least a dozen degrees north and south was good, farmable land. Baring where the continents were interrupted by the planet’s sparse oceans, it made for an extremely productive world.

From low orbit on the day side of the planet it looked like an endless patchwork of gold. Thousands of square kilometers of wheat spread out below them, consuming the entire landscape. Not that there was much of a landscape. Even from this high up Marcus could tell that at least this section of the world had undergone extensive terrashaping, the terrain having been molded by skilled geo-aethericists to be as flat as possible. It was a clear sign that whoever owned this stretch of the planet was extremely wealthy.

Mel whistled to signal that she noticed as much as well.

As the *Amal’hiam* broke through the lower atmosphere it started moving under its own grav-chems rather than just the rear propulsion crystals. For one terrible, gut-wrenching moment Marcus thought that the chems would not switch on; that they would just rocket into the ground below like so much falling scrap metal. Then he tugged on the helm and felt the resistance of the planetary winds as his ship leveled off a few thousand meters in the air.

Glancing over to where Mel had a holo of Bounty displayed on the nav console, Marcus asked, “So where are we actually going?”

Mel was quiet as she watched the holographic globe spin slowly, details of cities and corporate complexes appearing in tiny projected letters. Near the bottom of the display was a list that now only consisted of one entry and the tiny woman considered it for a long moment before she touched it lightly to drag it up onto the main display in front of them both.

The name Ellia was the first thing that appeared, followed shortly by a brief line that consisted of a ship’s registration number and a date. The sale of this possible Helena had been nearly four cycles ago, right after her and Marcus’ supposed deaths. It certainly fit the timeline.

“The buyer’s ship was owned by a man named Regis Gaius.” said Mel, highlighting the registration number and pulling up a page from the ‘net as she spoke. “He owns a small business, a textile dealer I think, out of a city a few meridians from here called Panimberg.”

“He sells cloths?” asked Marcus, adjusting their heading slightly so that he lined the *Amal’hiam’s* trajectory with a blue line that had appeared on the HUD of the viewscreen. “What does he need slaves for?”

Mel shrugged. “Free labor. Based on the ‘net page it looks like pretty middle-of-the-road stuff. Though I guess he’s mostly selling to farmers and mid-level corporate types, Panimberg is not exactly the center of activity around here. The only thing that probably got it passed being a company town is the monastery.”

Marcus raised an eyebrow. “Orcs, huh? They have more than one abbey this far out?”

“Three actually.” said Mel, more than a little surprise in her voice. “Though the one in Panimberg is easily the smallest.”

“Still…” said Marcus, focusing forward as he thought.

“Yeah, kind of weird.” said Mel. “Population here is only about two billion, wonder what makes this place so special?”

It was more than weird in Marcus’ opinion, Imperia itself only had seven orcish monasteries and it was one of the most densely populated worlds in civilized space.

Shaking his head, he put it out of his mind and refocused on the task at hand.

“Do we know anything else about this guy, Regis Gaius? Is that even his real name?” asked Marcus.

The surname Gaius was an extremely common one in and around the Western Reach, said to date back to when the fractured midrian worlds had joined the Dominion nearly five thousand cycles ago. So it was no surprise that anyone looking to hide their identity could do so behind that name fairly easily. The fact that the name Marcus was also common among midrians from the Empire had caused the former Magus a small amount of grief over the last few cycles as he had attempted to conceal the fact of who he had been to a galaxy that thought him dead. Most of the time people just assumed he was using a fake name.

“No idea.” said Mel with another shrug. “All I’ve got is the name and place of business. I think we’re just lucky that this one was sent directly here.”

Marcus nodded darkly. More than one of the possible Helenas had led them on a merry chase through some of the seedier portions of the galaxy, a few even leading them as far as the Southern Reach. He and Mel had been lucky that they found most of the women in one piece, mentally or otherwise.

The small lump of the hope swelling in Marcus was due to this planet though. Bounty was not the most accessible world they had come to in the last cycle but it was certainly one of the more stable ones. Agworlds tended to be free of the kind of graft found in more metropolitan planets, with corporate interests and land barons making the more detestable sorts of crime extremely unprofitable.

That was not to say they were perfect places, the fact that outright slavery was still legal on Bounty spoke to that fact.

As the *Amal’hiam* swept over the continuously flat landscape Marcus could see patches of green beginning to line sections to the south. A different crop of some kind, maybe corn or soy. It was impossible to tell from this high up.

Ahead of them, where the breaking dawn was only just touching the horizon, a small city rose up out of the fields. Located on the only remaining hill for kilometers around, Panimberg probably only had a few thousand permanent residents, with long public houses on the outskirts serving as homes to the slave population used to maintain the surrounding crops. Only three or four buildings rose above two stories and even those looked squat from Marcus’ vantage point. A pair of small berths was set up on the northern and southern edges of town though they looked a far sight better operated than some of the ramshackle docks he’d been forced to use in the last cycle.

All and all, Panimberg looked like a small, out-of-the-way town that only existed because transporting laborers from one of the bigger cities would not have been cost effective. It was the perfect place to hide the former Throneguard Captain, Helena Istara.

Marcus started on a descent vector, reducing their speed until they were hovering just above an empty berth. Using his right hand to push each of the eight docking clamps out and down so that they served as landing struts, Marcus set the *Amal’hiam* spinning downwards.

They were perhaps two meters off the ground when the grav-chems suddenly cut out and the *Amal’hiam* fell straight down. They hit the ground with a jarring thud that rocked Marcus forward so that he slammed into the helm. Mel managed to buzz into the air just before the impact and flew to his side as the landing struts gave out tortured creaks.

“The Queen’s-cursed Hells was *that*?” shouted Mel as small ticking noises started from the aether conduits all along the ship.

Marcus shook his head. If he had not been fully awake before, he certainly was now. Spikes of adrenaline shot through him and made the veins on his arm stand out as he struggled to release his white-knuckled grip on the helm. He pried his fingers loose and took several deep breaths before speaking.

“Primus take us.” swore Marcus as he flexed his right hand slowly and leaned back in the pilot’s chair. “Was it the drive-core?” He looked over at the power readouts to his right and then glanced over his shoulder at Mel. “Can you go check?”

Mel had been hovering just behind him, a mix of worry and anger smearing her face. She did not move only staring passed Marcus at the readouts as well.

“Meliantheena!” snapped Marcus.

With a buzzing flutter, Mel snapped her attention back to him. “Drive-core, on it.”

She flew off the bridge and zipped aft, towards the engine room at the rear of the ship.

When she was gone Marcus let out another long breath as he closed his eyes. His left hand clutched at the flask that rode next to his thigh and there was a long moment of struggle as he waged a war with himself. Eventually Marcus managed to clench his hand into a fist and slammed it down just above his knee. The shaking wouldn’t stop.

Motion helped a little.

When Mel flew back in Marcus was standing and inspecting the aether conduits that ran out of the bridge. They seemed intact.

“I don’t know.” said Mel with a frustrated tone. “The Queen’s Cursed thing could be upside down for all I can tell. Dwarvish crap.”

Marcus moved back through the *Amal’hiam*, watching the conduits as he went. Mel followed close behind.

The ship made the settling noises it always did when they landed; aethite cooling, joints settling, systems power-cycling or shutting down entirely. Something had clearly gone wrong or else they would not have fallen like they did or experienced that malfunction when they had come out of warp. The *Amal’hiam* was an old craft but she was dwarf-make and the tech of the khag lasted longer than most.

Moving across the walkway and through both the hold and galley, Marcus made it to the engine room that housed the *Amal’hiam’s* drive-core. It consisted of a large chunk of pure aethium that Marcus could not see due to the absorption panels that surrounded a sealed cylinder.

Before they had acquired the *Amal’hiam* several of those panels had been removed by Edward Stoat in a successful attempt to prevent them from leaving Saul’s Rock. They had since been replaced but Marcus had always had a small amount of concern for one of the panels that had been cracked upon discovery. The broken panel had apparently been replaced but now that he was staring right at it, Marcus could see some of the same stress lines forming along the center of the panel.

Perhaps the repairs had not been as complete as he had assumed.

But for the few malfunctions in the last turn though, the *Amal’hiam* had not experienced a single hiccup in the last cycle.

Marcus inspected the last lengths of the aether conduits that led into the core and ran a hand over each of the absorption panels. There was a slight rise in the previously cracked panel that marred its otherwise uniform surface but other than that everything looked in order.

And even if it wasn’t, what could they do? Find a mechanic? Spend precious time and energy trying to fix a ship that, to Marcus, was only a means to an end? Helena was the true goal. Everything else was a secondary concern.

Licking his lips, the former Magus swallowed and turned to Mel to say, “It looks fine. She was probably just readjusting to normal gravity. It’s been a while since we’ve been planetside.”

Mel gave him a penetrating look and a disapproving crossing of her arms. “That still doesn’t explain the heavy-G sim we went through when we got out of the Void.”

Marcus shook his head and said, “No idea Mel.”

The pixie turned and flew towards the mess. Marcus couldn’t see her face as she asked, “So what’s the play?”

Marcus stared somberly after her and found some steel in his voice as he spoke, “We find Regis Gaius and make him tell us where Helena is.”

Mel paused before she was out of sight and turned back to give Marcus a single nod. “Give me a minute to gear up.” said the pixie. “I’ll meet you up front.”

Nodding back, Marcus moved back towards the front of the *Amal’hiam*, pausing only in the hold to grab an extra box of ammunition for his revolver.

If the last cycle had taught the former Magus anything, it was to expect anything where slave owners were concerned. Marcus tried to steel himself for the worst but the thought of *not* finding Helena was unacceptable and there wasn’t a fiber of his being that believed she was dead. Unfortunately, if this last cycle had taught him anything else, it was that there were worse fates than death for a slave.

Chapter Eight

Greg stared at the greasy midrian on the other end of the holo for a long moment, never breaking eye contact with the man. Eventually the customs officer looked away nervously and said, “So, uh, is that the ship you were looking for or not?”

Keeping his even gaze locked on the midrian, Greg said, “Thank you for the information Mr. Nulta, I’ll let you know if our arrangement still stands within the next turn.”

Without letting him respond, Greg moved out of the holodisplay’s sensor-ring and out of the booth itself. The mercenary who had accompanied him to the public comm booth looked up at the ogre expectantly and asked, “Well?”

“We shall see.” said Greg evasively; he did not want to give the man any false hope. Though, based on the description he had just been given, there was little doubt that their time here on Bounty was about to come to a close one way or another.

It had been nearly a cycle since Ark had led them here, insisting on hiring a band of mercs after he had finished his metadive to the chem-hack. Greg might have been insulted if his khagrish employer had not finally relented and told him that the files he had recovered mentioned some kind of StRATa connection to this whole mess. It was not exactly a surprising revelation, given what they had seen, simply the last in a long line of little oddities that had begun compiling since Saul’s Rock.

Edward Stoat, the previous owner of the khagrish vessel Ark hunted, had smacked of far too much class to be some fringeworld crimelord. He had reeked of old money, a scent that Gregory Vesuvius Wilhelm Von Statun XIII knew all too well.

Mel, the pixie aboard said ship, used tech that no wildfey should possess. She had also lacked any and all of the social graces used by bound servants or nobility of her race.

Last and most interesting of all was Marcus, the midrian who had taken control of ship. He had seemed nothing more than an ex-Legion merc, appearing at first to be some hapless Feyslave, but there was a streak of heroism in the man that spoke of something more. The fact that Greg had also seen the midrian shrug off a wave a small-arms fire as if he were an ogre made him all the more enigmatic.

Greg felt as though some form of involvement by the Khanus Empire’s shadowy Strategic Recon and Advanced Tactics group was less of a question mark to everything and more of a corner piece to the puzzle. He needed a few more edges to make out the shape of the thing but there was certainly some sort of grand picture to be seen here.

Not that any of that mattered to Ark in any more than a passing fashion. The khag Prospector only had eyes for the ship in Marcus’ possession. It was the reason they had come to Bounty. It was the reason he had hired a squad of mercenaries who Greg knew were little more than cannon fodder in Ark’s mind. It was also the reason he would not be able to reacquire the ogre’s services in less than a turn’s time.

As far as Greg could tell Ark had paid a ruinous amount to cover the costs of the last cycle though it was the retainers on the mercenaries that had truly bankrupted the khag. By phases end Arkon-no-Sek would barely be able to eat, let alone afford the renewal of Greg’s Contract in a little over twelve hours.

A strange sense of melancholy took the war-merc as he moved across the street and back towards the townhouses Ark had rented for their stay on Bounty. It had been nearly eight cycles since he had begun working for the khag and as of right now his resume consisted of only one other job since he had left Gobwor a decade ago. Greg had grown accustomed to Ark’s way of life and he admitted that he would be sad to see it go.

Gallivanting across the galaxy in search of lost treasures, relying on their wits and weaponry to see them through – there was a certain amount of thrilling romance to it all. He was practically living out the plots to some of his favorite plays, the ones full of dashing action and roguish heroes.

Greg smirked at the idea as he took in a giant lungful of air through his nose; all he was missing was a flouncy hat with a wide brim and a shinefly-wing plume.

He was fooling himself, of course. Life was always more complex than the simple archetypes he had grown up with. His adventures with Ark, if he wanted to call them that, had generally amounted to wild stirge-chases that rarely, if ever, ended with the pair finding anything concrete, let alone worthy of Ark returning home with.

The tragedy there was not lost on Greg, even if his khagrish companion could not see the forest from the trees, as it were.

Greg could say this for Ark though, he never gave up. His tenacity might ultimately cause him undue grief but the ogre saw it as one of his employer’s more admirable qualities.

This ship though, the *Amal’hiam* his informant had called it, might be more trouble than even Ark was willing to face.

The name itself put an eldritch tone in Greg’s mind.

*Amal’hiam*.

It was not a word that the ogre recognized nor did it sound like any language he had been exposed to. It was something strange and *other*. The alien nature of it stuck to his tongue and he said it aloud just to taste it. “*Amal’hiam*.”

“What’s that?” asked the merc walking behind him.

Greg glanced back down at the other man, having completely forgotten he had been there.

“Musings.” said Greg with a shrug.

The man gave him a look that let Greg know that the midrian had not understood either of the words the ogre had just said.

“Simply thinking aloud.” said Greg more plainly, looking back ahead as they made it to the front of the townhouses.

They were small, two story affairs that shared a central wall that bisected them into separate establishments. One side housed the mercenaries while the other Ark kept for himself and Greg. The lopsided arrangement of space, on top of the last cycle of dull work, had created some tension between the mercs and their employer.

“Tell the others to be ready.” said Greg as he reached the door. The man who had accompanied him nodded though Greg noted the bored look on his face.

This last cycle had not been especially taxing on any of them but for professionals mercenaries like Red’s Dogs, used to plying their trade, it was boring. Greg was accustomed to the off and on nature of Ark’s work but these others, like most common mercenaries, were used to doing their jobs and moving on. Staying on Bounty for so long with little to do other than wait had begun to fray even at the most patient of them.

Ark was not helping in that respect. The khag had very little tact when it came to dealing with others. At first it had only been the Contract that let Greg overlook Ark’s abrupt manner but over the cycles he had come to understand that social niceties were just something that khags did not observe. As far as Greg could tell, recognition of existence was the khagrish version of being polite.

It had taken Greg almost two cycles to realize that all the little pieces of etiquette that had been drilled into him by his Hobs were completely lost on Ark. All of the social window dressing that constituted the employer/employee relationship, given so much importance by everyone who had ever educated Greg, was just a waste of time to the Prospector.

Abandoning most of the finer societal elements from his old life had been a liberating experience. Though if his old Hobs, every ogre that had ever held a piece of his Contract during his education, could see him now they would likely scream. The thought made Greg grin slightly as he got inside.

The inside of the townhouse was mostly dark, the blinds on the windows having been drawn. Little drifts of sunlight attempted to squeeze in through cracks and dust motes moved in the room like small bugs.

Greg moved over from the door, stooping slightly to avoid scrapping his head on the ceiling and snapped open the blinds, illuminating the living room.

They had never bothered to furnish the downstairs area of the house with anything other than a small table back near the recessed kitchen so it wasn’t surprising that there were no lights on down here. Greg just did not like the gloom.

Moving upstairs, the ogre found Ark on the small ‘net terminal he had set up shortly after moving in here. He could metadive if he wanted to but mostly he used the simple holo-display monitor to cross reference information and attempt to find out more about their quarry.

The khag was completely oblivious to the outside world and Greg noted that the smaller man still had not changed out of the cloths he had been wearing for the last two days. The smell in the room wasn’t bad, per-say, but it was stale in a way that let him know that Ark had not moved in quite some time.

Ark’s bearded chin was propped up by an elbow as he leaned over the desk and stared intently at the simple images the terminal created to represent the complexity of the metanet. His free hand rested gently on a smooth aethite pad that let him manipulate the terminal without the ridiculously complicated set of peripherals that Greg needed to do something as simple as look up a local address.

Things like using the ‘net still astounded Greg to some degree, the ability of the other races to see and do things in a realm entirely separate from the real. It was like they could enter another piece of reality that ogres could never touch. Not that they wanted to. Any sensible ogre could see that far too many people lost themselves to the ‘net to make it something to yearn for.

“We have a possible match.” said Greg softly.

Ark almost fell out of his chair, his chin slipping from where it rested on a fist and slamming into the desk that was slightly too large for him.

“Rusted Teeth!” spluttered the Khag as he picked himself up. “What have I said about sneaking up on me?”

If there was one thing Greg had rarely been accused of, it was stealth. A smile quirked his lips as he said, “Apologies.”

Ark waved his hand dismissively as he touched the terminal’s control pad, closing the streams and ‘net pages. Turning back towards Greg, he moved from the room he had been using as an office and bustled towards his own room as he spoke. “What’s the source? What do you have?”

“A man I’ve been paying off who works for planetary customs contacted me this morning.” said Greg evenly, keeping behind Ark by a few paces and staying outside of the khag’s room. “He said a ship matching the runner’s description received landing clearance near an hour ago.”

Greg heard Ark pause within the bedroom, the subtle silence full of the khag’s intense thought.

As he resumed motion Greg heard him rustle through his closet and chest of belongings as he spoke. “Did we get an ID?”

“*Amal’hiam*.” said Greg with a touch of reverence to the foreign word. “My contact says they’re headed here, to New Demis.”

“We should be so lucky…” Ark mumbled to himself before he continued speaking to Greg, “I highly doubt the Cogfather would be so kind as to drop them in my lap, I want Bartlett’s men ready to move on my word. This is the moment I’ve been waiting for; I won’t have them slip through my fingers again.”

“I’ve sent word for the Dogs to prepare.” said Greg.

Ark emerged from the bedroom, dressed in fresh cloths and smelling of the disinfectant wipes he used rather than trust the local water supply to bathe. He also wore his bandolier of pouches that contained various khagrish devices. A bright look filled his dark eyes and the wheels of thought spinning within his mind were clearly visible to Greg, contingency upon contingency layering into a latticework of confidence on Ark’s face.

Greg stood slightly stooped in the hallway that had not been built to accommodate an ogre and as Ark moved passed him he said, “There is also the other matter.”

The khag glanced at him as he stopped on the stairway, raising a thick eyebrow.

“My Contract.” continued Greg.

“Oh. Right.” said Ark, continuing down the stairs. “If all goes well I won’t be needing your services for much longer Greg. Perhaps I’ll contact you again once I’ve finished returning the ship to Nov-Khag-Rin.”

He said it all without so much as a look back and Greg deflated slightly, letting out a long breath before following his employer downstairs. The war-merc wasn’t sure what he had been expecting. Regret? Disappointment? Even a twinge of sadness would have been gratifying though Greg did not exactly know why.

Ark was never one to wear his emotions on his sleeve, except where the khag were concerned but this was something else.

The Prospector here on Bounty was not the same man Greg had been travelling with for the previous seven cycles. Ark had always been abrupt, stubborn and direct to the point of rudeness, but ever since the events on Saul’s Rock a change had come over him.

Dogged determination Greg had expected but in their search for the *Amal’hiam*, it had started to gain a manic quality. In the last few phases Ark had become quiet and intense, when he spoke at all it was of the Usulv Linebreaker. It was mostly just old stories and hearsay but after everything Greg gleaned, it seemed like the *Amal’hiam* was more than just some piece of tech to Ark. The same was true for the two sapients that had comendeered the ship. Marcus, the mysterious ex-Legion merc, and the pixie that traveled with him. Rumors and whispers around the ‘net painted a strange picture of the two making a haphazard search of nearly the entire Dragon’s Wake. The more Ark learned, the less he seemed to understand about the pair.

It had become an obsession.

The khag had spent the last cycle learning every detail he could scrounge about their quarry and all of it only served to deepen his hunger and darken his mood.

There had been other times, other pieces of lost khagrish tech that they had tracked across whole quadrants of space. Each one had been part of a rumor wrapped in misunderstanding and the distaste that most of the galaxy still held for the khag. Very few had ever amounted to anything significant but none of them had grabbed Ark as the *Amal’hiam* had.

None of their previous enterprises had been this drawn out, to be sure, but before Greg always had the sense that Ark was ready to move on to the next challenge when they met with failure. The Prospector would scowl and Greg would attempt to cheer him and Ark would say that he did not need cheering up even though he did. It was an old dance at this point but one that the war-merc thought they both participated in willingly and with a sense of satisfaction.

Greg had thought that, perhaps after all this time, maybe Ark saw him as more than just some hired muscle. A friend? Was that going too far? It was certainly how Greg felt and he had thought that Ark might share the sentiment.

Clearly he had been wrong.

When he reached the bottom floor, Ark was already bringing up several pages on a small ‘net terminal he had strapped to his forearm.

“I think I have them.” said Arkon-no-Sek, a small, slightly wicked grin playing across his face. “A ship registered as the *Amal’hiam* just touched down in Panimberg. Go pull the tran around and get Bartlett and his men.”

Greg nodded and said, “Right away.”

Moving outside the ogre was finally able to straighten up and he stretched for a brief moment before going to the small garage on the side of the townhouse. He pulled a keychem out of his pocket, miniscule in his huge hand, and lifted the garage door with his other hand. Inside was a medium sized black tran that could comfortably seat five people. Although it was more like three people and one ogre.

He leaned into the tran and started its drive, careful not to muscle the keychem lest he break the tiny thing on accident. Then, its gravchems lifting it less than a meter off the ground, Greg gripped the front bumper and guided the vehicle out onto the street with one hand. He couldn’t actually drive the tran, his lack of aetherics stopped him from actually getting it to accelerate or turn, but he moved it out onto the road in front of the townhouse.

Soon the garage of the unit next to theirs opened as well and a surly man stood inside, his burly arms crossed over a barrel of a chest. Underneath a heavy brow and a thick mustache, Red Bartlett chomped on a lit cigar that trailed a disgusting green smoke.

“What’s the play tallboy?” asked the mercenary leader as his men drove a similar tran out onto the street. “We got action or are we just rustling some more local feathers?”

“We have a possible hit Mr. Bartlett.” said Greg politely, trying to hide the edge in his voice. The leader of Red’s Dogs had a very annoying habit of not calling anyone by their given name.

“And will the big boss be joining us?” asked Bartlett even as Ark appeared at the door, never looking up from the small holodisplay on his arm.

“This is where you earn your pay.” said Greg as he opened the front door of the tran for Ark and standing in the way so they could not see the booster seat the khag had to use to drive. “Follow our lead. You’ll get more details on your personal comms as we get close.”

Working his cigar from one corner of his mouth to another, Bartlett nodded and hopped into the passenger seat of his tran, talking to his men as the six others piled into the back seats.

Greg clambered into the back seat of Ark’s tran and hunched down awkwardly, his knees up near his chin and the entire back half of the vehicle sagging down to almost touch the street.

“No more delays.” said Ark as they began to move though it was more to himself than to Greg.

The ogre nodded slightly even though his employer was not looking at him.

Perhaps that was all the cycles since he had left Gobwor had been, a delay. At least while he was with Ark though, he had been able to do things on his own terms. His Contract had not felt like such a noose around his neck. On another job though? Would some new Hob allow him to be as carefree, able to forget what had brought him away from his home? Bodyguard work was one thing but the Hobs at the academy still told stories about how things had been during the Deep War.

Greg shook his head, clearing his thoughts. Now was not the time to dwell on these things, he would have more time to think in less than a turn. He needed to focus. Getting sloppy now would look terrible on his Contract and he didn’t need it looking any worse than it already did.

Chapter Nine

“It’s actually not that far.” said Mel as she buzzed up into the fresh air. “At least the storefront, who knows if he manufactures all of it on site.”

Marcus grunted and looked up as they emerged from the berth, shielding his eyes from the glaring sun with a hand. The sky was a clear blue that made the two moons hovering above them look like pale ghosts. The air had a clean, earthy taste to it. It smelled like growing things and it reminded Marcus of his homeworld, Verge.

Panimberg itself was not much to look at, the squat buildings looked all the squatter from street level. Most of the city looked like it had been made of dark terracotta, shingled with some kind of darker material. Marcus guessed that they somehow concealed solar panels on their broad, flat roofs based on the lack of external wiring or obvious power infrastructure.

This early in the turn people moved about the streets briskly, preparing for another day of work. Merchants opened shops, aghands prepared to go out into the fields and people wearing slave collars did their masters’ bidding.

Pausing, Marcus stared as a midrian man wearing a large steel and aethite collar walked briskly passed.

The sight of the slave did nothing to improve his mood and Marcus was shocked at how angry it made him now. Five cycles ago he would not have given the man a second glance, if he noticed the slave at all. While he had never considered himself elitist it was hard not to see it like that in hindsight. Someone wearing one of those collars had always been like an appliance or tool, unheeded until it was of use. The collars themselves could dampen and even reverse the aetheric output of a person but on top of that they had a symbolic magic all their own. They told anyone of station that this was not a person anymore, that they were an object; property. Marcus could not say that he was innocent of ignoring such peoples’ plight.

While outright slavery was illegal in the Khanus Empire, indentured servitude was not and the fine line between the two had become all the more muddy to the former Magus recently. While searching for Helena he had seen far more of the slave trade in the Dragon’s Wake than any member of society probably should and he had come to find that not every person contained by a slave collar within the Empire had done so by choice. It was all too easy for slavers to fake documents or find buyers who did not care one way or another if the merchandise they were receiving was obtained legally, even within the Empire.

In the three hundred cycles he had served House Khanus there was no way he could have stayed ignorant of that fact and the thought that he had suppressed that knowledge in some way terrified Marcus to his core. As a Magus he had been the next best thing to immortal, even now he barely looked older than forty, and it had removed many of the daily concerns of a regular life. Perhaps not at first but it had also given him a much different perspective on some issues, *a longer view*, as his teacher Viktus Null had put it. When time was removed as a factor many things that others saw as immediately good or bad where weighed against the long term benefits to the Empire as a whole.

It was a dispassionate mindset that suited some better than others but it was either that or go mad as everyone and everything you ever cared for faded away with the centuries. Marcus had eventually succumbed to the latter.

Helena’s disappearance had not been the only reason he had tried to kill himself when he did, but it had certainly been the last step in the downward spiral he had been falling down since the beginning of The Shattering.

Now that he was mortal again, with life and entropy slowly grinding away at him, Marcus was forced to reevaluate things. Especially now that he could see just how sheltered from the rest of the galaxy he had been in the service of the Empire.

There were so many perspectives that he had simply not been exposed to, so many histories that clashed with the Imperial propaganda. He had once thought himself well educated, a would-be scholar of the ancient midrians that had come before the Empire, but now that thought only left a bitter sneer on his face.

What had he really learned?

There had been people, living people, right under his nose for hundreds of cycles who had been forced into servitude or worse while the Magus had collected talismans and runestones.

It was an ugly truth made all the uglier by the fact that Marcus wasn’t sure if he would change anything if he could go back and do it again. There had been a simple happiness in what he had done. Marcus Crassus, an honest and powerful legionnaire from a frontier world, had become Magus Imperia Marcus Crassus Khanus of Verge. His honesty had been praised as a virtue and his aetherics were ascended to heights unknown by mortal midrians. He lived only to serve and found contentment in the knowledge that everything he was ordered to do helped to preserve the most powerful midrian civilization that had ever existed.

In short, he had been enslaved.

It had not been a choice, not really. When the ruler of the Khanus Empire told you that you would be given the highest honor that can be bestowed on a citizen of their realm, you did not turn them down. Marcus could not have said no to Aria Khanus, even if he had wanted to, and once the process was over it was far too late.

He had not been given a collar like the slaves that walked the streets of Panimberg but the two crystals left over from the aethium they had infused his body with were leash enough. Any Magus could be subjected to excruciating pain and even death thanks to the resonator crystal held by House Khanus. It was not something he had ever experienced - no not loyal, honest Marcus - but he knew that some of the others, the monsters amongst the Thirteen, had to be reigned in from time to time.

Marcus wished it had been something as obvious as a collar; at least then he would not have been able to believe he had ever been anything other than a slave.

Perhaps his masters would not have forgotten either.

Blinking hard, Marcus looked away from the slaves on the road. For a moment it was not Helena’s face that haunted him, but Alessia’s.

He reached down, searching for the engraved pocket-watch that the last Empress had given him and finding only the contours of his flask.

Of course.

The watch was gone. He’d left it on the bridge of the *Argo* over four cycles ago.

Watching absently as Mel took in a deep lungful of the clean, agworld air Marcus took another deep breath as well.

“I forgot how much I missed this.” said Marcus.

Mel turned towards him and smiled as she asked, “Air that hasn’t been pumped through a filter eleventy-billion times?”

Marcus nodded and started to walk away from the berth, heading into Panimberg proper. Mel flew down to land on his shoulder, her weight a familiar comfort as he moved.

“So where are we supposed to find this guy?” asked the former Magus.

Mel shook her head and hit him lightly on the ear. “Weren’t you listening? Its just down the road a bit and two blocks in, name’s Armstrong’s Closet.”

“Who’s Armstrong?” asked Marcus.

Mel gave a tiny shrug. “No idea. Some clothing guy? All you people wear tents as far as I’m concerned.”

Marcus gave out a small snort of amusement as he cut down a side street to get to the road that they needed.

From the look of it Panimberg was fairly well laid out, a simple grid pattern with signs at most of the intersections. Aside from the occasional small cargo-tran hauling supplies or workers the roads were mostly dominated by sparse foot traffic. Considering the vast majority of the population lived in the public houses on the outskirts of town Marcus wasn’t shocked to see that the interior of the city seemed less active.

All in all, the town had a rustic feel that the former Magus was sure the larger cities on Bounty did not share. Corporate supervisors and land barons would not stand for dirt roads or clay buildings. Marcus would almost call Panimberg pleasant if that countryside ideal wasn’t undermined by the thousands of collared slaves that were even now leaving town to go work in the fields just beyond.

The town where Marcus had grown up had been similar to this place in some respects. Quiet, out-of-the-way, filled with people working the land in order to survive. The difference was that a young man on Verge, dissatisfied with the life of a farmer, could go off and see the galaxy. Join the Legion. Earn fame and glory. Return one day to help all of the folk who had helped make him into the man who had become a Magus.

None of the slaves on Bounty had that option.

“Whatcha thinking about?” asked Mel carefully.

Marcus glanced at her and said wryly, “Who says I’m thinking about anything?”

“Well, that’s my general assumption.” said Mel, “But you just had a look there. Wistful or something.”

Marcus took another deep breath through his nose, taking in the smells of Panimberg. “Verge.” he finally said.

“How long has it been since you’ve been back there?” asked the pixie on his shoulder.

“Too long.” said Marcus because in truth he could not clearly remember the last time he had been to his homeworld. Fifty cycles? Maybe more?

Mel looked away and she seemed to be lost in thought for a few seconds. When she spoke again it was in a quiet voice that Marcus had to strain to hear.

“Maybe we can go there again, once this is all over.”

The idea made Marcus pause momentarily, stopping mid step.

Go back to Verge. Find Helena so that they could be together, once and for all, and then return to that green and brown orb on the edge of the Western Reach. Finally go home.

The idea was a romantic one; simplistic and outright stupid in some respects.

Verge was still part of the Khanus Empire. Marcus Crassus and Helena Istara were supposed to be dead. The former Magus knew he still had family on his homeworld, the descendants of his brothers and sisters who also carried the name Crassus, but those people did not know him. They knew the Magus. They knew the propaganda and myth that was Marcus Crassus Khanus of Verge. Anyone who had known him personally had died centuries ago.

No. Verge was not an option.

Shaking his head, Marcus continued to walk. He could feel an awkward silence fill the air between him and Mel when he did not respond but he just kept his eyes forward and carried on.

Mel’s wings buzzed suddenly and she dipped off his shoulder, flying ahead.

“Where’re you going?” asked Marcus lamely.

Hovering backwards for a moment, Mel said, “Doing my job. Scouting ahead.” She shot him a bright smile as she added flippantly, “Try not to get lost old man.”

Turning away Mel let the brittle smile fall off of her face. She felt hot and she could feel the aether fighting to spark from her fingertips on sheer instinct. Fighting the power down, she sped upwards at an angle, getting above the roof line while still streaking forward. The wind pressed at her but did little to cool her down.

*Go there again*?

What had she been thinking?

Clearly she hadn’t.

Embarrassment. Anger. Resentment. Depression.

A pinwheel of emotions rolled through Mel as she covered the distance to her destination in the space of a few seconds.

The look that had crossed Marcus’ face when she had brought up the idea of going back to Verge drove her upwards. Mel had seen that sudden light fill his eyes like a binary sunrise and then, almost as quickly fade into a dark scowl the likes of which she had not seen on the former Magus since The Shattering. He hadn’t even been able to summon words to reply, he had just shook his head as if denying a dying man a reprieve.

Mel finally stopped moving when she was nearly a kilometer off the ground. The air was thinner up here, colder. Down there it was already warm, the heat from the previous day’s sun only just having finished dissipating off the clay buildings. It was *too* warm, Mel told herself, it made her brain all muzzy. She needed the bitter sting of this height to clear her head she reasoned, so she could be sharp for the mission.

She had definitely not flown all the way up here, to a point where the town below looked like a disjointed puzzle, just because of the hot-faced shame now lighting up her cheeks and wings alike.

Falling back down took longer than it needed to, especially with her added weight of the last cycle. Her wings seemed to be instinctively pulling her up and away from the source of her searing emotions.

Eventually she stopped her wings altogether, locking them so that she could glide down on the gently rising thermals coming up from beneath her. She fell in a lazy spiral, looking to the world below like a circling bird, though once she was beneath the lines of the first roofs she started to hover once more.

This was stupid. She was being stupid. Marcus couldn’t be angry at her, not for something as simple as her comment about returning to Verge. Could he?

Why was she even worrying about what he thought?

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Queens take it all but Mel felt as though she was either going to laugh or cry but her body could not decide which was more appropriate. So she did neither.

Instead she focused. She found those little nodes of aetheric power seeded through her body and used them. She let the aether flow.

Silvery lines of power streamed across her arms and face. Beneath the layers of her tech-belts and form-fitting tactical suit she could feel the hairs on her skin rise. The aether swirled in strange patterns that Mel did not recognize, the power moving through her with an instinct she had developed over centuries of practice. It soothed her nerves, calmed her mind and settled her stomach before she had even realized that it was upset.

Pushing everything else from her head Mel refocused on the task at hand. As her ritual ended and the lines of power disappeared, Mel blinked and found that she had landed on the edge of a roof without realizing it. The toes of her boots hung just off edge of a dark tile that itself extruded a few centimeters from the side of the building.

Across the street she saw two large windows framing a wooden door above which hung a sign that read, *Armstrong’s Closet* in a somewhat loopy script. The long windows displayed midrian-sized golems wearing what must have been fashionable clothes. The automotons moved with casual ease to show off how the garments looked in motion. A sign on the door read, *closed*.

Glancing down Mel saw that this part of the street was slightly busier than where she had left Marcus. A bistro just below her had several customers dinning outside on small tables atop a wide porch and a butchers’ to her left had one of its employees opening the rolling cage that secured the shop while another was pushing a display of fresh cuts under glass out onto the street.

Mel almost looked back up towards her target across the street but her eyes snapped back down in a sudden double-take. Losing her balance momentarily, she wobbled on the edge of the roof, her wings buzzing to life automatically to stop her from falling outright.

Down below, wearing a baffling white apron over a sleeveless shirt, was a lykin with pitch black fur that was marred by a network of rough scars that ran across what Mel could see of his head from above.

Even from this angle, the outline of Basheen Grimm was not something Mel could easily forget.

The huge wolf-man had been the leader of a pack of other lykins and sundry other savages on Saul’s Rock. The Grimms had made moves to seize control of chunks of the smugglers haven while Mel and Marcus had inadvertently helped the crimelord Edward Stoat take total control via a deal with the encroaching Khanus Empire. For the most part the Grimms had been monsters and assassins, lending no doubt as to why their kind was counted among the so-called “Savage Races”. Basheen himself had given the order to kill his own brother when the younger lykin had disobeyed orders. Mel had thought that, when all was said and done, the Grimms would have ended up on Stoat’s chopping block once he had consolidated his grip on the moon. Apparently that was not the case.

With taloned hands the lykin pushed the meat display into place, pausing only to shoot a glance across the street and audibly sniff the air.

Suddenly Basheen’s long muzzle jerked upwards and Mel let out a tiny squeak of panic as she hurled herself away from the edge of the roof. With her Sidhe-enhanced hearing she heard the lykin give out a snort, as if clearing his nose.

It was another full minute before she worked up the courage to peak back out over the lip of the roof.

Basheen was nowhere to be seen.

Mel let out a sigh before pushing herself back and sitting down on the warm tiles, wrapping her relatively long arms around her knees.

She had absolutely no idea what to make of what she had just seen.

On a whole, at least in Mel’s book, lykins were bad news. They were one of the few sapients in the Dragon’s Wake - aside from wizards but they cheated - that could track a pixie through her nanite-webbing, what Marcus called her glamour. It made them very difficult to surprise and nearly impossible to follow discreetly.

Normally Mel would have used her nanites to become nearly invisible, slip down to street level and see exactly what was up, but now? How was she supposed to spy on something that could literally sniff her out? It hardly seemed fair.

Pondering what to do next Mel was forced into sudden motion as she saw Marcus coming down the street. If he wasn’t careful he would walk right in front of Basheen without even realizing the lykin was there.

The last time they had crossed paths with him, the wolf-man had let them go because of some strange lykin code. *Hunter’s Right*, was all he had said. Now though? The Queens only knew.

Flying in an arc to avoid being seen, Mel zipped down towards the former Magus. The startled look on his face as she appeared in front of him was almost worth the scowl she had produced before. Almost.

“Stop.” hissed Mel.

“Mel?” coughed Marcus, “What the Hells?”

“Turn around right now.” said the pixie. “Basheen Grimm is just down the street.”

If Marcus had looked surprised before, his eyes practically bulged out of his skull now.

“What?” he half shouted.

Gripping a chunk of his shirt near his shoulder, Mel attempted to physically turn her friend around as she spoke quickly. “I don’t know. I don’t know. He’s just up the street and I don’t know. We just need to get out of here before he notices us.”

Reluctantly Marcus turned towards where Mel guided him, his neck twisting as he strained to look back at where he had been going.

“Get back to the *Amal’hiam*.” chattered Mel, almost to herself. “Get back and figure this out. From low orbit. We get back to the ship and figure this out from low orbit.”

Looking over at her Marcus asked, “Mel, what is going on?”

Mel buzzed forward, bobbing from side to side in agitation. Between clenched teeth she said, “I. Don’t. Know.”

Mel did not know how Basheen Grimm was here on Bounty. Or why. Or what he was doing just outside the store they had been going to investigate. Or how he had escaped any reprisals on Saul’s Rock. All the pixie knew was that this situation would be a lot less terrifying from a few thousand meters in the air.

Chapter Ten

18 Standard Imperial Cycles Previous

“I don’t know about this sarge.” said the young man behind Helena as the other members of Assault Zero-Seven moved through the corridor at a jog.

Staff Sergeant Helena Istara shot the private a wicked grin and retorted, “You’re more than welcome to stay here Renic.”

As the rest of the squad laughed grimly the whole ship around them shook with the first vibrations of reentry into the planet’s atmosphere. They didn’t have long now.

Helena prayed that her squad of warmages were the only ones left on the frigate. Having passed the aft escape pods she knew that whoever else had survived the destruction of the forward half of the ship had already jettisoned. They were no safer out there, amidst the battlefield encircling the Dominion world over which they now fought, but at least they weren’t struggling through the wreckage of a ship now hurtling ever closer to the burn-point of the world beneath them.

Helena breathed a sigh of relief as they rounded a corner. Ahead of them the hatch leading into the rear cargo hold looked whole and the lights just to the left shone blue to testify to the fact.

Striding forward confidently Helena only hesitated briefly as she reached for the hatch’s lock. Now was the moment of truth. If the hold was truly sealed then they still had a shot at survival, all of their Raptors and appropriate vacuum gear had been stored here. If not, if the hull had been breached in some way, then all of their oxygen would be sucked out of the hall in a matter of seconds.

The door opened with a satisfying hiss and Helena let out another sigh that was echoed by the four other warmages who made up Assault Zero-Seven that stood at her back. The aft hold of the frigate was completely intact. Their Raptors, the suits of enhanced battle armor worn by the warmages, stood in their racks and all of the equipment needed to customize them sat untouched nearby.

“Suit up.” said Helena sharply as she strode into the hold, making for her own scarred Raptor. “Make sure you’ve got an extra O2 tank and anything else you might think is useful.”

“Grab chutes.” said Corporal Valis, attaching a small box to the back of his Raptor, striped with red paint. Helena nodded when the others glanced towards her and Valis continued, “Worse case scenario, we don’t get a pick up after we blow that station to the hells and we have to make planetfall.”

“Wait,” said Renic, pausing next to his nearly pristine Raptor. “We’re still on mission?”

Over at his bulkier, light-green Raptor, Mak snorted derisively while Julian, already climbing into his more streamlined, paired down armor, looked at the private with an incredulous smirk.

“We’re warmages kid.” said Valis grabbing a stout cylinder that held extra pouches of water and rations before fixing it to his Raptor’s lower back. “We’re always on mission.”

“Sarge?” intoned Renic, looking over at Helena.

Helena gave Private Hadrian Renic an assured nod as she secured the upper fittings on her own armor.

The seals around the Raptor’s joints hissed as they sealed. The memory gel just under the polysteel and ceramic plating puffed up slightly before settling into a perfect mold around Helena’s frame. She immediately felt the expansion of her aetheric sense through the Raptor’s onboard scryer array and a familiar vigor fill her limbs. Inside the armor Helena was faster, sharper and stronger. She let it focus her aethrics and gave herself over to the full body chem.

Unlike any kind of standard issue Legion armor the Raptors interfaced directly with the warmage’s aetherics directly, giving them enhanced senses and strength. With weapons and adaptable modification capabilities built into almost every centimeter of the suit, the Raptor represented the peak of the Legion’s lightweight personal armaments. At least, that’s what every member of the warmage corp would have the rest of the Legion believe.

With gauntleted hands Helena reached over and grabbed her armor’s helmet. As her left arm was extended she glanced down at the numerous scrapes and dings, scattered around them were several more purposeful marks. Four hash marks crossed by a fifth. Seventeen marks in all.

Helena took a deep breath as she studied the marks for a moment and then fixed the solid looking helmet over her head. From the outside the headpiece of the armor looked like a solid, visorless mass of polysteel and inside it was black as pitch until it sealed and synched with her aetherics as well. Then Helena was treated to a full view of her surroundings as though the helmet was not even there. Lines of light formed in the corners of her vision and formed a heads up display, small blue lights coming on next to the names of her squad mates.

“Comms check.” said Helena once everyone else’s helmets were on.

“Check.” said Mak, hefting several large demolition charges into a pack.

“Ready to go Hel.” said Julian, doing a few quick knee-lifts in his Raptor.

Checking his rifle that was sized slightly larger than normal to accommodate the Raptor’s added bulk, Valis softly sang, “Raptors fly where no one dare. Hornskulls forced to stop and stare.”

Helena turned to Renic as the private shrugged his shoulders a few times and glanced back. From the outside his face was just a blank mask of dark gray polysteel, making him impossible to read.

“Comms good.” said the young man, a slight tremor in his voice.

Staring at the man for a long moment, Helena cursed silently to herself. She did not want to be in this position, leading these men. Her friends and comrades until those violent explosions had shaken them from their racks and they’d learned that their lieutenant had been killed when the front half of the frigate detonated. Renic was the rookie of the bunch, having just joined the squad as they were leaving port for Dominion space but he was still a warmage. The corp did not allow cowards or weaklings into their ranks.

What was left of the frigate shook around them again, more violently this time, and Helena reached for her own gear, affixing a pair of long tubular devices to the ports near her thighs.

“Grab boosters as well.” said the sergeant, keeping one eye on Renic. “We need to hit hard and fast.

The others grabbed similar gear and outfitted their Raptors in short order before falling in behind Helena.

She led them farther aft, towards a large set of bay doors that opened up into the empty vacuum. Through a small porthole of clear quartz aethite, Helena could see the battle unfolding outside the ship.

Imperial and Dominion forces clashed over the blue-gold sphere slowly rotating beneath them. Pinpricks of light flashing in shades of white and green against the backdrop of stars. Their frigate had been one of the first destroyed in the fight, obliterated by the same orbital weapons platform that fired steadily at incoming Imperial ships. Many were not so lucky as Helena, their vessels completely annihilated by the battery of charged aether rather than simply being torn in half. As the back half of their frigate hurtled closer to the agworld below, Helena could see that they were quickly drawing level with the floating pillar of weaponized polysteel and aethite.

“Seals?” said Helena, nervousness creeping into her voice. She did not want to be here, she did not want these men’s lives in her hands.

“Everything’s blue Sarge.” said Mak. Coming up to stand next to Helena, he put an armored hand on her equally armored shoulder. “Let’s do this.”

Nodding, Helena spared one last glance at Renic before opening the airlock without bothering to cycle the inner and outer doors.

The squad braced themselves as all of the air left in the back half of the frigate was forcibly evacuated. Their Raptor’s boots magnetized them to the floor until the torrent of wind and loose cargo had flown passed them and out into space.

Helena took several steps forward, noting the small timers that had appeared on her HUD that displayed the amount of breathable air she and her squad had left. If that wasn’t chilling enough, she now had a much better appreciating for the gulf of space between where they stood and the weapons platform that they had originally been assigned to destroy. That had been before the tauro station’s capabilities had been found much more devastating than their intel had initially suggested. Now it was tearing the fleet trying to take this world to flinders and the only members of the Legion in any position to do anything about it were the warmages of Helena’s squad.

From behind her Valis let out a low whistle, though it sounded right in her ear. “Hey Julian,” said the sardonic warmage, “who holds the record for the longest ship to ship jump?”

The young noble did not even pause to think about the answer. “Maylin Gaius back in forty-six eighty-eight. She was a First Sergeant on the *Heraclean*. Went two hundred and eighty three kilometers from an exploding enemy ship back to the surface of the *Heraclean* in just under ten minutes.”

“How in the green hells do you know that?” asked Renic incredulously.

Julian shrugged. “I like trivia.”

Insider her helmet, Helena smiled and said, “Alright Zero-Seven, that means if any of us survive this we’ll hold the record by a pretty wide margin.”

She couldn’t actually see the grins on the other faces in the squad but she could hear the infectious enthusiasm begin to spread as they moved out the airlock to stand affixed on the side of the frigate.

“Just how far is that thing?” asked Renic, much of the nervousness gone from his voice.

“Best guess?” asked Julian.

“Sure.”

“About seven hundred clicks.”

Helena silently adjusted her HUD and the instruments within her helmet measured the distance to the platform.

“Closer to a thousand actually.” she chimed in.

Renic couldn’t suppress a giggle either, though this one was tinged with fear. “You know, they say that warmages are crazy.” He snorted softly. “But this is insane.”

Mak actually laughed at that and the bass levels on their comms dipped for a moment trying to compensate for the booming sound.

Valis laughed as well and said, “What? You want a Seraph or something?”

With long, exaggerated steps Helena led Assault Zero-Seven to a clear patch of hull that stood slightly raised above the curvature of the frigate. She sighted their trajectory, using the Raptor’s onboard scryers and other measurement equipment to plot their course across the huge void of empty space. She took a moment to work in the variables for each member of the squad and adjusting for slight gravitational changes since they were so close to the planet already.

Normally she would have joined in on the banter. Less than a turn ago she would have been gleeful for this attempt to stand out among the warmage corps. But now she was in command, the lives of these men were hers to oversee. As the ranking member of Zero-Seven she had been forced to assume command and while she knew the others would willingly follow her to the Green Hells and back she did not think she had earned that level of trust or devotion yet.

She’d only been in the Legion for a little over a cycle now and while warmages like Julian and Renic had served only about as long as she had, Mak and Valis were hardened veterans. They had been performing mad stunts like this, achieving goals that no ordinary Legionnaire could hope to accomplish, for cycles before the war had broken out. What right did Helena have to lead men like them?

But they followed her anyway. As soon as the green lights had begun flashing inside their racks and the frigate had started shaking apart under the defense platform’s fire, they had all leapt to their feet and turned toward the nineteen cycle old girl.

It was true that in the last cycle she had cut an impressive swath through the Legion. After basic she had been almost immediately snapped up by the warmages, her aetheric power alone making her a prime candidate for the use of a Raptor or even a tank-like Seraph. She did not even doubt her own status as a noncommissioned officer, having earned her chevrons while fighting across half a dozen worlds. As part of the Ninth Forward Legion, she had been at the tip of the spear in the Empire’s retaliation against the Minos Dominion. Up until now though she had always been the subordinate, wrangling some of the others while in the field but always while taking orders from someone directly her superior.

No, what Helena doubted wasn’t those that followed her or even her own strength in battle. What she doubted was her ability to not get them all killed.

“Seraphs?” scoffed Valis. “Where would the fun in that be?”

“Yeah,” said Helena with a breath of sarcasm, absently wishing they were all wrapped in the massive plodding bulk of the warmage’s equivalent to mobile artillery. “And we wouldn’t be breaking the record. Seraphs qualify as heavy armor.”

“We’d be closer than you think.” said Julian.

“Absolutely insane.” said Renic, shaking his head but taking up a position in the loose ring around Helena that Zero-Seven was forming.

The five members of the assault team created a slightly lopsided X pattern, with Helena at the center and she crouched as the others got into place. One by one, Assault Zero-Seven each crouched as well, their armored hands pressing flat against the polysteel beneath them.

“Didn’t they tell you kid?” asked Valis dryly. “Insanity is part of the job description.” Helena could imagine the older man’s shark-toothed grin even through his paint striped helmet. When he continued speaking it was in the crisp, clear tones of Legion discipline. “Ready on your mark Hel.”

Helena nodded once and said, “Hard burn after push off, hold for sixty seconds and then cut boosters until I say.” She looked directly up, towards the Dominion weapons platform that was still cutting other Imperial ships to pieces. To her right was the growing mass of the planet and to her left was the endless expanse of the Dragon’s Wake. Their only safe place to go was onto the enemy’s orbital platform, probably swarming with tauro soldiers that were intent on destroying every midrian that came into their crosshairs. If they even managed to get over to the platform the struggle to destroy it would be a desperate one. It was kill or be killed.

Helena spared one last glance at the seventeen hash marks that decorated her left arm and at the four other warmages that waited for her signal.

There were worse ways to go out.

“Mark.” said Helena Istara and Assault Zero-Seven launched themselves away from the drifting frigate, across the curvature of the planet’s gravity well and towards almost certain death.

Helena fidgeted. She couldn’t help it. Considering where she sat she was surprised that everyone else she saw wasn’t as giddy as she was. This was the *Argo.* She was actually on the *Argo*! The command ship for the entire Seventh Fleet and Ninth Forward Legion! This single ship was widely considered the nerve center for the entire campaign against the Dominion. Other ships were bigger and more impressive, the *Thessian* itself had appeared not long after Assault Zero-Seven had destroyed the tauro-controlled weapons platform, but while supercarriers like that were unbelievably huge and awe inspiring it was the *Argo* that directed the war effort.

And Helena was not just inside the *Argo*, no, she sat in the waiting room of Fleet Commander Farris Honnius. The man was a legend in the Legion. He’d served for nearly five decades, being a part of every major military action since the Bruthius Rebellion. He’d overseen almost as many victories in battle as every Admiral and General in the Legion combined. And now Helena Istara was sitting just outside his office.

She knew it had something to do with the platform that Zero-Seven had just destroyed only a few hours ago or, more specifically, what they had discovered after they’d been forced to make the jump from low float to planetside.

Legion Intelligence and a member of StRATa had already debriefed her, both scrupulous and intense men having wanted to learn every detail of what Helena and her team had witnessed. She was sure that the others from Zero-Seven had received similar treatment but she had neither seen nor heard from her teammates since they’d all been evacuated off the planet’s surface by a speedy dropship and deposited on the *Argo*.

In fact, the interrogation with the StRATa operative had only ended when a furious looking Commander Honnius had burst into the otherwise empty briefing room. He’d shouted down any complaints by the man questioning Helena and had almost physically dragged the young woman out of the room and through the halls of his ship.

Helena had followed without complaint and, quite frankly, without much thought. She’d been too stunned by the mythological figure leading her towards his personal office. It was Fleet Commander Farris Honnius. *The* Farris Honnius. His face had stared back at her at the beginning of dozens of mission briefings over the last cycle. The gruff but confident voice leading her and every other member of the Legion through specific battle plans on each new world they encountered while piercing the Dominion’s territory.

The Commander had still been fuming when they’d reached the waiting room and he had ordered her to wait until he had finished with another meeting. Someone else had apparently already been waiting for him in his office.

That had been nearly twenty minutes ago.

The harsh and pensive looking secretary on the other side of the room, Helena had never gotten her name but she wore the crimson leaf of a major, shot quick glances up at her from time to time.

Helena was beginning to have flashbacks of the waiting room on Nam’edlah. Had it only been a cycle ago? It seemed like a lifetime. She’d changed so much in her time in the Legion. Or perhaps this was who she had always been but the danger and conflict had done something to bring it out. She was almost terrified to admit it, even to herself, but Helena enjoyed her new life. She would trade it all for a chance to see her family again – her mother, father and little brother – or just to see Diana’s smile. But if none of that had happened, if her homeworld had not been one of the first put to the flame by the tauro, then Helena might never found herself in the Legion. She might never have discovered the true potential of her aetherics. How good it felt when she could finally cut loose, directing every milligram of her power towards a foe that deserved it.

She tried to imagine her life if the tauro had never attacked Nam’sil. Where would she be? *Who* would she be?

She had planned on going to art school, perhaps spending a few cycles off world to study on some of the Old Holds, maybe even Imperia itself.

Just then a man strode into the waiting room, practically charging the Commander’s office door.

“I’m going in.” said the man. He wasn’t particularly tall though he had the broad build about him that most Legionnaires had. His deep blue eyes were focused and held a fiery determination that startled Helena slightly.

They must have startled the secretary as well because she only managed to stammer, “Sir, sir, the commander is in a meeting, if you could just-”

The man did not slow, before he was even at the door his eyes darted toward the panel to its right and the aetheric locks opened themselves. Then Helena saw the knots on the shoulders of the man’s dark naval uniform. They were the mark of an admiral.

Helena’s eyes went wide as she realized who was barging in on the Commander. Possibly the only person other than the Empress herself who had both the rank and the right to do so. This man was one of the Magus Imperia.

This man, actually shorter than Helena now that she looked at him more intently, was one of the Thirteen.

Helena had never seen a Magus before, and if anything she found being in the same room as one to be slightly underwhelming.

Her mother and father had never been overly religious, they hadn’t forced their children to attend prayer meetings or go to temple if they didn’t want to. But her Great Grandmother had been an extremely devout Follower. She had taught Helena and her sister about Primus and his miracles; taken them to Temple to commune, and shown them how to make offerings to win his favor.

Helena had never quite taken to religion. She knew the chants and the traditions, but they weren’t really anything to her but that. Her sister had been a different story.

Diana had often parroted their Great Grandmother about how Primus had lived his life in service to other midrians, and attained Godhood through his works. About the millennia long reign of Primus as if she had been there; telling her progeny about those golden peaceful years. How they had ended when Primus had sacrificed himself to break the power of the tauro and ensure that they would never attain the same power over the midrians as they had held after the Deep War.

When the Guides at temple had spoken about the Thirteen, they had said that the mere presence of one could be felt by those around them; that the Sliver of Divinity that existed within them marked them so that all could know them by sight.

Helena couldn’t see anything special about the Magus striding through the room before her eyes, nor could she feel it, he seemed to just be a man, no different from any other.

“Why haven’t my orders been carried out?” bellowed the Magus, now moving into the office proper. “Why haven’t we moved into position?”

“Gods damn it Marcus.” shouted the gravely voice of Commander Honnius. “I’m trying to run this fleet.”

“Answer the question Farris.” said the Magus, cool rage in his voice.

“I canne believe you’d even consider doing this.” said the Commander, a bit of a fringeworld accent creeping into his words.

“You know my position.” growled the Magus, still standing in the doorway.

“Aye, you’re right.” said Commander Honnius, his voice rising from an even agreement to a thunderous accusation. “But that does ne stop it from being one of the worst things you could possibly do!”

“They could have done something!” shouted the Magus, his rage making the air around him boil with crackling aether. “They could have rebelled! But no, they remained complicit. Working for those monsters.”

Commander Honnius’ voice grew quite and desperate and Helena had to strain to hear him, even through the open door.

“And do you think that will stand up ta the Senate Major?” Honnius questioned. “What about the public? What will it do the soldiers? Have you even stopped ta consider that? We’ve come too damn far and lost too many on this campaign o’ yours to falter now. And Marcus, if you burn that world that is exactly what’ll happen.” He let that statement hang in the air for a moment before giving his voice more volume. “I will’ne let that happen on my watch.”

Everyone was silent for a moment, the tension still thick in the air, and then the Magus spoke.

“You may leave now Corporal.”

Helena could barely hear the murmured response from inside the office but a young woman, her shoulders slightly hunched, slid away from the two most powerful men in the fleet. She was built like a whipcord, all sinuous muscle and long, graceful limbs. It wasn’t until she had raised her head, looking up at Helena with storm tossed blue-green eyes, did she recognize her.

It was her sister.

“Diana!” exclaimed Helena, stepping towards her sibling. “What are you doing here? It’s so good to see you!”

An unreadable look crossed Diana’s face but it was quickly consumed by that same mask of unfeeling steel that Helena remembered from the last time she and her sister had stood face to face.

The two had corresponded intermittently in the last cycle, Helena having no intention of keeping up any pretense about joining the Legion. This was the first time the Istara sisters had been face to face since leaving the Nam system and Helena hesitated as she moved in to embrace Diana. Her older sister had not exactly been happy with the news of Helena’s enlistment.

It looked as though Diana was about to speak but she was cut off when the door leading into Commander Honnius’ office hissed shut and the secretary stood up.

“Neither of you will ever speak of what you just witnessed here.” said the harsh looking woman. “Those words never came out of the Admiral’s mouth and the Commander never replied. If either of you ever say otherwise you will be court marshaled for defamation of an officer. You will be found guilty, and you will spend up to ten cycles on the brigship *Solitude*.” She paused briefly to stare directly at each of the Istara sisters in turn. “Is that understood Staff Sergeant?”

“Sir, yes sir.” snapped Helena, her posture going rigid.

“Is that understood Corporal?”

Diana straightened as well and said quickly, “Sir, yes sir.”

“Good.” said the secretary, some of the ferocity leaving her voice as she moved back to her desk.

Looking awkwardly at one another, the Istara sisters sat down together in silence. It took a long moment before Helena really grasped what they had just seen. Commander Honnius had just disobeyed a direct order from an Admiral, a Magus no less. A Magus who, if what Helena had just observed was any indication, was beginning to lose it.

The man that had stormed in here just moments ago had looked, for all those to see, like just that; a man. Not some Sliver of Divinity left behind to safeguard the Empire of Primus Khanus. Not one of the Thirteen, practically saints in the eyes of the Followers. Not even a particularly regal or stable officer in Her Majesty’s Legion. He was a man filled with frantic rage and on the edge of collapse.

Helena heard a soft snort and she looked over at Diana to see her sister wearing a small, grim smile on her face.

“What?” asked Helena softly.

“It’s all a lie.” responded Diana, ice in her voice.

Helena gave her sister a confused look. “What are you talking about?”

Glancing back up at the closed door, Diana’s mirthless grin faded back into that blank look she wore. “Him.” she said finally. “The Magus. Marcus Crassus Khanus of Verge.” Helena shot a look back at the door, she hadn’t known which Magus it had been. “He’s just a man. It’s all just been a lie. There was never anything divine about him. Or any of the others.”

Helena turned back to look at her sister and was about to ask her to elaborate, feeling the wellspring of unsaid words dammed up behind Diana’s cold expression, but then the door to the Commander’s office slid open once more.

The Magus strode silently out of the room, his eyes slightly puffy and rimmed with red. As he passed the sisters Helena could see his fists balled into tight fists, the hand closest to her gripping something golden attached to a chain.

“Corporal.” said the gruff voiced Commander and Diana quickly stood to reenter the office.

Helena was left alone in the waiting room with the busily working secretary but she did not have long to wait before Diana exited the office again.

The older Istara did not even pause to consider her sister but instead made straight for the door that lead back out into the hall. Rising quickly Helena moved to intercept Diana, stopping her before she could escape.

“Diana, wait.” said Helena.

Diana stopped abruptly and finally looked up at her younger sister’s face. “What?”

“Sergeant.” said Commander Honnius from behind her.

Helena scrambled to find her words quickly.

“Please,” she said imploringly. “Wait for me. I really want to talk to you. It’s been a while; I want to catch up.”

Diana stared passively at her for a moment and then nodded demurely, moving to one side of the door.

“Sergeant.” said the Commander again, insistence in his voice.

Turning, Helena followed the Commander into his office, sparing one last glance back at her sister before the door hissed shut again.

As she turned back, Helena took in the office of Farris Honnius. The walls were covered in photos and medals. Letters of commendation from nobles and high ranking officials broke up the pattern sporadically. On a shelf just behind his dark faux-wood desk there was a line of still photos. The last one showed the Commander getting promoted to his current rank several cycles ago and the man pinning the bits of metal to his collar was Marcus Crassus, the Magus who had stood here just a few minutes before. Helena traced the photos back in time, each successive image showing Farris Honnius receiving a promotion and each time it showed Marcus Crassus giving it to him. In each picture the Commander got progressively younger but the man standing beside him always looked the same.

“I’ve known him a long time.” said the old midrian with a sigh as he watched Helena inspect the wall. When he turned and sat down behind his desk, any hint of wistfulness disappeared behind his craggy expression. “I wasn’t aware that Istara was a common name Sergeant.”

“It’s not sir.” said Helena, still standing at attention before the Commander’s desk. “That was my older sister.”

“Ah.” replied the Commander, considering the young woman standing in front of him for a long moment before continuing. “At ease Sergeant, take a seat.”

Helena let out a low breath as she relaxed slightly and moved to sit in one of the comfortable chairs that rested in front of the Commander.

“That was good work with that weapons platform.” said Honnius when she had found her seat.

“Thank you sir.” said Helena crisply, feeling more than a little pride at what she’d accomplished.

Not only had all of Assault Zero-Seven made it to the orbital platform, with nearly twenty minutes of oxygen left to spare, they had destroyed the whole facility with some well placed charges. The attack had disrupted the enemy’s defensive tactics around the planet and eventually led to the Empire’s victory. Then her team had made a jump from low float all the way down to the agworld’s surface.

“I’m told it was you that made the call to stay on mission.” said the Commander. It was a statement, not a question.

Helena nodded, unsure if this was going to be a reprimand or congratulation. She replied as honestly as she could. “It had to be done sir.” she smiled slightly before continuing. “And it’s not as though we had any other way out of there.”

Honnius grinned back at her, the same glint in his eye that Helena had seen a thousand times in the eyes of other warmages. Some called them insane but a warmage called it fun.

“You did an especially good job with the steders as well.” said the Commander growing a bit sterner. “If we hadn’t received your report when we did, that world might be glass now.”

Helena shifted uneasily, still unsettled by what she and her team had found once they made planetfall.

They had fully expected to find themselves in the middle of enemy territory, surrounded by bloodthirsty tauro or any of the other “savage races” that helped comprise the majority of the Dominion. Instead they had found midrians. Hundreds, thousands. Midrians working the fields, midrians mining the quarries, midrians acting as the main workforce on a world controlled by the Minos Dominion. Stranger than that, the vast majority of the men and women that Assault Zero-Seven had come across had been steders, the black-eyed descendants of the more barbarous tribes that had originally settled the Old Holds millennia ago. What their kind were doing so far into the Eastern Reach was still an absolute mystery to Helena but the mere existence of a slave population like the one they had discovered created a whole new realm of fears for the Imperial legionnaires.

“We just landed on the ground sir.” said Helena, looking down at the smooth features of the Commander’s desk.

“I know that Sergeant, but it still changes things.” said Honnius, shuffling through a few errant papers that were scattered in front of him. “You’re a good soldier Istara, you’ve got a good head on your shoulders and you aren’t afraid to use it.” He finally found the paper he was looking for. “Things are going to be changing around here Sergeant. I know they try to keep it quite among the ranks but you can’t stop the rumor mill, this war has been a costly one.” Hard steel entered the Commander’s voice as he continued, “That is going to stop very soon.

“I’m going to make the Seventh and Ninth the best gods damned fighting force in the Legion. Starting today this campaign will’ne cost us any more than it needs to.” He met Helena’s gaze with a determined grin. “To do this I’m going need good officers and I think you’re one of them.”

Helena stared at the Commander with wide, fearful eyes. “Sir… with all due respect.” she stammered. “I am not an officer.”

“Tha’s funny.” said Honnius, pushing a piece of paper across the desk. “Because I’ve got a document right here that says otherwise.”

“But… but… I never went to OTC or any kind of school.” said Helena, panic creeping into her voice. “I only joined up a cycle ago, I’m only nineteen, I couldn’t possibly…”

Honnius waved a dismissive hand. “You can do the schooling later. War makes fools of us all. As fer’ya age, there’s no rule that I can find about field promotions and legionnaire seniority. You’re platoon is down a lieutenant and I need good leaders right now. I want you to be one of them Helena. Do you want the job or not?”

There was no time for Helena to hesitate with Fleet Commander Farris Honnius staring her right in the face. Her voice steadied as she said, “Yes sir, thank you sir.

The Commander gave her a wolfish grin and said, “Excellent. I intend to make good use of your skills Second Lieutenant Istara.” He reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a small case, sliding it across the table towards Helena. Inside were the collar pins of a Second Lieutenant, a vertical crimson stripe. “You’re dismissed.”

“Thank you sir.” said Helena again, rising to shake the Commander’s hand and almost dropping her officer’s pins. “I won’t let you down.”

Honnius smiled at her and Helena couldn’t help but smile back.

She turned to leave as the Commander waved her away but she stopped at the door when he spoke again.

“Oh, and Lieutenant.” said Honnius with another smirk. “Great thing you did, bringing the Ninth that jump record. I thought I’d heard them wrong when they told me how far ye’went.”

Helena smiled again and said, “You know what they say about Raptor pilots sir.”

The Commander nodded and said, almost wistfully, “Too stupid to know what’s impossible.”

Helena gave out a brief laugh as she made her way back out of the Commander’s office. As the door shut behind her the newly promoted Lieutenant looked around the waiting room. As she did, all of her elation from the previous few minutes disintegrated in her chest, turning to ashy disappointment.

Diana was gone.

Helena had been left alone again.

Chapter Eleven

Marcus’ mind reeled as he threw himself into the pilot’s seat of the *Amal’hiam*. Two distinct sides warred within him as he moved through the start-up sequence.

Half of him was running scenarios, calculating odds and looking for any probable reason other than sheer coincidence that Basheen Grimm would be on an agworld at the fringes of Imperial space. The lykin’s presence was a completely unforeseen circumstance.

The other half of Marcus did not care. What did it actually matter? Just because the largest, most brutally efficient lykin Marcus had ever seen was on Bounty did it actually change anything? Helena was still here and she needed his help. Primus have mercy on anyone who got in the former Magus’ way, Basheen Grimm or no.

Hands on the helm, Marcus was about to pull the *Amal’hiam* upwards before he had made any thought about where they were actually going once they were in the air.

Mel’s fearful chatter had stopped once they had boarded their ship but the pixie looked at him worriedly when he hesitated.

“What’s wrong?” she asked carefully.

Marcus stared down at the center of the helm for hard moment before he said, “What are we doing?”

The pixie’s eyes darted back and forth as if she was glancing at observers on either side of Marcus that weren’t there. “What do you mean, *what are we doing*? We’re getting out of here before a certain lykin picks up our scent.”

Marcus shook his head and finally looked back up at Mel. “Why? Why does it matter that he’s here?”

Mel put one fist on her hip and gestured emphatically with the other as she spoke. “You don’t find it weird that someone from Saul’s Rock shows up now of all times and here of all places? And of all the people from that dustball it just happens to be the guy who’s brother was killed when he tried to kill us? No way this is random Marcus. It stinks like kappa crap.”

“I’m not saying it doesn’t.” said Marcus as he removed his hands from the helm and swiveled his chair to face his friend. “But I am saying that it doesn’t matter. He’s here. So what? Helena is the priority here, nothing else-”

“*Possible* Helena.” cut in Mel, her tiny chest swelling as she spat the words in an almost defiant tone.

“Nothing else matters.” finished Marcus with a hard look at his partner.

Mel looked like she was about to say something else but then shut her mouth, then she glanced away and growled something to herself. Finally she looked back and said, “No. No. Marcus, fuck that. This shit just got weird and if we’re going after this slave we’re not going to do it like a tauro in a ceramic shop.”

“So we just leave?” asked Marcus, feeling the anger in his chest that made his words louder than he meant.

“No, of course not.” said Mel.

Marcus deflated at that, some of the tension in his neck and shoulders waning.

“We do the job.” continued the pixie. “But for the love of Queens and Court Marcus, this isn’t our first time doing this sort of thing. You’re smarter than this.”

There was a light in Mel’s eyes that Marcus could not place but as he looked at his friend he felt his whole body sag. She was right. Of course she was right.

In the struggle going on in his mind he had not even considered the middle option. Proceeding carefully, intelligently. He could still tackle this situation head on but he did not have to do so blindly.

Mel seemed to pick up on what his change in posture meant because she took a buzzing hop over to his flight console and looked up at him with half a smile. “It’s not all or nothing.” she said softly. “I just want us up in a low float so we can figure this out. Maybe search the ‘net to see if there’s any news from Saul’s Rock that might give us some clue.”

Marcus let out a breath through his nose and nodded. Not being planetside but staying in a low orbit was their best bet at remaining mobile without actually having to go through planetary customs again. If they stayed above Panimberg they could observe the situation on the ground, gather some more intel and land again once Mel had found what they needed on the ‘net.

It wasn’t the kind of plan Marcus wanted but it was the smart move.

Turning forward again, Marcus placed his hands on the helm once more and started to pull them upwards, his right hand drifting to the side so that he could retract the landing struts.

Then everything on the *Amal’hiam* turned off.

Marcus’ fingertips barely brushed the swiveling control sticks before they all went limp. The blue lights to his right and the heads-up-display on the viewscreen suddenly disappeared, as did the aviation readouts that were usually just in front of him.

There was half a second in which Marcus felt the bottom drop out of his stomach and the *Amal’hiam* hung in air. Then both crashed down with a sickening speed.

The crash was not quite as bad as the one that they had experienced as they had landed but this time Marcus could see that the power had not simply reset suddenly, it had vanished completely. Even when he pressed the button that usually allowed him to start the drive-core, nothing happened.

“Not again!” shouted Mel as she flew up to hover just above the nav console.

Secondary power still allowed for some basic systems to turn on but as Marcus mashed the start button for the sixth time he felt a grim resolve wash over him.

This was a sign. From Primus or the Stedgods or maybe the universe itself, it didn’t matter. It said that Marcus Crassus wasn’t going anywhere until this was done.

Mel was saying something as she hovered near the aetheric startup that a normal person might use to prime the drive-core but Marcus was not listening. He looked directly at the pixie and could see her mouth moving but could not hear what she was saying.

“What?” he said lamely.

Mel’s voice returned all at once with the other sounds the *Amal’hiam* was making around him. Above him the aether conduits whined and something from farther back in the ship was making an unsettling clanking noise.

“Do you know what just happened?” asked Mel with an exasperated snort.

“No.” said Marcus, though he could guess.

It would be that faulty absorption panel and there wasn’t a damned thing Marcus could do about it. With dwarvish ships you either had to replace parts outright or have a mechanic who could handle tech that had been anachronistic when it had been built thousands of cycles ago.

He knew all of this but he still stood and made for the rear of the ship. His body moved automatically even as his mind processed what he knew would be true.

Soon he found himself standing in the room at the back of the *Amal’hiam* that housed the drive-core, staring blankly at the slim rupture in the absorption panel. He tried to muster some show of surprise or concern on his face, for Mel’s sake if nothing else, but failed. Licking his lips, Marcus felt an uncomfortable dryness in his throat. He clenched his fists at his side to stop his hands from finding their way to his flask even though it was empty.

Mel buzzed around nervously in the air, anxious instinct overriding any discomfort in her shoulders from the unnecessary flight. Shifting around in the air behind Marcus the pixie moved with little bursts of white light. This was bad, like, really bad.

A thin crack had appeared on one of the absorption panels that surrounded the *Amal’hiam’s* aethium core. The break in the metal was maybe only eight centimeters long and barely a hair’s breadth wide but that was all it took for the emergency shut down procedures in the dwarvish ship to kick in. Any exposure of the raw aethium to the air in the ship, constantly recycled once everything was sealed, could lead to terrible radiation leaks throughout. Aether poisoning was the best they could hope for in a situation like that. From a distant, logical perspective it made perfect sense.

Looking at the tiny opening in the panel though, it was hard to believe that the *Amal’hiam’s* ability to function properly depended so heavily upon such a fragile system.

“What do we do?” asked Mel weakly.

In front of her Marcus just stared at the crack in the panel, his hands balled into fists at his sides. She moved around so that she could see his face properly and saw that he wore a look that was dull and unfocused.

“What can we do?” said the former Magus with a resigned tone in his voice. “It’s like you said, we do the job. Helena is still out there.”

Mel furrowed her brow and she felt her lips begin to form a snarl but she pushed it away. “Marcus.” she said firmly. “Just hold on a second. We still don’t know why Basheen is here, we can’t just go charging off.”

Anger. Frustration. Disappointment. Sadness.

Mel thought they had worked this out. She had seen the change in Marcus’ face just a few minutes before and had hoped she had done something to reclaim just a bit of who he had been. He hadn’t been the Magus but for that brief moment before their crash Mel thought she had seen some of the old tactical gears spinning behind his eyes. Now there was just the morose ex-Legion merc, looking to throw his life away chasing a ghost. Did the pendulum of his mind swing that easily?

Then Marcus looked at her and there was fire in his eyes. It wasn’t the horrid flame that had been there during The Shattering but neither was it the bright proud shine that had been there during his time serving Alessia or even Galen the First. This light was a pale, flickering thing; desperate and full of a feverish need.

Mel wasn’t sure if she should be encouraged or scared or both or neither.

“Look just,” Mel held up her hands in an inarticulate gesture. She could feel a slight tinge of panic in her own voice. “Just let me scrounge the ‘net for a minute. See if I can dig *anything* up.”

“Fine.” said Marcus. “We go back to that store or you find us Regis’ home. Either way we leave in fifteen minutes.”

Marcus turned away from her and moved back up towards the front of the ship, his shoulders squared and his back straight.

As Mel watched him go she decided that the miserable merc she had seen so many times in the last few cycles wasn’t there anymore. This new version of Marcus was the last scrap of the passionate soldier, whittled down into something else that she did not recognize.

It wasn’t until she lost sight of him did Mel snap out of her thoughtful reverie. She cast one last look down at the miniscule crack in the absorption panel before darting forward, reaching the mess just in time to catch the last of Marcus’ back.

Instead of following him, Mel cut right to her little alcove in the kitchen, landing on the counter with a bouncing hop-step. Moving to her ‘net-pad, Mel activated the device and dragged it awkwardly onto her lap. She didn’t know exactly what she was looking for but she started on Bounty’s local ‘net.

On the right side of her screen a yellow light blinked fitfully but Mel ignored it, focusing on the task at hand.

Window after window opened in front of her and she scoured the local business index. After a keyword search she found Regis Gaius. The main link was to his storefront location but after a few tries she found a backdoor hack into the registry used by the business owners themselves. That got her Regis’ private callset and from there it wasn’t hard to find an address tied to it. She didn’t know if it was the man’s home or another place of business but it was a good start.

Next she started searching for a mechanic. Someone to fix the *Amal’hiam*.

It should have been the first thing she looked for and it wasn’t until after the fact that she realized what she had done. She stopped moving through the ‘net for a moment, frowning down at the screen.

She had put Marcus’ wants before their mutual needs.

It had not been intentional and Mel only took a brief moment to consider why she had done it. In that moment she did not come to any satisfying answers, so she just shook her head and moved on. It wasn’t important right now. Actually it was, she thought wearily, but she didn’t have the luxuray of time to dwell on it.

The yellow light had turned into a solid blue but Mel still ignored it.

Starting back in on her metanet search, she began casting out for a mechanic. Preferably someone actually located in Panimberg because the last thing they needed was to wait for a tow all the way back to one of Bounty’s larger cities. Mel didn’t think Marcus would want to wait around for a trip that might be to another hemisphere.

Mel pulled up a few pages from the business directory but did not immediately see what she was looking for. What had she been expecting though, something obvious like *Dwarvish Doug’s Ships ‘n Things*?

A small *ping* sounded from her ‘net-pad and Mel finally looked over at the blue light, a tiny windmill symbol appeared next to it. Ariel could see she was online and was trying to message her directly.

Mel opened a line to the ‘diver and he started in before she could speak.

“Hey Wings. What is on the docket today?” asked Ariel in his dull, possibly-synthesized voice.

“Ariel, hey, sorry, can’t really talk.” said Mel, most of her attention still on the search that was quickly turning up nothing. “Kind of shitting bricks right now.”

There were two mechanics listed in Panimberg that were rated to take care of smaller transports like the *Amal’hiam*. Neither of their business pages said anything about dwarvish tech but they did not exclude them either, so it was a crapshoot.

“Anything I can do to help?” asked her ‘net friend coolly.

“Sure.” said Mel, exasperated frustration bubbling out as she found links to a much larger shipyard in New Demis that might be able to help. “Do you happen to know any mechanics in the middle of dick-end nowhere who can fix a dwarvish shit-pile of a ship?”

“Depends where on the dick-end you are.” said Ariel.

Mel laughed, though it did not relieve any of the stress. “Agworld called Bounty.” she said passively.

There was a mobile salvage platform that was making a rotation through the system in a few turns but there was no way Marcus would wait that long.

Other than those there were maybe only two other places on the whole planet that had the kind of set up that might be able to fix a dwarvish ship. There were smaller junk and parts dealers all over the planet but there was no way they could check them all.

“I may have someone who can help.” said Ariel. “But he’s a little out of the way, a company town called Panimberg.”

Mel froze, her eyes slowly drifting across the screen to the little animated windmill. She was glad there was no visual in their communication because she was sure that her slack-jawed expression would not have been a pretty one.

A small window popped up near Ariel’s icon that displayed a link that led to the page for one of those small parts dealers she had passed over previously.

“How in the fuck did you do that?” asked Mel, unable to mask her incredulity.

There was a brief pause and then Ariel said, “You can not see it right now but I am shrugging nonchalantly.”

“No seriously,” said Mel, navigating the page of the dealer, named Dann Slevin. He was more of an antiques dealer than anything but his store’s listings had, at least, a small selection of dwarvish tech and his bio claimed he was an expert on Deep War era ships. “How did you find this guy?”

“Not hard in the ‘dive Wings.” said Ariel.

Mel grinned wolfishly as she responded, “Much harder to wade Ariel.”

“Wade and ‘dive, still you thrive.” finished the metadiver. “I hope that helps.”

“Ariel, you have no idea.” said Mel as she copied down the addresses she needed onto the small nav unit she had strapped to her forearm. “This is huge. I owe you big-time.”

“Come ‘dive some time and I’ll call us even.” said Ariel.

“Sure. No problem.” said Mel, practically giddy at the prospect of finding everything she needed. “Talk to you later Ariel.”

“See you around Wings.” said the ‘diver just before Mel shut off her ‘net-pad.

Mel cast about her little nook once more and patted down the pouches and harnesses of her tac-suit, making sure she had everything she needed. She wished she had time to do some digging about what had happened on Saul’s Rock after they had left last cycle but she doubted she had time. There was no way in the Hells that she was letting Marcus walk back towards Basheen Grimm like some boldfaced idiot.

There was some old midrian story about one of their Steder gods putting a hand in a wolf’s mouth and then, of course, having it bitten off. Letting the former Magus go face the lykin would be like that; brave but stupid.

No, the fallout on Saul’s Rock could wait. If they did things right in the next few hours Marcus would finally have his answers about Helena, for good or ill, and they would be able to leave Bounty in a fixed up *Amal’hiam.*

Simple enough, thought Mel. Though right as the thought struck she felt a wave of dark pessimism hit her.

Things were never that easy.

Chapter Twelve

Greg eyed the inside of the berth suspiciously. The *Amal’hiam* sat alone just beyond the open door. It was the door that had made the ogre suspicious. It had been unlocked when Greg had tried the obvious solution to getting in to where the ship was docked.

“What’s the hold up?” asked Ark from behind.

“I don’t like it.” said Greg. “It’s too easy.”

Ark growled something in khagrish as he pushed his way through the other mercenaries and came to stand at the entrance to the berth. Red Bartlett stood to one side, chomping on a new cigar that was beginning to trail more horrid green smoke.

As his employer crossed the threshold into the berth Greg tensed up, shifting his weight to the balls of his feet. There was a silent moment as the khag set foot in the enclosure in which mercenaries, both ogre and midrian, held their breath but when nothing happened Greg let out a quiet breath and strode forward immediately.

“Fan out.” said Ark in a hiss. “Make sure there’s not another way out of here. Greg, with me.”

Bartlett’s men, waiting for a nod from their leader Greg noticed, spread out and began moving in pairs, scanning the rest of the berth’s exterior. Red himself stayed close to Ark, one hand resting casually on the rifle he had slung across his chest.

Greg kept his ears open and his eyes wide, trying to take in every facet of their surroundings. It seemed far too simple. The ship was just sitting here in an unlocked berth, as if waiting to be taken. The war-merc had seen his fair share of traps in his day and if this did not reek of trickery then he did not know what did.

Marcus checked his revolver for the third time, clicking its chamber open yet again to make sure every bullet was still there. None of them had disappeared in the last fifteen seconds. By the same token none of them had miraculously transformed into charged aethite slivers either. The backs of the simple lead bullets stared back at Marcus; unchanging and not going anywhere until he willed them away with a pull of the trigger.

Snapping the chamber back into place he let out a long breath, squeezing the thick handle of the dwarf-make gun before sliding it into the holster that hung at his hip.

He ran a finger across the chipped and faded leather of the holster and belt. Despite their age and the lack of care Marcus had taken with their upkeep they still looked out of place against the other clothing the former Magus wore. They were relics from a different era, standing out by no other virtue than their dogged determination to keep on functioning. It was a testament to the Imperial craftsman who had shaped them so long ago.

Coming away from the belt, Marcus’ hand drifted to the empty flask that rested against his thigh. It was still empty despite the raging temptation to refill it while he was back on the *Amal’hiam*.

Marcus took another deep breath and closed his eyes, picturing Helena.

Two distinct faces rose in his mind, each superimposed atop one another to create his image of her.

One was the warmage, her Raptor armor scorched from the last battle on Minos. Violet eyes blazing and sunken at the same time, though the sharp contours of her faces were stoic as she looked him in the eyes. She had found the Magus, shaking and alone, amidst the sack of Minos after the defeat of their savage king, the Mino-Taur. That final battle had left him weakened and bereft of the only thing that had driven him since Alessia’s assassination. Helena Istara had gripped him by the arm and stood him up. On that day Marcus had found someone to share the weight of his pain.

The other image was the Captain of the Thronegaurd, the ceremonial armor of the station fitting her far better than it had ever fit him. Her features were still sharp, her eyes still blazed with passion but now it was all tempered by cycles of loyalty and close service to House Khanus. Like Marcus she had found a certain amount of love for the royal family. He saw it in the way she bowed before Nassaeya and the way she would eventually look at Alexander, the Imperial heir. All the while she stood by the Magus, keeping him standing, reminding him of what he served for. On their last day together, just before he had left for the Atok system, they had shared many words, in the grips of their passion some had been whispered while others were shouted. Thinking back now though, Marcus could not recall the last thing he had said to her before they had fallen asleep in each other’s arms that night before his final departure.

He prayed he had told her that he loved her.

Because now there was a third face that Marcus had to consider. What image would he find today? How had these last four cycles changed the woman he loved?

Helena was the strongest person Marcus knew, not because of any aetheric power, though she did not lack in that either, but because of her sheer, unwavering loyalty and support of those she cared for. Could that resolve have held the woman he had known in stasis for four cycles? Surely not.

Marcus braced himself by plumbing the depths of his memory from the past four cycles. Every deplorable act he had seen. Every torturous way a midrian body could be used by those who simply did not think of them as anything more than property. Every face of every woman who he had tracked down in the hope that they would be Helena.

Some he had been able to save; most had not been so lucky.

Marcus said a silent prayer to Primus, more out of habit than any real faith, begging for the First Magus to aid his wayward son.

When he opened his eyes again, Marcus reached to check his revolver just as Mel flew to where he was standing near the stairwell leading down to the forward airlock.

Greg walked around the *Amal’hiam* noting the four airlocks that circled the craft near its center and appreciating the first ogre-sized doors he had seen since leaving the War School on Gobwor’s smallest moon. Coming back towards Ark, the ogre rubbed at his wide chin and scanned the area around the berth once more. There were no traps, aetheric or otherwise, that he could detect. If there was something truly subtle at work here, perhaps some kind of Fey magic, then it would take a skilled wizard to ferret it out.

“Well?” asked Ark, his burly arms crossed and his brow furrowed.

“Nothing as far as I can tell.” said Greg. “But-”

“Bartlett!” shouted Ark, ignoring anything else Greg had to say. “Have some of your men take up station on either side of the entryway and get the rest out of sight. I want to take them by surprise when they return.”

Greg let out a slightly exasperated breath through his nose. He had been going to tell his employer that it was entirely possible that the fairy accompanying their midrian quarry might have concocted more devious means to keep them out but now he did not see the point. Even if such a trap existed there was little they could do to prevent it, Greg just had to be sure he was there to shield Ark from whatever might occur.

A smile crept across Greg’s face as he put a finger to the place on the underside of his jaw where the fairy had sucker punched him last cycle with some kind of Fey-make gauntlet. The spot, barely bigger than the pad of his index finger, was still a little numb to the touch.

There wasn’t much that presented a challenge to a fully trained ogre war-merc and Greg relished the chance to face someone that had outmaneuvered and over powered him not once, but twice. An old ogre saying popped into his head, “*Once to observe. Twice to take measure. Three times to overcome.*”. The folk of Gobwor were not easily defeated. They took notice, they took stock and then they took action.

The old credo of, *No action before thought*, was actually something they had to drill out of young ogres at the War School. No, that wasn’t exactly right. The War School had simply taught Greg that his instinct in conflict was correct more often than not. One did not usually have time to contemplate in the middle of a firefight.

Moving off the side of the *Amal’hiam* just behind Ark, Greg took in a deep breath through his nose and savored the moment. Where else but with the khagrish prospector would he get a chance to face down a denizen of the Northern Reach not once, but three times.

He looked off towards what was apparently the only entrance to the berth and continued smiling. Greg hoped they fairy and her enigmatic midrian partner would return soon, a confrontation with those two would make for a spectacular last day to this piece of his Contract. The ogre also hated to see a job left unfinished.

“I’ve got a second address for Regis Gaius.” said Mel, pulling up a small holo of Panimberg on her forearm datapad and highlighting a location not that far from the clothing shop they had almost visited.

Marcus settled his hand on his revolver and nodded, that same desperate flame in his eyes as he spoke, “Excellent. We’ll head there and-”

“You didn’t let me finish.” said Mel over him as she landed on a spot on the railing just before it curved down with the stairs. “I also have a parts dealer that could probably help us with the ship.” Another blip on the map showed up as she touched her datapad. This location was much closer to their berth but in the opposite direction of the first address.

Mel watched as her friend studied the map for a long moment and then she dismissed it as she crossed her arms and stared at him.

“Now really think about this.” said Mel evenly. “Which should we go to first?”

Marcus immediately opened his mouth to say something but closed it again with a long exhalation through his nose. He swallowed and then said, “Fix the ship first. Helena isn’t going anywhere, not today.”

Each word he said sounded as if he had to rip them from his mind one at a time like some kind of tick. Every one bloody and refusing to be set free without a fight. The pained look on his face hurt Mel but she nodded and rose back into the air, gliding down towards the gunner’s station that rested just to the other side of the airlock.

There were a few seconds in which Marcus wasn’t in her sight and she took the opportunity to land in the empty chair. She took a breath and rubbed at her shoulders quickly, rolling her neck and shoving any discomfort she had deep down until today’s business was finally done.

Zipping back up as she caught sight of Marcus’ boots, Mel flew a quick circle around one of the few unused area’s of the *Amal’hiam*.

“Shame we can’t use the main gun.” said Mel as she came over to land on Marcus’ shoulder.

“Why?” asked Marcus with a sideways glance towards her.

Mel shrugged and said, “You never know what could use shooting.”

Marcus shook his head and looked forward again but Mel saw what might have been half a grin twitch across his lips.

“We’d need to find someone who could work the damn thing while I fly.” said Marcus roughly as he turned toward the airlock.

“Who knows.” said Mel. “We might get lucky with this mechanic. Maybe he has a five thousand cycle old dwarvish autotarget system lying around.”

That actually got a single laugh out of the former Magus though it may have just been an amused breath. Either way it made Mel grin.

“Yeah,” said Marcus, “and while we’re at it let’s see if he has any diamond-aethite or maybe he has the *Heraclian* parked out back.”

Mel chuckled at that as Marcus hit the release for the inner airlock door and moved inside. For the brief moment when they were enclosed by both doors the pixie felt an unmistakable surge of panic that she could not explain. Something about being trapped between the two interlocking sets of polysteel set her brain squirming with unnatural fears of tiny, inescapable spaces.

She wrestled it under control with a steadying breath and took another as Marcus opened the outer door to a hissing intake of fresh agworld air.

The sight of the four, armed midrians just inside the berth’s entrance made Marcus tense up and Mel hopped off his shoulder as he unclasped the safety strap on his holster. She didn’t blame him, even on a relatively civilized world like Bounty there was this crazy thing about criminals not caring which corporate laws they were breaking.

Only taking two steps away from the open door to their ship, Marcus called out, “Excuse me, can I help you gentlemen?”

“Bullocks.” said a deep voice from behind them.

Marcus turned slowly, his hand still on his revolver. It took him the space of a breath to take in the dwarf, the ogre war-merc and the other midrians just beyond the airlock to his right.

The only sound in that moment was the hissing and grinding as the outer airlock of the *Amal’hiam* closed automatically.

Greg threw himself in front of Ark even as Marcus drew that massive khagrish revolver and took aim at his employer. The midrian was fast, his shooting posture drilled into instinct even if it was a little sloppy. The massive slugs hit the war-merc in the upper thighs and hip, just where Ark’s exposed head would have been less than a second ago. Thankfully he did not feel any of the bullets penetrate the dense muscles of his legs though one might have scratched the bone.

Careening backwards, half out of a tactical retreat half simply allowing the recoil of his gun to carry him, Marcus did not actually turn to see where he was going until he had fired four times.

Then he awkwardly pivoted and rushed headlong towards the exit of the berth.

“The fairy!” roared Ark from behind Greg, seemingly unaware of the danger he had just been in. “Grab the fairy!”

Groaning slightly but still upright, Greg lurched forward three steps before his trembling leg gave out beneath him. He would heal but for the moment he wasn’t going anywhere.

Red’s Dogs moved with scattered discipline, unprepared for a reversal of the trap they had been preparing. Bartlett shouted orders but by the time the mercenaries were even half organized, the midrian and fairy were almost to the door.

“Mel!” shouted the sprinting Marcus, moving in a straight line as if unconcerned by the four men that stood in his way.

Watching the fleeing pair, Greg had half a moment to realize what was about to happen as the pixie began to glow with silver aether. He was not quite fast enough to shield his eyes before an explosion of silver-white light cascaded from the tiny flying woman.

Incoherent shouts and idiotically discharged gunfire sounded all around the berth. Greg struggled to his feet, already feeling the bullets still lodged in him being forced outwards by his mending flesh. He teetered like a tree in the wind but he remained upright as he surveyed the scene with his rapidly adjusted eyes.

The other mercenaries were momentarily blinded, most of them still had hands to their eyes and Ark was also shaking his head, cursing profusely. Two of the four mercs at the berth’s door had been bowled over and of Marcus or his fairy companion there was no sign except for the open door.

Hobbling over to where his employer was still blinking rapidly, Greg asked, “Ark, are you well?”

“Yes. Yes. I’m fine.” said the khag. “The fairy? Did you get the ‘tuned pixie?”

Greg shook his head even as felt the first of the bullets dislodge itself from his leg. When he realized the Ark could still not see him, he said, “Apologies. No. Marcus shot me several times in the leg as he was attempting to hit you. I was momentarily immobilized.”

“Marcus?” growled Ark, rubbing again at his eyes. Greg marveled at how long it took other races to recover from something as simple as an aetheric flashbang.

“The midrian with the fairy.”

“I know what his name is!” shouted Ark. “I would just like to know why you’re on first name rusted basis with him?!”

The prospector seemed to finally be gaining some of his sight back because he managed to look up at Greg as the ogre responded evenly, “What, pray, should I call him?”

Ark just shook his head in frustration. Unable to come up with a suitable answer to questions like that always frustrated his employer and Greg bit his tongue after the rash response. It had been unbecoming and more than a little spiteful.

“Is the ship still locked?” asked Ark, turning towards the forward airlock as he abruptly changed the subject.

Greg noted that most of Red’s Dogs had recovered, including Bartlett himself who was coming over as Ark inspected the entrance to their prize. An aetheric lock was built into the door at roughly khag height while the manual release was closer to where an ogre could comfortably reach. Neither seemed to work as Ark poked and prodded at them.

“Rusted Ruin.” cursed the khag through clenched teeth.

Sliding his bandolier around, Ark eventually came to a specific pouch and then pulled out a small device with several trailing wires dangling from it. He detached two even smaller patches from the back of the device, the wires connecting the two pieces of tech, and attached them to the touchpad of the aetheric lock.

The device itself was mostly just a tiny screen that displayed some rapidly changing wave patterns as the frequency of this locks attunement was decoded.

Ark studied the readout for several seconds before affixing it just below the touchpad.

“This could take days.” said the Prospector with an angry sigh. “The ‘tunement is far more complex than it should be.”

Greg blinked slowly as the last of the bullets exited his leg and he let out a sigh of relief. Just because his body healed as quickly as it did, that did not mean that it hurt any less. “The fairy?” he asked to cover his exhalation.

“Most likely.” grumbled Ark. “She may still be our best bet.” Turning towards Red Bartlett, the khag continued. “Bartlett, your men will accompany me. I need that pixie, alive.”

The midrian merc shrugged, he had managed to hang on to his fowl cigar through all of the chaos. “You’re payin’ the bills shortstack.”

Ark grumbled something incoherently furious as he made for the exit.

Watching him go in confused silence, Greg finally called after the khag, “What about me?”

“Stay with the blockade runner.” said Ark over his shoulder. “If they loop back around kill the midrian and capture the fairy.”

Greg stood with stoic resolve as Ark and the other mercenaries filed out of the berth. It was not until he heard their trans take off and leave that he let out a long breath.

Staring down towards the dirt floor of the berth, Greg raised his hands and gazed at his palms as his fingers flexed. They were hands that could take midrians by the head and lift them bodily off the ground. They could take apart low-grade polysteel doors with ease, digging through softer metal like another sapient might push through clay. They could reload his lever-action shard-launcher in less time than it took to tie his boots on.

Greg did not particularly enjoy the violence but he did enjoy the thrill of it, the challenge it offered.

It took a few moments of steady breathing before Greg allowed himself a halfhearted grin and then looked up at the beautiful sky above the berth. It shone bright blue with puffy little wisps of clouds floating by like some kind of sky-sheep.

Lying out beneath the open sky, Greg massaged the tender portions of his thigh and drank in the clean agworld air. Just because he had been forced to wait behind like some common watchdog it did not mean he had to be miserable while he did so. It was a lovely day after all.

Chapter Thirteen

Mel had been flying for almost four blocks before she noticed that Marcus was not behind her. Cursing, her wings snapped and crackled as she hurled herself back the way she’d come.

Rising into the air she cut over buildings rather than strictly follow the streets. She could see two medium-sized black trans speeding in the same general direction, weaving into thoroughfares in a seemingly random search pattern. Eventually she saw Marcus moving northwards through an alley and she dove down on an intercept course. He did not stop even as she came down in front of him and she had to flit out of the way so that he did not plow into her.

“Marcus!” Mel cried out as she flew after him. “Hello? We need to go the other way.”

“No mechanic.” grunted Marcus between puffing breaths. “Find her now.”

Mel stopped in midair for a moment, dumbstruck. She clutched at the air in a desperate strangling motion before surging forward to catch up to Marcus.

“You have got to be kidding me?!” shouted the pixie as she flew.

“Have to know.” said Marcus, eyes forward.

The former Magus did not even spare a glance at his pixie companion. He couldn’t. She was right, of course. The smart play was to go and find a way to get the *Amal’hiam* fixed. Ark wasn’t going to be able to get aboard anytime soon, not with the added security Mel had added to the locking chems, and they may have been able to get back aboard to make repairs. Marcus could have easily led the dwarf and his mercs away while Mel stole back aboard with a mechanic.

But something about the dwarf and ogre’s appearance had sealed something in Marcus’ mind. One final nail in the coffin of certainty. Every instinct he had drove him towards Helena and it seemed as though fate was conspiring to do the same.

When they had fled the berth Marcus had scrambled out the door, hearing wordless cries and gunfire behind him, only to be presented with an instantaneous choice. Left or right?

A left turn led towards their mechanical salvation while going to the right would take him towards Helena.

There had been no thought in his action. No conscious decision. Turning right had been the only real option. In Marcus’ mind there had not even been another direction. Hearing Mel’s voice put a wedge of doubt into his mind but at his core he knew that there was no other way he could be going right now.

Stopping momentarily at a cross street Marcus gained his bearings and flicked a gaze down the way.

“Did they follow?” he asked, almost casually.

Mel let out a huff as she hovered near him and said hotly, “Yes. They don’t have you but they’re coming this way. You’ll have two minutes at most after you get on to any main streets.”

Marcus nodded. He could feel a tiny bit of the Magus creeping back as Mel listed off tactical data and he planed his next moves accordingly. The midrian could feel his body reaching out for his aetherics, instinctively trying to supplement his Spymaster’s information with his own, but nothing came.

No thrill of aether, alive and flowing through everything around him. No emotions on the auras of those who passed in front of him out on the main street. No rush of power as his entire body sang with the aethium grafted to his bones and infusing every fiber of his flesh.

Nothing.

He was reaching out with a hand that was no longer there.

It all happened in an instant but Marcus felt his hands tighten into fists as he was forced to rely solely on the five senses he had left. There were times when he believed he had finally gotten over being stripped of his aetherics but as the cycles wore on he was coming to realize that he would never be used to it. He simply had to ignore it.

Moving again, Marcus cut diagonally across the street towards another alley that turned suddenly left, letting him move northwards for a ways without being out in the open. He was already passed where the clothing shop was and he wasn’t concerned with being seen by Basheen at this point anyway. He was already being hunted by a pack of people trying to kill him, what was one more?

Mel did not say anything else as they moved towards their destination and the one time Marcus spared a glance her way he regretted it.

Her face was bound up in its usual knot of emotional turmoil but now he could clearly make out frustrated rage as the most common theme while she glared straight at him.

In their last three cycles together Marcus knew that he had continually done things that caused Mel consternation to say the least. But she always put up with him, Primus knew why. She’d followed him from one end of the Dragon’s Wake to the other and helped him through his newfound affliction in ways that no one else would have. Occasionally he would do something exceptionally selfish or downright stupid in his search for Helena and after every crushing disappointment or misspoken word Mel would manage to prop him back up, slap him across the face and get him moving again.

Now though, he was putting them both in jeopardy for the sake of his own wants and she knew it.

What could he say?

How could he make up for this in the end?

Would finding Helena make any of this better? Probably not. But it would finish this. It would leave Marcus free. Mel might just understand. Maybe.

Looping back around to the main street again, Marcus found himself looking at something very much like the town squares he had known back on Verge. There was a marketplace with stalls set up, vendors selling freshly baked goods and carts serving all sorts of food. Trinket merchants and peddlers of strange odds and ends lined the square’s four sides. Broad, flat stones tiled the street here, worked into a beautiful flower pattern that culminated in the center with a large fountain in the shape of a cornucopia, overflowing with water that splashed down into a sunlit pool.

Merchants shouted. People exchanged gossip. Children shrieked and splashed at each other around the fountain until their parents shouted them away.

It wasn’t the rustic pleasantness of it all that stopped Marcus cold though. It was *her*.

He saw her profile through a perfect gap in the crowd, as if everyone in the square was aware of what was happening and parted to let him see.

Blond hair, longer than he could ever remember her wearing, fell down the other side of her face, putting her features into sharp relief. It was the likeness of one of the Stedgods chiseled onto some long forgotten currency. It was a face that had filled his dreams and haunted his nightmares. The view also showed off the dark mass of the slave collar that was affixed to her neck, marring her otherwise pristine form.

There was one moment of perfect stillness for Marcus Crassus as he saw her.

Then the crowd moved, forgetting about the reunion of the lovers, and the former Magus lost sight of her in the crush.

Letting out a strangled cry, Marcus moved forward, hoping up and down in a ridiculous motion as he tried to catch a glimpse of her again. As people moved passed him and crossed in front of him he had brief visions of swaying blond hair, moving away from him.

Mel flew nearby, shouting indistinct words at him. Was there a question there? Did it matter?

“It’s her.” Marcus said aloud, chattering more to himself than anyone who might be listening. “It’s her.”

Marcus dove through the crowd, his last words still ringing in Mel’s ears, their ravenous tone like nothing she had ever heard from the former Magus before.

*“It’s her.”*

Mel swallowed nervously and flew after him. She did not know what he had seen to set him off like this. Could it have really been *her*?

Every time in the last cycle when they had been finally confronted with a possible Helena there had been that quiet moment of deep, desperate hope from Marcus. Mel had not noticed it the first few times but after seeing a dozen faces that were just this side of being the one they were looking for she had caught on.

This was not that. This was something else, something new. Again Marcus had transformed into someone that Mel could barely recognize. Sure, he looked the same but it was in the way he moved now that Mel saw the change.

He was a man staggering out of a desert, almost falling forward rather than actually moving in a coordinated effort, reaching franticly towards the first source of water he could see. It did not matter that he seemed more like an animal than a person, he had been alone and thirsty for so long. What could anyone know of his hardships? Their opinion did not mean anything until his thirst was quenched.

Mel could only ever remember seeing that look on one other individual and they had been a Feyslave, so twisted and removed from reality by Sidhe manipulation that they twitched and moved like a beaten animal. The thing they had reached so desperately towards had been death.

Glancing back over her shoulder Mel saw two non-descript black trans barreling down the street towards the market square. She let out a small yelp and shot after Marcus, finding him as he shoved his way through the crowded city center.

Finally, Marcus broke through the crush in the square, finding himself on another dirt road that was lined with small, two-story residential buildings. Some were crowded together but most had at least a few meters between them and one or two even had small patches of grass growing around them.

*She* was there, not one hundred meters away, casually making her way passed a low picket fence that surrounded one of the residences with a miniature lawn.

He tried to shout her name but the sound that came out was too warped by excitement and violent joy. She did turn ever so slightly, the noise catching part of her attention, and shot a glance back down the road towards him before entering the house.

When Marcus approached he found the door locked and it wasn’t until after his first attempt to open it did he consider knocking. What he did was not knocking though, what the former Magus did was pound on the door like he was hammering a nail, his fist bludgeoning the polywood surface and leaving the side of his hand numb.

Finding some of his voice again, Marcus managed to say, “Please. Please I need to see her.”

From the other side of the door a male voice said, “Go away, I’ve got BAGsec on the call already.”

Something inside Marcus snapped. A simple polywood door and some slave owner threatening him with local security was not going to stop him. Not now. Not after everything he had been through.

Marcus reared back just as Mel flew towards him, shouting something that was lost behind the sound of blood pounding in his ears.

With a roar the former Magus kicked at the door, sending splinters of faux wood flying as the frame shattered beneath his assault. It took another kick but he got the door to spring wide open just as the man on the other side leveled a scattershot at him and opened fire.

In another time and another place Marcus would have been dead, laying broken and bleeding after being torn apart by the spray of charged aether. But here, now, after being stripped of his aetherics and subsequently gaining a strange immunity to it, Marcus Crassus stood with his arms crossed, instinctively shielding his face. The blast had forced him backwards by a hard step and seared a few holes in his shirt but otherwise left him unharmed.

The man with the scattershot stared at him in astonishment and gapped silently as Marcus uncrossed his arms and glared at him. The other midrian was taller than Marcus but relatively skinny, his bulk mostly made up of fine clothing and the large gun he cradled against his shoulder. A pointy spike of a beard grew from his chin and it moved up and down as his mouth made incoherent sounds of shock.

Not even bothering with his own gun, the former Magus strode forward and elbowed the skinnier man in the chest. The blow, while not aetherically charged in any way, was enough to send the other man crumpling to the floor with a surprised gasp. His scattershot fell away from his hands as he grabbed desperately at his chest.

Marcus did not even stop to properly incapacitate the other man, he just marched forward with fevered motion. As he moved into the house proper his voice finally found the word it had been searching for.

“Helena!”

Mel was right behind him, still shouting something but it just sounded like a squealing shriek that meant nothing.

He moved through the house, clearing one room and then another in quick succession. It wasn’t until he reached the kitchen, a long silver and white room at the back of the house, that Marcus found her.

She turned with a smooth, precise motion, blond hair flying over her shoulder as she leveled a long barreled rifle directly at him.

The gun did not matter. Mel’s shouting did not matter. The distant sounds of screaming people and flaring tran horns did not matter.

All that mattered was the face that stared at him down the barrel of a rifle.

It was the face that made everything come crashing down.

Her features were sharp and lean; a few centimeters here and a few centimeters there and they could have been Helena’s. But they were not. This woman’s face had a terrible beauty all its own. It was beautiful like a stedcrafted blade, polished and sharpened by the old ways of hammer and tongs.

Her eyes alighted on Marcus but they did not shine with that violet hue that watched him every time he slept. They shone with a swirl of blue and green, alight like an ocean in a storm. In the moment he saw that gleam though, it was gone, replaced by cold orbs that lacked any emotion. Those eyes analyzed him, broke him apart and found the easiest way to leave him cold and lifeless on the tiled floor.

When she spoke it was in a voice that was the last icy knife stuck into Marcus’ heart.

“Marcus Crassus.” said Diana Istara. “You absolute bastard.”

Chapter Fourteen

17 Standard Imperial Cycles Previous

“Fuck this planet!” shouted Renic, diving back behind cover as more bolts of charged aether rained down on their position. “They’ve got us pretty well pinned Hel.”

First Lieutenant Helena Istara fought the frustration building in her chest. She wanted to break ranks, charge the enemy position and set her heavy rifle to detonate right in the hornskull’s long faces. The frontal assault might just work but it would mean she would more than likely get gunned down in the process. Assault Zero-Seven’s situation was just dire enough that it might call for such tactics but Helena was in no position to do it herself. Because it wasn’t just her fireteam that relied on her anymore, the entire twenty seventh platoon was relying on her leadership now.

Zero-Seven was currently cut off from the others though and if Helena did not find some way through the enemy blockade up the street from their position then this whole mission would have been for nothing.

Though, when Helena considered just where they were and what was going on around them, her platoon’s actions seemed insignificant in the grand scale of things. Even from their position entrenched in the Temple City, Helena could see that the rest of Minos was on fire.

This was it, she knew. The final push. For the first time in nearly five thousand cycles Imperial troops were upon the surface of the tauro homeworld, the center of their Dominion. Nearly every resource in the Legion’s arsenal had been used for the final push into the very heart of their enemy’s space and now tens of thousands of legionnaires, warmages, special-ops personnel and combat wizards were flooding the surface of Minos.

For the first time in history multiple supercarriers hung over a world besieged by the Khanus Empire. The shadows of the *Thessian*, the *Odyssian* and the *Percean* never let the Minosian sun touch the surface of the planet. Meanwhile the *Heraclean* and *Achillean* moved just outside the planets orbit, strafing the far moon’s ship foundries and repelling any reinforcements that might show up from off world. The five gargantuan ships were unlike anything produced by the Dominion, or the modern Empire for that matter, and their combined firepower had already decimated the tauro’s navy and orbital defenses.

It was an offensive unlike anything ever employed by the Empire, an overpowering hammer blow that had been phases in the making. Feints and counter-feints had been involved across the galaxy, strategically spinning the Dominion forces around to open up this singular gap in their defenses. It had been the work of dozens of magistrates and Arch-Praetor Zeno Regula Pollious Khanus himself working in unison to allow for a final, merciless attack that would, in theory, shatter the oldest and most powerful enemy the Empire had ever known.

Amidst all of that, just one tiny part of the planet-wide invasion, Helena and her platoon had been given a very specific mission. Just before dawn Assault Zero-Seven had attacked the compound of a High Fane, one of the tauro religious elite, and secured an artifact from a vault beneath the building. Helena had led the direct infiltration at the head of her squad while the remainder of her platoon had secured strategic choke points along their escape route.

The plan would have been flawless if not for the fact that the main brunt of the fighting had reached the Temple City much faster than the warmages intel had indicated it would. Now they were well into the dayside of the turn and fighting had broken out all over the city while attack-craft and bombers from both sides shrieked across the sky. Zero-Seven had been cut off from their intended escape route and the tauro were now closing in en mass.

A whining buzz filled the air and Helena turned towards Mak, shouting, “Incoming!”

The hulking form of Mak, completely obscured by the huge frame of the Seraph he was inside, threw up the walking tank’s primary arms. Blue aetheric light poured out of inlaid chems along its shoulder joints and forearms, forming a wide dome above the squad as they took cover within a ruined building at the edge of a market square.

Shards of aethite screamed out of the sky as the tauro artillery impacted against Mak’s shield. The Seraph did not move but Helena could hear the man inside grunting with effort as he struggled to repel shot after shot of cascading shard launcher fire.

Just as the last shot exploded off of Mak’s shield the Seraph’s arms fell to its side and the whole ogre-sized suit of armor seemed to sag. From inside Mak said, “Gods damn. Not sure I can take another beating like that Hel.”

Renic and Valis had taken the opportunity just after the artillery fire to stick their heads out around opposite corners of the crumbling wall that shielded the squad from being entirely visible. Valis even managed to fire off several shots at some unseen foe across from them.

Huddling close to Mak’s Seraph, the rookie looked shaken, her eyes invisible behind her Raptor’s helmet but her body language speaking volumes about her disposition. Helena drew close and put an armored hand on her shoulder.

“Private Ilza, are you with me?” asked Helena in a firm tone.

Ilza was barely a cycle younger than Helena but she was still new to the warmage corps and the Lieutenant wondered if she had ever been that green.

Ilza nodded her head slowly and said, “I’m with you L.T. I just… I didn’t…”

Patching a live image of her own face directly into the Private’s HUD, Helena gave the younger woman her best determined smile.

“We’re in the shit.” said Helena. “No doubts about that. But Julian’ll be back soon, slippery bastard can always get us a way out.”

“Yeah.” said Renic, ducking back behind the cover of the wall as the enemy’s personal arms fire began again. “Guy’s like a Rhini. In and out of anywhere. Quick as you like.”

Helena snorted as Julian’s lithe form in his paired down Raptor literally appeared in their midst.

“A little racist there Ren.” said Julian, the refractory panels on his specially customized Raptor shimmering as he faded into visibility.

Valis, still taking potshots by blind-firing around the wall, asked, “Got anything for us?”

Julian shook his head and Helena, cutting off her feed to Ilza, cringed.

“We’ve got about two blocks to maneuver east,” said Julian, “But the hornskulls are rolling up from the south fast. That squad across the way was just reinforced with some artillery.”

“Noticed that, did you?” cut in Mak wearily.

“And west…” continued Julian.

“Leads us right back to where we started.” finished Helena. She had no idea what the compound would be like if they headed back there. It had only been a skeleton crew guarding the place when Zero-Seven had broken in but it was a highly defendable position and those where becoming rarer as the battle raged on within the city.

“Anything on comms?” asked Julian.

Now it was Helena’s turn to shake her head. “Everything is a mess out there. Open channels on both sides are starting to overlap and most of the direct frequencies to command are either swamped or dark.”

Assault Zero-Seven was silent for a long moment with only Valis moving as he continued to fire from behind the wall. Eventually they all heard the satisfying *boom* from across the courtyard.

Sticking his head back around the wall for a moment, Renic broke the silence, nodding appreciatively as he said, “Shard launcher. I think you hit an ammo cache.”

Valis snorted and Helena could practically see the self-satisfied smile on the warmage’s face. The veteran turned toward his lieutenant and asked, “What’s the play Hel?”

Helena gave each of her squad a glance, moving her gaze from one domed helmet to another. Then she glanced down at the left arm of her Raptor, now covered in so many hash marks that she had to start carving into the plates on her shoulder and chest. Four hundred and eighty six in all. Finally her eyes fell on the low bulge of the High Fane’s compound to the west.

“We go back.” said Helena, straightening and feeling her aether crackle unconsciously along her arms. Anger boiled in her belly, giving her words a slight growl. “Hole up in the compound and wait the shitstorm out.”

The squad each nodded in turn, forming up behind Helena as she took point.

“Mak.” said the Lieutenant over her shoulder. “Could you give our friends across the way a parting gift?”

Grunting, Mak raised one of his huge, barrel-like arms skyward. A mechanism whirred and a seam split the arm open, revealing a long cannon that crackled with yellowish aether. The Seraph paused for a moment and Helena knew that Mak was quietly calculating the range of his target with the Seraph’s onboard scryers. After only a few seconds there was a *thwoomp* that would have been deafening if not for their Raptor’s onboard audio suppressors that kicked in.

A glowing shard of perfectly cut aethite erupted from the Seraph’s own shard launcher, looking like a streaking golden comet as it flew up into the sky in a dazzling ark.

Helena and the rest of Zero-Seven were already moving before the explosion from the resulting shot was heard behind them. Several thunderous detonations sounded from where their foes had been and Valis gave a congratulatory nod to Mak.

“Only two shards left Hel.” said Mak solemnly.

Helena proceeded forward, cataloguing the information as she threw up her own hands and used a focused burst of aether to blow out a wall that slowed their progress. The Raptor focused and charged her own aetherics, letting her project the energy in the same way that weaponized chems let other mages fight at a distance. Her heated purple power cut a ragged hole that was easily big enough to allow for the Seraph if it stooped slightly.

“Keep it tight and fast.” said Helena. “I want to cut in there before they know we’ve moved.”

The blue lights of the other warmages winked on her HUD, confirming they’d received her orders.

Then Helena took off at a jog. Going through back alleys and straight through the walls of some smaller domiciles Zero-Seven made good progress back along the half-klick they had traversed only an hour previous. The whole time Helena was intensely aware of the small case that was attached to her Raptor near the small of her back. The whole reason her platoon had found themselves in this position in the first place.

The assault on the High Fane’s compound a few hours ago had been easy enough and finding the vault below the facility had been equally as easy. Getting it open had taken Julian a few minutes but all and all it had not been nearly as dire as their orders had made it out to be.

The backchannel nature of everything had been the first tip-off. Helena had received the mission for her Platoon just before the invasion of Minos had begun, sent to her personal comm through a scrambled metanet source. If not for the verification codes within the directive that overrode all of her previous orders for the operation Helena would have thought it was some kind of ill-conceived prank. It all stunk of Special Operations, cloak and dagger bullshit.

In the middle of the largest military action since the Deep War Helena and her squad had been sent into some dragon worshiping hornskull’s basement to retrieve a rock.

Because that was what it had been, essentially. Just a rock. An admittedly strange rock to be sure, all black edges and a weird metallic sheen, but there was nothing special about it as far as Helena or any of her squad could tell. Even Ilza, who had proven to be particularly adept at sensing subtle aetheric changes in things, could not even sense a charge on the thing. It was inert in every way that mattered as far as Helena was concerned.

After this was all over Helena prayed she could get her hands on whoever had sent those orders and give them a quick introduction to her Raptor’s weapons.

“Sir.” said Ilza as Helena led them through a small yard, blasting a low wall so Mak did not have to. “I’ve got something.”

Turning to look at the private, Helena saw that she had crouched suddenly next to the building, holding a hand to her helmet in a gesture of concentration.

“What’s up rookie?” asked Renic. “You find some-”

“Sush.” Ilza said, cutting off the former rookie. “I was rotating through the comms, looking for a free line to command. Everyone is saying its too hot for any kind of extraction.”

“No.” said Valis, looking up at the sky filled with fire and flashes of aether bursts. “Really?”

Ilza shook her head and gave the older man a look. “I was broadcasting our IFF, just in case, you know?” continued the private. “Someone just pinged me, well, us. Here, listen.”

There was a brief hiss of static on all of their comms that quickly settled into a strangely modulated voice.

“-opy Zero-Seven?” said the voice over the comm. “Repeat. Assault Zero-Seven, do you copy?”

Helena jumped onto her own comm and said, “This is Assault Zero-Seven.”

“Confirm.” said the voice.

“Alpha Zero Tango Seven. A Second Shadow Does Not Waver.” said Helena, enunciating to be sure her words came through clearly.

“It Shields Against The Dark.” responded the voice, giving the correct words to Helena’s own call for confirmation. “Confirmed Zero-Seven. It’s good to hear from you, we thought you’d been carried under.”

“Not yet. Who is this?”

Totally ignoring Helena’s question, the voice on the other end of the comm asked, “What is your position Zero-Seven?”

Helena traded a look with Valis, neither of the Raptor pilots able to see each other’s face but the other warmage shrugged noncommittally, guessing at the Lieutenant’s concerned glance.

“Say again.” said Helena, trying one more time. “Who is this?”

“Zero-Seven we’re trying to work out an extraction for you. What is your position?” said the voice, the strange modulation making it impossible to tell if the speaker was a man, woman or possibly even an automated system of some kind.

Helena let a sharp breath through her nose and looked at her squad. They were in the middle of the most fearsome warzone any of them had ever experienced, now was not the time to be turning down a saving grace from Primus.

Glancing quickly at the geo-nav readout on her HUD, Helena said, “We’re about a quarter klick from our original insertion point.”

“Mission status?” asked the voice.

“Package is secure.” said Helena, absently putting a hand on the small case at her back. “Original extraction plan is No Go. It got hot here too quick.”

“Understood Zero-Seven. Please stand by.”

Helena stared blankly at the inside of her helmet and across from her Renic said, “What the fuck?”

The rest of the squad had been listening, of course.

“I’m inclined to agree. All of this over a rock?” said Julian, shaking his head as he kept up a watchful perimeter with Valis. “What in the Wake is going on?

The older veteran gave a disgusted snort over the comm and said, “This whole thing stinks.”

“StRATa?” asked Mak in a slightly lowered tone.

Valis shrugged again. “Dunno. Maybe. Definitely Spec-Ops.”

Ilza glanced back and forth between the more senior members of the squad. “What’s StRATa?”

“They’re ghosts, rumors and vapor. Technically they’re a branch of Spec-Ops.” said Julian with that casual air as he rattled off facts. “But they work outside the Directorate proper. No one’s quite sure who they answer to. A spooky bunch if you believe all the stories.”

“Assassins and mod-freaks.” said Renic, adding his half-charged opinion. “They say all of their operatives have had their insides scooped out and replaced with tech.”

“Don’t believe that crap.” said Valis, though his tone was dark enough that Helena doubted he disbelieved *all* of the rumors. “All they are is bad news for the likes of us.”

Silently agreeing, Helena did not voice her own opinion to the squad but listened intently for any response from their mysterious contact. She thought that they had definitely been caught up in some kind of Special Operations fiasco but there was no evidence to suggest that they were inadvertently working for the most shadowed and secretive of the Legion’s many factions.

“-Seven?” the voice suddenly cut back through over the squad’s comm, silencing any further speculation.

“This is Zero-Seven, go ahead.” said Helena, guessing at the first part of the transmission.

“The soup is hot Zero-Seven but we’ve got a ladle for you. Extraction will be at your original insertion point. Get to the top of that ziggurat. Flyby Five-Zero-Niner is en route, ETA ten minutes.”

“Five-Zero-Niner, ten mikes.” parroted Helena. “Copy.”

The comm cut off and Helena moved back down the path she had originally been taking. “You heard the mystery CO. Move out Zero-Seven.”

It was short work getting back to the High Fane’s compound. Assault Zero-Seven maintained a bit of luck by only running into one stray group of tauro. Thankfully the fully armored squad of hornskull’s did not seem to have been expecting a gang of surly warmages cutting a line through the interior of their Temple City. Most of the fighting was still on the outskirts of the city, with tauro forces from across the planet falling back to their most defensible metropolis. Zero-Seven had dispatched the group, numbering two times larger than the small group of midrians, with very little effort.

The compound itself, resembling a smaller version of the primary ziggurat that dominated the center of the city, rose only a few stories above the surrounding buildings but it was plenty tall enough to serve as their extraction point.

Once inside Helena ushered her squad back through the slightly battle scarred halls. The evidence of their assault on the place just a few hours ago was still fresh on the masonry of the floor and walls. The Raptors moved quickly through the tauro-sized building and even Mak in his lumbering Seraph had no trouble maneuvering through the corridors and stairways.

“Time?” asked Helena, winding her way around yet another long hallway that led towards another wide staircase.

“Two minutes until extraction.” said Julian, the unofficial stopwatch of Assault Zero-Seven. The young noble did not even need to rely on his HUD to mark the seconds ticking away.

Pausing as she reached a polysteel door that she thought led to the roof, Helena did a quick checkup on her squad. Once all of their display lights on her helmet’s display had winked blue she took a quick breath and then blasted the door outward, not really in the mood to even attempt a stealthy entrance.

Something more subtle would have been useless anyway. Helena could have been fitted with chems for a solo-orchestra and no one would have heard her and Zero-Seven coming out onto the roof.

The Battle of Minos had reached its own crescendo.

Tauro capitol ships were now in orbit above them engaging the absolutely massive shapes of the Imperial supercarriers. For every one of the Empire’s end all of space faring battleships, the tauro had four or five smaller vessels. Even Helena, a veteran of dozens of battles throughout this campaign, was staggered by the sheer scope of the war ragging around them. Half the Temple City was now a smoldering ruin, blackened by orbital bombardments or the artillery of the ground forces from both sides. The other half seemed to be well on its way to matching the first, with large detonations of aether creating a constant and unstoppable wave of sound that cut through even their Raptor’s audio filters. It was impossible to imagine what kind of thunder a common Legionnaire was experiencing.

In the heavens above, great sweeping beams of white and golden aether danced between the Imperial and Dominion forces. From where they stood, just south of the massive golden ziggurat that served as the center of the Temple City, Helena could not see any sign of the *Heraclean* or the *Achillian* but the other three supercarriers blotted out most of the sky. The *Perssian* seemed to be taking the brunt of the enemy’s fire, while the *Thessian* and the *Odyssian* moved in lumbering tandem, cutting luminescent swaths through the tauro armada.

Two of the Dominion’s capitol ships, kilometers away from each other but seeming to be nearly touching from Helena’s perspective, erupted with greenish-red light that bled out in long, jagged lines. The aether burned outward in huge bursts, like waves crashing against cliffs, and then the two ships lurched suddenly towards each other. The explosion that followed flattened all of Assault Zero-Seven, including Mak in his hulking Seraph, to the roof where they stood.

Helena did not even have time to shout any orders for her squad to brace themselves before the supernova of light in the sky above them caused all of their visors to automatically go black. The only sound that made it through her helmet’s systems was the squawking of overloaded static and the distant shouts of someone else in the squad.

If not for their heavier class of armor Helena was sure Zero-Seven would have been blown straight off the roof of the smaller ziggurat. As it was, after a long moment of furious buffeting and overwhelming sound, there came a lull.

Her visor lightening slightly, Helena was just able to make out the cascading wreckage of the tauro ships tumbling out of the sky. They were not even recognizable anymore, just chunks of superheated metal streaming aetherflame against the background of the supercarrier imposed night.

It took another long moment before Helena realized that someone was speaking into her ear and clutching at her shoulder.

“Lieutenant!” shouted Private Ilza. “Lieutenant Istara!”

Shaking herself out of her reverie, Helena finally turned away from the devastation once she used her HUD to make sure none of the raining scrap was on a trajectory towards their position. “Private?” said Helena.

“We’ve got incoming Sir.” said the rookie, pointing back up towards where the battle still raged above them.

Weaving in and out of the falling pieces of Dominion warship, a small black craft seemed to avoiding the main brunt of the fighting and making a line straight down towards the city. Straight towards Assault Zero-Seven.

Helena pinged the ship with their coded Identify Friend/Foe signal and was quickly rewarded with an answering ping. Their extraction was on their way.

“Be ready to move people.” said Helena, herding her squad to the side of the roof to make room for the craft’s approach. “Our ride’s here.”

Their extraction turned out to be a medium sized matte-black dropship that wheeled around as it came close to the ziggurat’s roof, displaying its rear airlock to the assembled warmages. The hatch swung down into a long ramp even before the ship touched down and it only took Helena a moment to realize that their rescuers had no intention of putting down. This was going to be a load and leave.

A slender figure made its way down the ramp and motioned for Zero-Seven but Helena was moving before it had even appeared. As the rest of her squad approached, also figuring out what was going on, Helena paused to study the person on the ramp.

They looked midrian, which was a good start, but they were dressed head-to-toe in a form-fitting but slightly bulky set of armor. It looked like a much slimmer version of the Raptors that the warmages were accustomed to but much sleeker and more streamlined, like a more advanced version of the suit Julian wore. Thin seams of aethite ran along the armor’s limbs and across its back and chest, spreading its aether output across the wearer’s whole body rather than just a few choice points like they did in the Raptors.

“Lieutenant Istara.” said the figure, its voice modulated with strange filters that made it unrecognizable. “Do you have the package?”  
 Helena’s hand drifted to the small case at the small of her back and she nodded. “Package is secure.”

The figure nodded, it’s helmet far more streamlined and contoured than the one Helena wore. It was thinner to, Helena noticed, even from outside she could see some of the tactical data being displayed on the HUD of their rescuer, albeit backwards. Focusing she could just barely make out the outline of a sharp-featured face beneath the tinted quartz-aethite.

Suddenly all of those numbers and words on the figures helmet flashed green and the spec-ops legionnaire jerked its gaze skyward.

Helena followed the look just in time to see the beginnings of another massive flash of aether. Just before her helmet’s display went dark again she saw the center of the *Perssian* bulge and shatter.

Even from where they had been deployed in low orbit the explosion from the supercarrier shook the ground beneath their feet. The shockwave and roar that followed were unlike anything Helena had ever experienced. She felt the ceramic and polysteel of her Raptor tremble and shake, even if she could not hear it over the fury coming from above. No sound could match its sound. No force could match its force. No light could match its light. The systems of her Raptor, indeed all of Zero-Seven’s Raptors tried to compensate but failed.

As the Imperial supercarrier *Perssian* died, all within the Temple City of Minos knew it.

All Helena could see was darkness followed swiftly by terrible light. She was flat on her back, staring up at the erupting sky. It hurt just to look at, though even as she did her visor began to blacken and crisp. It was a safety feature that stopped Helena’s eyeballs from doing the same.

Before her sight was consumed by the burning aethite Helena thought she saw a blazing figure tearing through the atomized ruin that had once been a supercarrier. Like a comet it streaked across the sky, hurtling not down, but up. Blazing with emerald light, whatever it was shot towards the *Thessian* with deadly purpose.

It was then that Helena realized that she could not breath. She gulped for air but none would come and as the remainder of her Raptor’s visuals went black she struggled to get her helmet off.

The struggle surprised and frightened her. Her limbs, usually light and strong within the Raptors amplified confines, barely moved. It wasn’t until she calmed slightly, focusing her aetherics through her limbs, that she managed to throw a hand up to hit the emergency release on just above her collar.

With a spring-loaded *twang* her visor flew off, letting Helena take a gasping breath as she blinked rapidly. She tried to remain focused, to keep her wits about her and figure out what had just happened. She needed to rise, she needed to check on her squad, but her Raptor moved with increasing sluggishness. Instead of enhancing and focusing her aethrics the armor was now only so much dead weight. The two suns that danced above her weren’t helping either.

Helena blinked again and tried to focus upwards as it struck her that Minos did not have two suns and the one it did have most certainly did not move as quickly as the two spheres of light that now circled each other above them.

Raggedly, the lieutenant of Assault Zero-Seven sat up, staring skyward in wide-eyed astonishment. All thought of her squad, the mission and even Minos itself destroyed by what she saw.

At first she thought it was two glowing ships, one green and one blue, moving through the upper atmosphere. They zigged and zagged in and around the remaining capitol ships, emitting more aetheric light than any type of craft Helena had ever seen. It was only when the two blazing blurs of motion swept down and over the city that she knew the truth. They were people.

Two sapient forms wreathed in light.

Alight with so much power, drawing it out of the very air around them and draining it from the city below, sucking the aether from everything without proper shielding for kilometers around to power their titanic struggle. Helena caught the briefest glimpse of the two figures as they passed overhead at a speed that broke glass and stone.

The figure in blue was midrian, his power rippling off him in waves that sang to the core of Helena, striking a chord with her own aetherics.

The figure in green was tauro, wreathed in emerald flames that looked as though it blazed from the Green Hells itself.

The two rocketed across the city, just above the skyline. Their passing shattered buildings that had stood for millennia as a testament to the Dominion and their worship of the dragon for which they had named their world. Images of Minos carved in stone and steel were turned to rubble and slag.

They exchanged blasts of aether back and forth as they drew close to one another. When a beam flew wide it turned a swath of the Temple City to boiling glass.

One such lance of power radiated off the emerald-clad tauro, missing its intended target but screaming straight towards Helena.

It was a green circle in the air, a verdant eye that stared down at Lieutenant Istara with a horrible malevolence. She wanted to stand and face her rushing death but all Helena could do was sit and stare back.

The blue power, singing once again in concert with Helena, consumed the oncoming Hells. The midrian in blue stood outlined by his own aetherics clashing with that of the tauro. Whether by chance or on purpose, he stood as a shield for Helena and the rest of Zero-Seven.

The Magus, for what else could he be thought Helena, let out a roar that was heard even above the crackling of aether and the continued war in the skied above. It was more than just noise, more than just the animalistic scream of some struggling creature, the Magus let out a warcry that echoed in his power as well as his voice.

Helena felt it. It coursed through her veins and along her bones. It was a fire that started in her chest, a tired and angry thing that burned hot nonetheless. It was a weight just below her heart with strings that wormed their way down her limbs. A numb tingle that ran across her palms, just beneath the calluses, that made her want to tighten her hands into fists. Most of all it hurt. It hurt with a pain she could not describe but was intimately familiar. It made her throat tighten and her jaw clench. It made her legs tremble and her chest shake. Her eyes filled with tears while her mind filled with memories of the family that had been taken from her.

Beneath the fire and rage. Beneath the pain and hatred. Beneath that unspeakable thing inside of her that drove her to carve mark after mark into her armor.

Beneath all of that, thumping in a twinned baseline to the power of the Magus, Helena Istara felt loss.

That shared pain sang through their aethrics, combining, joining, becoming stronger than either could be by themselves. It was deep and terrible and it was never going away but together, for that moment in the Temple City of Minos, they were not alone.

The blue aetherics of the Magus swelled and consumed the green light of the tauro, an answering pillar of energy coursing back towards the enemy of the Khanus Empire.

Green and blue aetherics swirled into a phantasm of turquoise that created a third, haunting sun above Minos. With a crash that seemed to shake the world, it collapsed and shattered, fragmenting back into the two forms just as they struck the central ziggurat of the Temple City. The top half of the building was obliterated as the two men struck. Helena watched in rigid fascination as there was yet another flare of the two lights that caused her to squint and look away.

When she opened her eyes again, the light was gone and so was the thrum of aetherics from the Magus. It was a hole within her that Helena had not realized was there until now.

Tipping upwards, Helena struggled to find her feet without the Raptor’s ability to autocorrect her balance and posture. She looked around briefly, two instincts now warring within her.

She needed to check on her squad.

She needed to go to the golden ziggurat.

Feeling some of the former aetheric power returning to her Raptor, just a trickle rather than the river she was used to, Helena took a few weary steps.

Finally she said aloud, “Zero-Seven, report.”

Groans and cursing were a guttural sound around her that Helena was just beginning to pick up on. Assault Zero-Seven lay strewn about one side of the roof of the ziggurat, and Helena now saw that most of the far side of the structure had been shorn cleanly away. The others had managed to get their helmets free as well though Mak had ejected himself completely from the Seraph and Renic had stripped off most of his Raptor. Everyone was alive at least, though beyond that, Helena could not be sure of their status.

It was enough though.

Moving across the roof, Helena pulled from her own internal aether, using the flaring emotions that still roared within her to strengthen her limbs and give power to her Raptor. She’d abandoned her helmet so the voices that followed her were not directly in her ear but she could still hear Valis shouting from where he dazedly sat.

“Hel! Where are you going?”

Helena Istara did not answer because she did not entirely know. Her aetherics led her away, following the faintest of hums that harmonized with her own.

The Battle of Minos was over by the time she found him. The Dominion was shattered and broken, their ground forces decimated and their navy routed completely.

Helena stumbled through the ash and ruin of the tauro homeworld until she came into what remained of the golden ziggurat, the highest temple to Minos and the other divine dragons. Within the blasted crater, amidst crumbling stone and melted gold, she found the Magus sitting alone. A corpse lay just beyond him, a tauro of gargantuan proportions dressed in what might once have been ceremonial war-regalia of their highest clergy. It’s eyes were now smoking holes ringed by blackened handprints that had been scorched into its bovine face.

The Magus did not shift as she approached, he simply stared down at his own hands, smeared in the flaking, charred blood of his enemy.

It took her a long moment of starring before Helena realized that she recognized the man. The Magus who had begun this campaign with an oath of vengeance and had served as the speartip across all of Dominion space. Magus Imperia Marcus Crassus Khanus of Verge.

The man that sat before her was not the proud bastion of Legion courage and Imperial honor that waded through the propaganda holos though. Nor was he the avatar of wrath and rage that had strode into the office of Commander Honnius over a cycle ago. No. This was none of those things.

This huddled figure, weeping silent tears that streaked his ash-covered face, was the pain and loss of everyone the tauro had hurt.

Helena felt that pain, she knew that loss but in this man it was a weight and a burden that had broken him. She knew now that vengeance did not heal those wounds. That perhaps nothing would.

Stepping forward slowly, Helena reached out with her aetherics, feeling the power radiating from the Magus even from a half a dozen meters away. She let that energy wash over her, wrap about her own aura and mingle with it.

She did not speak because there were no words that could possibly express how either of them felt. Not here. Not in this place.

The aether between them, auras of blue and purple, swirled and joined. The song of their power creating a symphony of emotion that rose and fell. It swept through them and over them. Two souls laid bare in this place of absolute destruction.

Helena Istara did not speak. She communed.

Taking a shaking breath, Marcus finally looked up. His tear streaked face found Helena’s own and he licked his lips, swallowing as if preparing to talk.

Helena shook her head and took several more steps towards him, finally coming close enough to kneel and take the hands of the demigod. They looked into each other’s eyes. The violet normally reserved for wizards. The blue so dark as to drown the deepest oceans.

Both pairs of eyes held the pain of loss and they had both drank from the cups of revenge, finding them empty. They were both broken, left hollow by bloodshed, but nothing that had happened could quench the embers of pride that still smoldered within them.

They were midrian. They were of the Khanus Empire. They were Legion.

Together they could be strong where they might otherwise falter. Side by side they could continue on where all else would fade. With one another they could conquer even the bleak feelings that would drag them down into oblivion.

Today would not be the day that they fell.

“Rise.” said Helena, her voice barely a whisper.

His hands still in hers, the Magus came up. He stood slowly, as though the weight of the entire Dragon’s Wake pressed down on his shoulders. With a new fire now alight in his eyes, he rose.

The Magus and the warmage were standing side by side when the recovery craft finally found them, alive and reborn in the ashes of Minos.

Chapter Fifteen

Marcus desperately tried to change reality. With every fiber of his being he willed the universe to be different. For the face in front of him to be different, for those eyes to be a different color, for it to be Helena behind the barrel of the rifle. He wanted all of those things to change and he spent a silent moment straining against the truth that was staring him down.

Nothing changed.

Diana stood just to one side of the kitchen, the exposed aethite of her gun glowing with a primed shot. As she stared at him, studying him with the cold, predatory eyes of a shark, she tightened her grip on the rifle and trained it more precisely towards his head.

“What are you?” asked Helena’s sister.

Marcus just stood, still too dumbstruck to muster any kind of response.

“Not a doppelganger, you’re not pretty enough.” said Diana with a calculating tone in her voice. “So you’ve either had work done to look like him or you’re Marcus Crassus, who is dead. Either way it begs the question, what are you? A look alike or a dead man?”

There was a buzzing sound of the scattershot firing behind them in the first room of the house and then Mel’s frantic cursing as she came flying into the kitchen.

“Queen’s tits, Marcus what-” The pixie’s words died as soon as she saw Diana.

“A dead man then.” said Diana, lowering her rifle slightly but still holding it at her side.

“Diana!” shouted Regis Gaius from behind them. He stormed into the room, looking flustered but not any worse for wear. He brandished the scattershot inexpertly, aiming at a point between the former Magus and pixie as though he could not decide which to shoot first.

“Hold.” said Diana. “Regis, hold.”

Marcus blinked several times, looking back and forth between the two other midrians with weapons aimed at him.

Diana Istara. Helena’s sister.

It just wasn’t sinking in.

The trail he had been following, every lead and scrap of information he had found over the last four cycles had lead him here. He had contacted slavers and fleshmongers and worse, from the edges of the Empire to what had once been Dominion space in the Eastern Reach. It had not lead him to the woman he loved, but to her sister.

“Tower and Void.” cursed Mel from where she floated near Marcus. “What in the Green Hells is going on here?”

“I could ask you the same thing.” said Diana evenly, exchanging a look with Regis that now looked concerned. “You’re not with the Empire then?”

“Empire?” asked Mel. “What? No. What?”

“Diana?” asked Regis, his scattershot still wavering. “What is going on?”

“*Diana*?” parroted Mel incredulously, finally pausing to take in the woman in front of them. “Oh fuck.”

Finally lowering the barrel of her rifle, Diana turned away and reached behind a counter for a large duffle bag. She slung it over her shoulder as she said, “We’re leaving. They’ll be here any second.”

“Who?” asked Marcus numbly, only able to muster up the one word.

There was a brief flash of contempt in the look Diana gave him but it reverted to that same steely expression as she shouldered passed him. “Weren’t you listening?” she said. “The Empire is here. They’ve had a team on me for days but your little entrance will force their hand, they don’t want anyone escaping in the confusion.”

“What confusion?” asked Mel just as the whine of rapidly halting trans sounded from the shattered front door.

Marcus did not even turn to look, he knew it would be Ark and his mercs coming for them. Not that it mattered now. Helena was dead.

That simple fact hit him like a ton of bricks, heavy and oppressive, squeezing all the air and thought out of him at once. He just kept staring at Diana, completely unsure of what was left for him in the galaxy anymore.

Mel turned to look back the way they had come and saw the dwarf coming out of one of the black trans almost before it stopped moving. Flanked by two mercs, he moved towards the front door of the house, a stubby handgun drawn.

Whipping back around she glanced from Marcus’ dumbfounded face to Diana’s hard expression as she moved towards a back door.

Everything was happening too fast. Even for Mel it seemed absurd. Helena was not here but her sister was? It was ridiculous. Coincidence did not even begin to cover it.

There was shouting from out front, something about taking the fairy alive, and that got Mel moving. She swooped towards Marcus and smacked at her friend’s ear as charged shots of aether began to pour through the front door towards them.

“Marcus, move!” shouted Mel, knowing by the dimness in his eyes that he wasn’t really there. He was somewhere in his mind, probably still reeling from the lack of Helena. But they did not have time for the former Magus to go withdrawing into himself right now.

Zipping around behind him, Mel tried shoving him forward, bouncing uselessly off the small of his back.

Shots from the advancing mercs hit Marcus ineffectually, only serving to scorch his clothing further and force him to stumble several steps towards the back wall of the kitchen.

Mel tried to force him towards where Diana and Regis had fled, towards a back door in a mudroom just off the kitchen. Diana was just getting the door open when Mel flew over to her in desperation.

“Diana. Help.” said the pixie pleadingly, “Please, he won’t move.”

Shooting a frozen look over her shoulder, Diana glanced quickly back at the stupefied Marcus who had now just sagged against the countertop and sat huddled beneath its edge. Shots of aether in a rainbow of colors flashed around him, obliterating the cabinets to either side but leaving the former Magus unharmed.

The cold shell on Diana’s face cracked for a moment as she watched but reasserted itself as she turned with liquid grace.

Her motions practiced and efficient, Diana threw her back against the opening that separated the kitchen from the front area of the house. She waited half a second, seeming to find the pattern in the mercenaries’ shooting, then leaned out to take two precise shots as she wheeled across the aperture. She arrived at the other side of the opening, now opposite where Marcus sat, her back now against another counter as she crouched to be fully behind cover.

“Regis!” she shouted. “Suppression on my mark.”

The lanky midrian with the scattershot scrambled forward haphazardly, almost tripping over his billowy merchants robes. He clutched at the larger gun desperately as he took up the position Diana had just vacated.

“Now!” screamed Diana as she moved towards Marcus.

Regis leaned out into the opening and fired his scattershot in the general direction of their attackers. Three blasts in rapid succession filled the small kitchen with buzzing noise and the crack of exploding polywood and clay.

Without thinking, Mel shot forward, throwing up her hand in a blur of flexing motions. The invisible cloud of nanites that surrounded her reacted instantly, creating the shimmering field of a veil around Regis. She growled and focused, hand twitching in the spasmodic micro-movements which let her control the nanite webbing. It spread and thinned, covering not only Regis but the entire opening into the kitchen. They wouldn’t be invisible but the distortion should make hitting them a lot harder.

Regis took the opportunity to fire randomly through the warped space. The mercs returned fire but their shots all went wide. One lucky shot was all they needed to kill anyone other than Marcus though.

Looking frantically over her shoulder, Mel saw Diana leaning down in front of the former Magus. She took half a glance at him before she bellowed, “Magus Imperia Marcus Crassus Khanus! You need to move, now! Your Empress demands it!”

His eyes did not quite lose their empty sheen but they refocused on the face in front of him. Mel could not see what exactly transpired behind those deep blue eyes, she was already straining with the effort of keeping her quasi-veil up as aether bolts danced through it constantly, all she saw was that he got up, nodded once and followed Diana towards the back door.

The world was gray for Marcus, everything washed out in a grainy film that dominated his mind. He did not think, he could not think, thinking was for those whose grasp on reality was far less tenuous. His rank and title had cut though the fugue.

Magus Imperia Marcus Crassus Khanus of Verge. ID number: 6819-3217-0.

The old litany is what got him up off the floor and gave motion to his body. He numbly felt the aether as it had struck and even now, as more shots cascaded through the kitchen around him, they were only a dull sensation on his skin.

Combat. He was in combat. Combat was something he could handle. It was familiar, somehow reassuring. The thrill, the motion, the soldier. These were things Marcus Crassus knew as old friends.

It did not require thought. It only required instinct and action. These things came easily as centuries of Legion life asserted itself.

Marcus threw his arm forward, catching a bolt before it could strike Diana. He was not aware of what he did. It was all instinct. All reaction.

He drove forward, shielding Diana as they made their way across the kitchen. There was shouting from somewhere. Mel? Others? The pace of the incoming gunfire changed but Marcus only spared it enough attention as to account for his unthinking motion.

Mel was at his side. Diana moved in front of him. Regis Gaius took up a position at their rear. Marcus’ hand drew his revolver in a fluid motion and he held it down at his side with two hands.

Diana’s eyes met his. They traded a nod. She moved to stand in front of the door, rifle raised. Marcus stood to one side, ready to throw it open.

There was a silent count to three between the two of them and then Marcus flung the door open, moving aside so that Diana had a clear shot. Without hesitation she fired three times at a target Marcus could not see.

“Lykins!” shouted Diana, though her voice was nearly downed out by the pain-filled roar that sounded from outside.

Mel had to stifle her own scream as the back door opened.

Basheen Grimm, flanked by two midrians and another lykin, stood just outside the back door, their weapons drawn.

The sight of the massive black furred wolf-man was enough to cause Mel to panic but what truly startled her was his appearance. This wasn’t the same Basheen they had encountered on Saul’s Rock a cycle ago, dressed in worn leathers and leading his savage pack of killers. The monster that stood in the way of their escape was a professionally equipped, tactically geared Finder. The double-dragon insignia of the Khanus Empire was emblazoned on a patch near his shoulder. He was dressed in a form fitting tac-polyweave combat suit not unlike the one Mel used to wear and he wielded a huge Zol-Khan Industries gun that was probably rated as an anti-armor weapon.

He took two of Diana’s three shots in the chest but his muzzled face bobbed to one side to avoid the last, potentially lethal bolt.

Letting out a deafening roar of pain and surprise, Basheen and the other Finders behind him dove aside as Diana let loose a barrage of continued fire. They took cover behind a low wall that circled the house’s small back yard and began to return fire just as Marcus slammed the door shut.

“Of course.” said Mel, some panic slipping into her voice. “Of fucking course. He’s a Queens’ Cursed Finder. Hells. Shit. Piss. Fuck.”

She spat curses continuously as she flew back and forth above Marcus. He stared blankly at the door and then looked back towards Diana, seeming to look to her to take the lead.

For her part, Diana took a breath and focused to bring her rifle back up to full charge. She glanced back towards the kitchen where the shouts of Ark were becoming more audible.

Mel watched Helena’s sister intently, noting the way she concealed any thought or emotion on her face, it made her impossible to read. With Marcus it was easy to tell when and what he was thinking; it was written all over his face. But with Diana it was like trying to interpret the emotions of a golem, there was only a blank expression followed by smooth, controlled action.

Thinking back, Mel tried to recall what she knew of Helena’s sister. She had been in the Legion, Mel was sure of that, but aside from that fact she was drawing a fairly hard blank where Diana’s background was concerned. Observing her now it was apparent that the older Istara had some very extreme training, both physically and emotionally.

“Move away,” Diana said, “and watch my back.”

Regis continued to look anxiously back towards the kitchen and Marcus moved to lean against the back door as he locked it.

Mel flew down to hover close to Diana, getting her attention with a buzzing snap from her wings.

“What’s the plan?” asked the pixie.

Diana gave her that same shark-eyed stare but Mel did notice the hand that held her rifle twitch briefly.

“We’re getting out.” said Diana simply.

“And then?” asked Mel, frustration making her words into a growl.

“Then we go our way and you go yours.” said Diana, turning her stare towards the side wall of the mudroom.

“But what about the Finders?” asked Mel. “Or the mercs?”

“Not my problem.” said Diana flatly as she pushed aside a box of dirty laundry and an empty coat rack, exposing more of the wall.

“Fuck that!” said Mel, shouting despite herself. “We crossed Void and Green Hells to find you!”

That drew Diana’s attention back and there was a flicker of emotion on her face. “What?”

“Well, not you…” said Mel in an aggravated tone. “Helena. We were looking for her. But we found you.”

There was half a second where Diana’s mask cracked and her brow furrowed. Her mouth formed into half a grimace and she swallowed with a wretched expression. The steel reasserted itself on her face and she said three words that were almost a croak, “Helena is dead.”

Her eyes snapping between Mel and Marcus, Helena’s sister seemed to do some quick thinking before she said, “Fine. Keep close once we break out.”

Mel was about to start asking about what she meant by *break out* when gunfire sounded behind her.

“They’re coming!” shouted Regis, taking a few shots back through the kitchen.

At the same time Marcus let out a grunt as something threw itself against the door he was holding shut. Even with the first strike Mel could see cracks in the door frame. There was a roar from outside as the door rattled again.

“Close your eyes!” shouted Diana, holding her free hand up to the wall.

Mel did not. She watched as Diana turned her head away and drew every last drop of aether from her rifle and channeled it into the wall. Violent pink light erupted in a rough rectangle in front of her and there was a sound like a thousand miniature autosaws revving up at once.

Just as another booming hit struck the back door, Diana shouted, “Marcus, wall!”

Flinging himself away from the door, Marcus charged the section of wall Diana had just weakened. The square outline of what she had done gave Marcus a clear target as he drove his shoulder forward.

Suddenly everything was a crashing discord. The wall fell outwards, Marcus’ weight sending it and him moving in unison towards the ground. The back door flew off its hinges, smashing into the opposite wall with the force of the hit Basheen Grimm had just delivered. The lykin toppled into the mudroom as if he had not expected the lack of resistance. Bolts of aether began pouring in from the kitchen as the dwarf’s mercenaries pressed the attack.

In the abrupt chaos, Mel stuck close to Diana as she followed Marcus out. Helena’s sister stood over the former Magus, rifle coming back up to full charge as she swept it towards the back of the house. She fired a quick burst at someone Mel could not see.

“Up!” barked Diana to Marcus.

Mel hovered close by as her friend rose on shaky legs.

“Diana!”shouted Regis from back inside the house.

Diana barely spared him a glance as she maintained a steady stream of fire back towards the Finders. Though Mel could now see that only one of the midrians had yet to follow Basheen inside. The other Finders, including Basheen Grimm, now stood between Regis Gaius and escape.

The skinny midrian managed one panicked look towards Diana before he raised his scattershot at the huge lykin in front of him.

Diana shouted something but Mel did not hear it over a sudden flurry of gunfire, Finders, mercs and Regis all shooting at once.

When the haze of discharging energy cleared one of the midrian Finders was dead, as was Regis Gaius. The two lykins had ducked out the back door once again and Mel could hear their growling barks as they moved to regroup beyond the low wall.

“Move!” said Diana as she turned and ran, sprinting back towards the road.

Marcus, still moving on autopilot, followed Diana doggedly and left Mel hovering just outside the ruined house for half a moment.

Mel spared a look back at Regis Gais’ remains. She hadn’t known the midrian, hadn’t even had time to introduce herself, but he had died trying to get them and Diana to safety.

Swallowing a hard lump in her throat, Mel sped away, a silver streak diving after Marcus Crassus and Diana Istara.

Chapter Sixteen

Marcus found himself breathing heavily, staring down at the intricate patterns of a rug. Diamond and rhombus patterns made of a rainbow of dots, white trees with all of their roots connected and small green spirals in the space between them all. The repeating pattern was contained within concentric rings all of which surrounded a strange symbol at the rug’s center. It reminded Marcus of outstretched hands holding a bowl or perhaps fingers grasped around an eye.

He stared numbly at the rug, which covered almost the entire floor in the small room where they waited. Without quite realizing what he was doing he leaned down and touched the woven fabric with his left hand. Its stitching was course and irregular though the details contained on its surface spoke to the care that was taken in its construction. This was not some mass produced polyweave either, the fibers had a feel to them that no synthetic material could quite match. Bovyak fur perhaps?

Yet again Marcus was reminded of the rustic qualities of his homeworld.

Herds of the huge wooly beasts had roamed in the fields south of Marcus’ home and he had vague memories of teasing them with his siblings until one of the Crassus children could get behind the creature and scale its long, shaggy tail.

He tried to picture the faces of his brothers and sisters and felt suddenly sick when he could not.

Licking his lips, Marcus finally looked up at his surroundings as he tried to evade his blurry memories. He sat in a small antechamber of some kind, a circular room with three doors equidistant from each other around its circumference. The seat beneath him was actually a bench that ran the length of the wall in between the doors to his left and right; similar benches stretched between the other sections of wall as well. Each bench was padded with thin, utilitarian cushions with one or two throw pillows a piece. The walls were unadorned and they slopped upwards so that the ceiling was actually more of a conical dome. At its apex hung a small ornament that looked like one of the ceremonial pieces used by Steder druids and shamans called a Waeth’ort; named for the Stedgod, Waeth. It was made from beads of wood, stone and aethite tied together by lines of sinew that all connected to an oval of woven pieces of the same. Looking closer at the slowly rotating Waeth’ort, Marcus saw that this one was mostly made of pale wood and glowing pieces of charged aethite. It was also floating freely near the ceiling, not actually suspended by anything other than a field of invisible aether.

Mel lay sprawled on the cushion to his right, the Sidhe implants that amplified her voice making her snores seem as though they were coming from a much larger sleeping body. Helena was… no. Not Helena. Diana. He had found Diana.

Marcus shook his head and felt hot tears in his eyes. He took a breath through his nose, trying to force the pain down. It was like trying to swallow a river. There was too much and it just kept coming.

He leaned back, his head thumping against the wall with a hollow sound that made Mel snort and shift slightly as she slept.

Staring blankly up at the Waeth’ort, Marcus tried not to think of anything, to lose himself in the gentle motion of the pieces spinning around like planets around a star.

One small piece of aethite in the contraption dimmed as Marcus watched and before it had even made one more rotation around the center it went dark.

“A shame.” said a craggy voice to Marcus’ right.

His head jerked down, looking over at the man that now stood just inside the door closest to Marcus. He was an orc, gray skinned and broader in the shoulder than any midrian but shorter as well, standing a head shorter than Marcus. His features were blunt and abrupt with a short, almost piggish nose and a pair of large eyes set wide over a jaw that jutted out to reveal a short pair of tusks sticking up from his bottom lip. Large, slightly pointed ears stuck out on either side of his bald head. Like most orcs Marcus had ever seen this one was dressed in a simple sleeveless shirt that revealed his long, burly arms and a pair of homespun pants that were tucked neatly into a pair of worn, calf-height boots.

For a long moment the orcish man just stared up at the Waeth’ort, watching as the burnt-out aethite ceased its spinning, arms clasped behind his back. Marcus studied the orc dully, unsure of what to make of him but sure that he barely had the capacity to form any opinions right now.

Finally, Marcus just settled on nodding and looking back up at the Waeth’ort as well.

The presence of the orc confirmed what Marcus thought he remembered about their flight from Helena’s… Diana’s house. She had led them to the monastery near the center of Panimberg. The trip had been made at a near dead sprint the entire way and at some point Marcus’ had just let go, giving his brain over to the blind, numbing ecstasy of the pain screaming in his legs and chest. His body had kept running but his mind had fled. All he had now was scattered images of following Diana, her blond hair whipping back and forth behind her back in a whipcord pendulum.

At the doors of the monastery her voice had cracked with tearful emotion and a story had come pouring out. It had been a tale of heartfelt loss and sacrifice. A master falling in love with his servant. Their affection destroying the lines of class and protocol. Poor Diana, once a soldier in the Empire’s Legion. Captured. Enslaved. Through all of that she finds love in the arms of Regis Gaius only to have it stripped away as the Empire comes for this world, removing anything that could pose a threat to their invasion. Like a sitting member of the planetary merchants council in possession of a former high ranking legionnaire. They had been about to leave, buying transport aboard a ship captained by Marcus. But everything had come undone. Regis was dead and the Empire still wanted her gone.

So tragic. So sad.

It had been a good act.

The pain in Diana’s voice had been enough to shake Marcus from his fugue and he could remember dully supporting her story, holding her shaking shoulders as she wept, Mel emphatically agreeing.

For almost a full minute Marcus was able to pretend that the trembling form he held was Helena’s. Then he had looked into her eyes. Those twin pools of swirling, storm tossed waters that held no trace of emotion. No fear of their situation. No sadness at Regis’ death. No relief when the orcs agreed to let them inside.

Diana was nothing like her sister.

Helena did not flatten her emotions, smothering them away, she rode the waves of her feelings. She found the peaks and valleys of her thoughts and used them to heighten her aetherics, using swells of anger and love and despair and happiness to strengthen herself in ways that few others could. Many aethericists, Marcus’ old teacher Viktus Null included, believed that emotional control was the key to using one’s aetherics reliably. Helena had been the exception to the rule, or perhaps its very pinnacle, Marcus had never been sure.

Her sister was Null’s ideal. There was nothing there that Diana did not control, every scrap of feeling bound up behind that mask of steel she wore as soon as the orcs had looked away.

She had wiped away tears as though they had been dirt on her cheeks and that was when Marcus had lost himself again.

“All things must fade.” said the orc.

Marcus could not even manage to look back towards him as he asked, “What?”

“You cry for what is lost.” said the orc, with a gesture towards the ceiling that Marcus caught out of the corner of his eye. “There is no need. All things fade and disperse. One day we all must return to the aether.”

Next to him, Marcus heard Mel stirring and he finally found the energy to look back down at the orc. As he did, he realized that he was indeed crying. Not sobbing, his breathing was normal, but tears streamed down from his eyes and there was nothing he could do to stop them.

His throat felt tight as he touched his own face.

Bounty had been the last place to look. From this point on he had no where else to go, no where else to search. He could barely even comprehend what that meant.

She was gone.

Helena was gone.

“Marcus?” said Mel from the cushion next to him, her voice still muzzy with sleep. “Everything okay?”

“Master Ruk bade me gather you.” said the orc, giving Mel a warm smile as she turned suddenly to look at him. “I deemed it well to let you rest a moment more.”

“Oh,” said Mel, rubbing at her eyes as her wings buzzed to shift her upright. “Thanks?”

“You’re welcome.” said the orc with a slight bow. “Come, best not to keep the Master waiting too long. She is a forgiving sort but it is best not to abuse such a trait.”

Mel turned to look back up at Marcus just as he rubbed at his own face, trying to staunch the tears. When his hand came away he could see a quick tide of emotions course across the pixie’s face.

Alarm. Confusion. Pain. Anger. Sadness.

“Marcus?” she said again, this time in a quite, worried tone.

Taking in a shaking breath through his nose, Marcus licked his lips again and tried to speak. He tried to assure Mel that everything was all right, that he would be fine.

The words wouldn’t come.

It was a lie that he had told her countless times in the last three cycles and one that he had told himself over and over since Alessia’s assassination almost two decades ago. The lie was over now and the truth left Marcus silent, only able to shake his head as he took another breath.

All the same, he stood, continuing to wipe at his face as he found his footing after a brief moment of wavering balance.

When he moved it was with a shuffling gait, his whole body dragging at him like there were anchors tied to his limbs. He felt a trembling at his core that had nothing to do with his sobriety. It was a quavering in the deepest pits of his guts. A broken hunger for something that he knew no longer existed.

Helena was well and truly gone from him. Any pillar of support she might have been for the former Magus no longer existed. Marcus Crassus was slowly collapsing and he could feel it as every centimeter of him crumbled beneath the weight of centuries.

The orc led them down a gradually sloping hallway that quickly emptied out into an even larger hall that dominated the bulk of the monastery’s interior. As they moved down a thoroughfare off to the side of the Great Hall, partitioned by small sections of wall made of some lightly stained wood, Mel glanced around as dozens of other orcs moved about.

They were all dressed similarly to their guide, simple homespun garments that had a roughness about them that spoke to their hand crafted nature. Most moved about performing small tasks; sweeping, tending to incense holders mounted around the space or moving crates of refined aethite towards a stack at the front of the monastery.

Mel eyed the crates with a spark of curiosity. She had never actually been inside an orcish monastery and it was far plainer than she had thought it would be. Though, based on every orc she had ever met, she shouldn’t have been surprised. It was a strange polarization. On one hand the orcs, at least the ones who chose the monastic lifestyle that the majority of their kind seemed to prefer, lived very simple lives. And yet on the other hand they produced some of the best quality aethite in the galaxy through a means that no one quite understood, making them outrageously wealthy.

It had something to with their ability to layer and compact the crystalline form of aethium to a point that no other manufacturer in the Dragon’s Wake could match. Aethite like that could be used to create complex and intricate chems that took up half the space of their traditionally crafted counterparts.

What Mel would not give to sneak a peak at whatever the orcs did to the aethite behind closed doors. It was a secret that some of the larger corporations would literally kill for, though these days none of them were stupid enough to try. Mel had seen worlds crippled or worse when an Exodus was sparked by some half-charged moron deciding the best way to get what they wanted was to invade orc privacy and take orc lives.

Orcs helped fertilize baron lands. Orcs helped teach in public schools. Orcs helped in free clinics. Orcs helped feed the destitute. Orcs helped those in need.

Orcs helped. It was an unwritten law somewhere in the galaxy.

But when people, for whatever reason, made the orcs feel unwanted, they left. No fight or conflict, they would just pack up and leave by the thousands, going where their services would be better appreciated.

Which is why Mel resisted the temptation to slip away and do a little extracurricular spying; she didn’t need an Exodus from Bounty on top of everything else right now. Especially when it seemed like the people who needed the orcs the most right now, was them.

She and Marcus were led up the Great Hall towards a pair of ornately carved double doors that let them into the gardens at the center of the monastery. The garden was why the monastery almost took up an entire city block in Panimberg, the long oval of the building curving around the carefully tended section of wildlife.

Trees, the first Mel had seen since breaking atmo earlier today, lined the inner walls of the monastery, sheltering dozens of other doorways that led to other wings of the building. Small ponds dotted the cultivated landscape, each surrounded by neatly trimmed shrubbery and specifically placed boulders or rocky outcroppings. Small birds flitted through the air and Mel even saw a small family of owlbears eating from some bowls of food that must have been placed out for them. The strange creatures, with the stubby bodies of something like a badger and the wide-eyed heads of owls, gave out contented hooting sounds as Mel passed.

Orcs were here and there tending to the garden’s needs and Mel felt as though the entire space was like some kind of snapshot into Bounty’s past, before it had been properly transformed into an agworld.

At the center of everything was a thin tree that looked downright scrawny in comparison to some of the others that grew near the garden’s perimeter. Its pale bark and leaves that grew in a profusion of unseasonal colors marked it as a drasil tree. Its slender branches grew upwards and outwards in a wiry expanse that always presented the illusion of the tree’s slender limbs passing through one another.

Beneath the tree another orc sat on a small stone bench that let her lean back onto the trunk of the drasil. She was a frail, thin thing, with arms barely thicker than some of the higher branches of the tree. Her features were softer than those of some of the younger orcs Mel had seen though the pixie wasn’t sure if that was just how orcs aged or if this one in particular had been of the rarer type of orc that looked far more like midrians. She had wispy hair that, despite its thinness, remained a deep, pure black and she held a gnarled walking stick over her lap.

Their guide stopped a few meters away and bowed deeply as he said, “Master Ruk, I have brought the young lady’s companions as you requested.”

The wizened Master Ruk nodded. “Thank you Torg. That will be all, you may return to your duties.”

Torg straitened and turned, leaving the pixie and midrian standing before the ancient orc Master in an awkward silence punctuated by birdsong and the occasional distant hoot of an owlbear.

Master Ruk seemed to study each of them in turn, first Marcus, then Mel, her eyes drinking in every detail. After a brief eternity her gaze met Mel’s and that was when the pixie finally noticed the slight scaring over the orc’s pupils, giving them an opaque color. Master Ruk was blind.

When the Master finally spoke it was in a kind, soft voice, lacking any of the accusation that generally accompanied the question she asked. “So what brings a Magus and one of Air’s folk out to my corner of the Wake?”

Chapter Seventeen

Greg watched silently as the two black trans approached the berth, one of them trailing smoke and moving erratically. That was not a good sign. Rising from where he had been sitting next to the berth’s entrance, the ogre began moving just as the trans pulled to a stop. Red’s Dogs began pouring out and a quick headcount revealed that they were four short, though Red Bartlett himself emerged with a snarl twisted around his cigar.

Greg did not see Ark as the last of the mercs emptied out of the trans and there was a brief moment of panic in the ogre’s mind. He forced his tightening nerves to settle down as Bartlett turned towards the opposite tran and shouted, “You didn’t say no nothing about no Finders, dwarf!”

Ark almost fell out of the tran and took a quick moment to still his trembling hands. Greg could see his employer was shaken though he could not tell if it was from anger or fear.

Turning with a snarl of his own, Ark snapped, “What do you think I’m paying you cretins for? I told you there might be Imperials involved.”

“It ain’t that. ‘Perial entanglements we can handle.” said Red, crossing his arms and chomping down on his cigar. “Finders ain’t that. Finders is worse.”

Ark made a dismissive slashing motion with his hand and said, “The mission hasn’t changed. It’s the ship I want and the fairy unlocks the ship. Send your men out into the city, I want them found.”

Tromping away from where the mercenary leader still glowered, Ark made his way towards the berth, passing Greg without a word.

Sparing a glance back at Red’s Dogs, Greg could see them converging on their leader and conversing in hushed, angry tones. Then he turned to follow Ark inside, catching up with the khag’s shorter strides before he made it half way to the *Amal’hiam*.

“I take it things did not progress smoothly.” said Greg softly.

Ark grumbled unintelligibly as he made for his device still attached to the front airlock of the ship, snatching it off to stare at it. After a long quiet moment he slapped the device back onto the ship and fumed.

“It makes no rusted sense!” he finally burst out.

“What doesn’t?” asked Greg.

Ark waved his arms around in an all encompassing gesture. “All of it! All of this! This cursed galaxy. Every misbegotten stretch of this dirt-ridden place!”

Letting out a long sigh, the khagrish Prospector pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes.

“What exactly happened out there?” asked Greg with as much care as he could. This was not the first time he had seen Arkon-no-Sek like this. He did not speak about it much, but from what Greg was able to glean from simple proximity to the khag, his homeworld was a much different place than the rest of the galaxy. Ordered, specific, regimented. These were the watchwords of New Khagrin. And clean, Greg was not overly fond of filth himself but Ark turned cleanliness into a religion. From time to time the differences from his home seemed to overwhelm the khag in a kind of frustrated homesickness.

Greg supposed he could understand, it had been a terribly long time since his exile from Gobwor.

“We cornered them in some house, maybe of the woman he’s been searching for.” said Ark through clenched teeth. “We had them, Cogfather take me, we *had* them.”

“Then the Finders appeared?” finished Greg.

Ark nodded. “They came in through the back. I think we were after the same thing and we started shooting at each other in the crossfire. The pixie got away in the confusion. The Finders pulled back as soon as it was obvious they had gotten away.”

“Finders.” said Greg darkly. “You are sure they were Finders?”

Nodding again, Ark turned to look back out towards Panimberg with a calculating stare. “Their gear matched the descriptions I’ve read.”

“Finders only mean one thing.” said Greg, giving the sky a wary glance.

Ark cracked his knuckles and then began to message his left hand as it twitched slightly. “The Empire is coming.” said the khag. “We need to hurry.”

Greg stared at his employer’s back as Ark bustled towards where Red Bartlett was speaking to his men. Scowling as he looked down at the gear-driven chronometer now strapped to his wrist, the ogre was not looking at the actual time of day but the time left in his Contract. He would be out of Ark’s service long before an Imperial invasion force showed up to take Bounty.

Pulling a small datapad from a pouch near his waist, Greg was careful not to crush the device as it nestled easily in the palm of his hand. It was a self-charging model that did not require any aetheric contact from the user but even still Greg could do little more than prod a its screen to see if he had any new messages or alerts with a special stylus. Without the aetherics of other races even basic technology like this was a small mystery to him, the only reason he had dug the ‘pad out of his gear today was to keep on top of any immediate changes to his Contract.

So far there were none.

What he had received was the usual monthly dispatch from his mother on Gobwor. It was just the mindless gossip that punctuated the court scene in Pinacal, Greg’s hometown. Lord Evanberry’s son was ascending to the head of house come the New Year and Lady Takalmoore was involved in some scandalous new affair with the Shornson’s middle daughter. It barely meant anything to Greg anymore but he still appreciated the familiar names and the way his mother, like most of Gobwor, placed such importance on these things. It made him smile.

There had been a time when he had been the same way.

Scanning the rest of the letter, Greg only paused to absorb the last paragraph, rereading it two times. It was about his father, Lord Gregory Vesuvius Wilhelm Von Statun XII. It was a trivial thing, the family firm was apparently being Contracted by some large corporation, but its mere existence gave Greg pause.

The mention of his father was something mother had forgone in their correspondence since she had first started sending them. By all accounts this was an intentional effort not to rouse any hard feelings Greg may have still possessed. But now it had been a little over a decade and when the ogre warmerc read the news about his father for the fifth time he found that he felt nothing. No anger at his father for not backing him when things had been at their most dire. No grief for the bonds of family that had been so easily destroyed by social niceties.

Greg felt a certain amount of, well not happiness, but satisfied contentment. Perhaps he had finally moved on. It was an odd sensation, to suddenly realize that he was so far removed from what had originally driven him that it no longer mattered.

Later, once he was free for the brief period between Hobs of his Contract, he would have to write his mother back. Perhaps he would even ask after father. Though, then again, perhaps not.

Mel stared at Master Ruk for a long moment; the blind old orc seemed to be looking through them with those milky eyes.

“I’m sorry.” said Mel. “What?”

“A Magus.” said Master Ruk, indicating towards Marcus before turning back to face Mel. “And you, my dear, a servant of the Awa’Baal.”

Mel almost fell to the ground at hearing the Court of Air’s name spoken in High Sidhe. She barely managed to change her trajectory and land on Marcus’ shoulder with nothing resembling grace.

Glancing over at Marcus’ face Mel did not see any surprise or shock there, instead he had a resigned look that wasn’t entirely in the now.

“How-” stammered Mel, trying to put together a sentence that was more than just confused babble. “How did you-”

Master Ruk gave them another kindly smile and said, “These eyes do not lie little miss. The signs are written on your bones and in your auras.”

“Just like Robson.” said Marcus dully and then Mel got it.

Robson Booker was one of the Thirteen. He was also as blind as a worm. He got around strictly by sensing the world around him with his aetherics.

Anyone with the knack for it could do that sort of thing to one extent or another. Though most folk, Mel included, could only feel vague ripples in the aether around them from big distortions of power or exceptionally strong emotions. What Magus Booker had done was different. He, the other Magus and specifically trained wizards or mages could work out the fine details of the world around them by focusing on the ebb and flow of energy. Sometimes the skill seemed like it bordered on precognition or telepathy, especially with those like Robson who had been forced to rely solely on their sixth sense to get around.

Mel had always thought that it was one of the reasons Marcus drank like he did. She would never say as much but she suspected that when he’d lost his aetherics it had been somewhat akin to suddenly going blind and deaf all at once. Even if he had done it unconsciously, Marcus had relied heavily upon his aetherics to observe the world around him. Losing that insight and clarity could not have been easy.

"Just so." said Master Ruk, though Mel was not entirely sure which comment she was agreeing to, Marcus' or her own thoughts. "But the question remains my friends, what has brought your like to my humble abbey?"

Mel glanced nervously at Marcus' faraway look and started in on a version of the story Diana had cooked up. "Well, my friend and I were hired to-"

Before she even managed to get to the meat of the lie, Marcus cut in. "I was searching for someone." he said morosely. "I didn't find her."

At that the wizened orc's face brightened from its easy grin to a genuine smile. "Ah." she said happily. "Finally some truth. The young woman I spoke to before had nothing for me but false tears and false words. Very well trained that one, but a heart of stone weighs heavy I think."

Mel gaped at Master Ruk for a moment. What the old orc had just displayed was impossible as far as the former Spymaster knew. It didn't matter how well you could sense the world with aetherics. If someone trained in controlling their emotions the way Diana seemed to be wanted to hide what they were feeling it took some elaborate and rather invasive technology to find the physiological truth.

"Wha…" started Mel lamely.

Master Ruk's wan grin returned as she said again, "These eyes do not lie." The grin turned a bit sour as she added. "Unlike the woman you arrived here with."

With a few stiff shifting motions, the old orc scooted to one side of the bench and then patted the now vacant half with a pale gray hand. "Come, sit." she said. "There is a story weighing you down Sir Magus, best you got off your feet."

Mel could feel Marcus taking a hard gulp of air beneath her feet and watched as he took several deep breaths through his nose.

"Marcus." she said softly, placing a hand just over his ear. "You don't have to if you don't want to."

She wasn't sure if he actually heard her; his eyes were somewhere, somewhen, else.

After a long moment filled only with the gentle rustle of the drasil tree in the wind, birdsong and the soft hooting of owlbears, Marcus moved forward. In a ragged, slumping motion, he almost fell onto the bench beside the old orc.

Mel flitted up to perch on one of the lowest branches of the drasil, her feet dangling just over Marcus' head. The branch bent slightly at her weight but did not break.

Continuing to stare forward in silence, Mel waited for a long, awkward moment before she looked over at Master Ruk. The orc looked expectant but in no rush.

"I'm sorry." said Mel, trying to fill the silence. "It's been a long day."

"Longer still," said the Master, "for him I think." She gave Marcus a quizzical look and then asked. "What may I call you, Sir Magus?"

Marcus licked his lips. When he finally spoke it was in an arid voice that was just above a whisper.

"My name is Marcus Crassus and I'm not a Magus. Not anymore."

Marcus told his story to Master Ruk. All of it.

He spoke of Aria Sohlus Vania Khanus, the Empress who had pushed him from his service as Captain of the Throneguard to the glory of Magushood. These words were tinged with bitterness and old anger at a regal woman that a young soldier had loved; foolishly thinking that she might feel the same.

He spoke of the so-called "Mad Emperor", Galen Khanus the First, namesake of the current Duke. The first man among the High Houses of Imperia who had won Marcus' respect and admiration by treating him as a man and not some pawn to be manipulated. There was fondness and wistful sighs amongst these recollections. Despite his wild appetites for the unreasonable and his vulgar statecraft, Galen had been the man to introduce Marcus to solarix and put him in charge of guarding all of Imperia.

He spoke of Asana, Galen's niece and Empress in her own right. She had been like a sister to Marcus. They had laughed and growled in equal parts at the Mad Emperor's antics and when she had finally taken the throne Marcus had been deep in the councils of House Khanus. Galen had given Marcus respect but Asana had given him love. The warmth of family that Marcus had not known since becoming the Magus. Though he had worn their name as his own since his transformation, it was Asana that convinced him that he might actually belong.

The words of her death were quiet and remorseful.

Treachery from House Bruthius. The short-lived rebellion that followed. Alessia taking the throne.

Sweet Alessia. Loving Alessia. Beautiful Alessia.

Trusting Alessia. Kind Alessia. Naive Alessia.

She saw the good in everyone around her, Marcus most of all. The Magus was the father figure that stood by her as her biological father's House turned against her.

He was there as she had struck down House Bruthius. He was there as she had begun to balance decades of Imperial debt and lapses in forgotten social programs. He was there as she had negotiated for peace with their ancient enemies, The Minos Dominion.

He had not been there when she died.

A young princess Nassaeya had insisted on the Magus' presence on a diplomatic mission to the Republic of Freeholds.

Her death broke everything.

Marcus' words were choked and tight as he spoke of their return to Imperia.

Black marks had been streaked across the throne room, flagstones and benched seats cracked by the blast that had killed Nassaeya's mother. It would not be until later that they would learn about the zealots the Dominion had created, suicide-magus that could not fully contain the aethium forced into their bodies. A creature such as that could match even the Imperial demigods in aetheric strength but not for long. Sooner or later they erupted with that power.

They were living bombs. Weapons to be used up and discarded for maximum efficiency.

This was what had killed Alessia but again, Marcus had not learned this until later and by then it had hardly mattered.

His voice rose to a fever pitch as he spoke of the Tauro, the hate palpable. Once upon a time this lack of emotional control would have literally made the air around him crackle with excess aether.

Eyes focusing at a point that no one else could see, his words were strangled to silence when he tried to explain the atrocities he had committed.

Worlds turned to glass.

Populations annihilated.

The utter ruin of the Minos Dominion.

Then Marcus smiled with a brittle grin, because in the desolation of the Temple City on Minos, Helena had found him.

The longing in Marcus' voice as he spoke of his time with Helena was heartbreaking. She had been his everything. Straight forward and more determined than Aria. Caring and loving in a way Asana could not have been with the Magus. Challenging and direct, looking passed his rank and the mystique it held, something Alessia had never managed.

For a time he spoke of happy things. A relationship growing, deep and strong. Tender moments. The complicated simplicity of love.

Then came Atok Delta. One last world burned in the name of the Khanus Empire. That was when three hundred cycles worth of blind obedience had finally come crashing down around Marcus' ears.

When he had been at his weakest he had reached out to find Helena - his support, his pillar - and found her gone. Taken from him when he needed her most.

A wry, mangled smile twisted Marcus' face.

He could see the selfishness in himself now. The uncaring *want* that made him sound like some kind of whining toddler rather than a Magus. Greed had been his sin. That unrestrained, insatiable hunger for his own safe, gray world. Primus forbid that he was ever forced to deal with how his life had turned out.

On Atok Delta he had tried to take the coward's way out.

But the Green Hells had found him wanting and spat him back into the pain and cold of the Dragon's Wake, stripped of his aetherics and alone.

Hope had found him several difficult phases later. He was no longer a Magus. He had simply been a man, wandering the cracks within the core of the Empire, searching for the truth about what had happened during the failed kidnapping of Prince Alexander.

It wasn't much. A note on a report filed away on a dignitary's statement about what had transpired when the Throneguard Captain had been declared Missing In Action.

The pirates that had tried to kidnap Alexander Khanus had failed. It was unclear why. The Prince had been recovered later in an escape pod by a Legion recovery team. Before they had arrived though, many of the diplomats and higher ranking crew of the Prince's cruiser had been taken prisoner by the pirates.

Taken to be sold into slavery.

Many of these had never been found.

Records were scattered and it was nearly impossible for a dead man like Marcus Crassus to ascertain the absolute truth.

It was not a flame of hope, it was an ember. Still hot but waning in the cold of the Wake.

Marcus' final words were of Mel. Reliable, dependable Mel. Always there when he looked. He spoke of the miracle of coincidence that had brought them back together.

"I would have never made it this far without her." he said quietly, looking up through the wiry branches of the drasil tree at the ruddy twilight sky.

He did not hear his friend's silent tears from just above his head.

Chapter Eighteen

Mel wiped at her face, trying to force her eyes to stop leaking. It was downright embarrassing. Crying was for those fey who belonged in the Courts of Water or Fire. She was of Air damn it. Even if she was technically a Ban'sidhe.

Despite these thoughts Marcus' words still cut into her. She had never heard the whole story before.

Her friend had only ever shared bits and pieces of it at a time, though what she hadn't known for certain she had guessed easily enough. The only truly new piece to all of it was the context. It was one thing to know the story, having lived through most of it, but it was quite another to hear it told in Marcus' voice. Sometimes full of wistful happiness, sometimes strangled by grief and sometimes quiet with barely contained rage.

And there were some things that the former Magus' point of view shed light on. Thoughts and feelings that Mel barely had the capacity to understand, let alone imagine feeling herself.

Aria. Galen. Asana. Alessia.

The last four rulers of the Khanus Empire before Nassaeya were names and faces in Mel's memory. They bore little resemblance to the characters Marcus described. It was part of the reason she was still crying, she knew.

They had worked and lived side by side for the better part of three centuries and it was only those scant events in the last seventy or so cycles that she truly appreciated on an emotional level. Marcus' love for Alessia. His rage after her death. The Shattering. These were the things she thought she had a handle on. Everything before that though?

Mel wasn't even sure if the person back then qualified as being her. The tight chord of Sidhe control had still been wrapped tightly around her neck.

That was why Mel cried.

Not because she did not remember the things that Marcus spoke of as he told his story to Master Ruk, but because they meant nothing to her.

The memories of her early career as the Spymaster were a silent slideshow within her mind. Data was attached to those pieces of her past, names and dates she deemed important, but there was no resonance. No emotions to color the experiences.

It was painful in a way she could not put words to.

Sniffing loudly, Mel tried furiously to stop crying but only succeeded in drawing the gaze of Master Ruk from below. The blind orc looked at her with those sightless eyes with an expression Mel could not read. The look faded quickly into that kind smile she had worn when they had first approached her.

"Anything to add little miss?" asked Ruk, still gazing up at Mel.

For the first time in hours Marcus' also turned to look up. As he turned his head awkwardly to glance up at Mel he noted how the sky had changed as well. Midday had come and gone and now the sun was moving down towards the horizon. There was still plenty of daylight left, but several hours had passed.

What was more concerning was his friend's face. Blotchy and tear-streaked, Mel looked heartbroken even as she rubbed at her face with a sleeve. It was not an expression Marcus had ever seen on her face.

"Mel." he said softly.

"Umm. Haha." started the pixie, trying to force a laugh through her obvious pain. "No. I think he pretty much summed it up."  
 Marcus wanted to stand. He wanted to grab Mel, hold her and tell her everything was going to be all right.

Half a dozen thoughts rushed into his head, stopping his ascent.

He was too big and she was too small. He didn't even know what was wrong. Did she even need comforting? Did the feyfolk even express emotions the same way mortals did?

Worst of all was the nagging little voice that still plagued him, saying that nothing would ever be all right ever again.

Buzzing up into the air, Mel's voice cracked as she spoke in a deluge of words. "Sorry. Must be allergies. Damn drasils, get me every time. Excuse me a second."

Mel flew away, whirling off towards one of the ponds they had passed on the way into the center of the monastery's garden.

When Marcus did not rise or go after her, Master Ruk said, "You have *both* had hard lives."

The former Magus nodded with a slack-jawed expression, still staring after Mel.

"Though perhaps," continued the orc, "you are only just realizing that."

Marcus licked his lips and looked back at Master Ruk, not sure what else to say. Finally he asked, "Will you help us?"

"You came to my monastery looking for aid." said the Master solemnly, returning Marcus' gaze with her own. "And you have spoken true to me. Your path is a strange one Marcus Crassus, even were I stricken as you are I would be able to see this. Fate, it seems, has dealt you as cruel a hand as ever I have seen. The Gods only know what the future holds for a man such as you. But here and now, yes, the orcs of Bounty will help you."

Marcus let out a heavy sigh, a weight he had not even known was there lifting from his shoulders. Staring down at the grass beneath his feet, the former Magus suddenly felt very tired. It was a wave of exhaustion that came onto him like a rapid influx of water, washing over his limbs and making his whole body feel heavy. He sagged forward, catching his head in both hands and continued staring down at the ground.

"Thank you." he said wearily.

Master Ruk touched his shoulder with a light hand, though she pulled it away quickly. The old orc rose with a few grunts, leaning heavily on her crooked walking stick as she found her feet.

Still not looking up, Marcus heard her say, "You may stay here a while. I suspect you could use some peace to undo that knot in your mind, but take heed, those that hunt you and your charge will not tarry long. We will need to move quickly if we are to hasten you off this world."

Marcus only reply was a solemn grunt as Master Ruk hobbled away.

His throat was dry and his mind was awash with memories. This was only the second time he had recounted the whole story of his life and it was a draining experience. The first had been with Helena and afterwards she had held him, shouldering some of the weight and giving the Magus a chance to breath for the first time since The Shattering.

But as opposed to the time when he had divulged everything to the newly promoted member of the Throneguard, Marcus only felt tired now. There was no relief from the centuries anymore. It all weighed heavy on his shoulders and pressed his back down.

He struggled to sit up and squirmed to the side so that he could lean against the drasil tree. The warmth of the pale bark eased some of the tension in his neck but the weight wasn't going anywhere.

Closing his eyes, Marcus took in a deep breath through his nose, letting the smells of the monastery wash over him as a gentle breeze flowed through the open space. He felt himself drifting off even as low voices where carried to his ears on the wind.

From the branches of a tree on the perimeter of the garden, Mel watched Marcus lean back and fall asleep. Away and to her right, Master Ruk had ambled towards a door leading into the monastery only to be approached by the same male orc as before. The two engaged in a short conversation that Mel could not make out, even with her enhanced aural receptors. As it ended Master Ruk headed inside and the younger orc struck out across the garden towards a door on the opposite side.

Mel watched all of this, kicking her feet restlessly as they dangled off the branch. She sniffed and wiped at her face again. She did not want to notice anything else. She did not want to take in the six separate exits from the garden or the six, no make that seven, orcs working its grounds or meditating. She did not want to catch the brief flash of Diana's face as the young orc attendant entered a door across from where she sat.

All she wanted was a few Queens' damned minutes to herself, some time to wallow in her own newfound depression and renewed anxiety. Was that too much to ask?

She just couldn't turn it off. The awareness. That heightened sense of things that came not only from her upgraded senses but literal centuries of habit. Normally it was not a problem, her quick observation of detail had got them out of more than a few scrapes over the cycles. Right now though? It was annoying and frustrating and horribly reaffirming for some of Mel's darker thoughts about who she was.

Pain. Anxiety. Stress. Sadness. Anger. Fear.

The flood of emotion came with its usual rapid-fire burst, rolling through her in quick shockwaves of thought.

She was Meliantheena. She was a slave of the Court of Air, a pixie of no real regard. She had been cast aside, discarded. She was a tool with no more purpose, in all likelihood replaced by a newer model. Better, faster, stronger. Somewhere there was another pixie just like her but superior in every way.

Fear. Anger. Fury. Focus. Righteousness. Resolve.

She was *Mel*. She was no one's slave. Not Magus or Empress or twice cursed Queen. She had stood by her friend in defiance of Court and Country. There was no one like her. She was one of a *gods' damned* kind.

The thought made her grin.

Clenching her hands into fists, Mel made a quick snap of her wings to send her upwards a few centimeters to leave her standing on the branch. She paced back and forth on the rough bark, shaking her head and stomping tiny boots until she ran out of branch and took to the air.

Mel streaked across the garden, coming to the door the attendant had gone through. As she alighted on the doors ornately carved frame, she heard two voiced within, one the orc's and the other Diana.

"Well that is good to hear." said Diana, her voice full of the sweet, mournful syrup that had gained them access to the monastery in the first place. "So we'll be leaving soon?"

"That is for the Master to decide. Though it seems as though we have some wolves at the gate, as it were."

"What do you mean?" asked Diana. Mel could not see her face but the tension in her voice sounded a bit more pronounced.

"I am sorry to say," said the orc, "that those who hunt you have found their way here. They declared themselves at our gates not a quarter hour ago. They have been denied entry until the Master can parley with them properly."

There was a moment of silence that was only broken when Diana let out a soft word that Mel barely heard.

"Oh."

There was another beat of silence before the orc said, "I must leave you now but please feel free to explore the gardens while you await the return of the Master, she will not be long. I believe your compatriots are out there as well."

"Thank you very much." said Diana just as the door beneath Mel swung outward.

With a start, the pixie hovered upwards and with a series of twitching motions sent her nanite webbing out around her, creating a veil.

The orc moved away from the door with swift strides, Diana just a few steps behind though she stopped once she was just outside the door and before she reached the garden proper. As the attendant made it a few dozen meters away Mel watched as Diana's features change. The look of concern and worry she had worn melted into that steel mask she called a face.

"How much did you hear?" asked Diana.

Mel was only shocked for a moment before she revealed herself. She did not know how the midrian had noticed her presence.

Her veil shimmering away, Mel said, "Enough. The Finders have found."

“They aren’t Finders.” said Diana, a cold darkness creeping into her voice.

Mel gave the woman another probing look. More and more she was beginning to suspect that the elder Istara sister was hiding something significant.

“Oh?” asked the pixie wryly. “So what are they then? StRATa or something?”

Diana was silent, staring dispassionately at Mel.

Swallowing, Mel felt the blood draining from her face as she said, “You’ve got to be shitting me.”

“We need to get out of here as soon as possible.” said the midrian woman in a deadpan. “Where is he?”

Mel flew down to hover just in front of Diana's left side and pointed out towards the drasil tree.

The former Magus was slumped against the slender tree, his head lolling back and his mouth slightly open. If not for the rise and fall of his chest and the occasional snore Mel might have thought him a corpse.

"What happened to him?" asked Diana, staring out at Marcus.

Mel turned toward her, cocking an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

Diana gave her an appraising look and for half a moment the mask broke, so fast that Mel barely caught it. Had it been pain? Perhaps confusion or anger? Mel wasn't sure and as quickly as it had slipped the mask returned, Diana's eyes cold and intense.

Those eyes turned towards the pixie as Diana spoke. "I mean he's supposed to be dead. You're *both* supposed to be dead. A Magus and his Spymaster do not just get to leave the Empire behind."

"Oh and a spec-ops operative does?" snapped Mel, taking a wild guess at Diana’s mysterious background. "They wouldn't be after you if you still ran with the Empire."

Diana's silence seemed to concede the point as she and Mel traded stares. It was the midrian who finally broke their gaze and looked away as she said, "What was that before, about Helena? You said you were looking for *her*, not me?"

Mel let out a long sigh, rolling her head to one side to stretch out her neck. "Yeah… We," She paused and shot a look back over at Marcus. "We came here looking for Helena."

"Helena is dead." said Diana in that tonal void she had used in the house full of gunfire earlier.

"I know." said Mel. "*I* know that. But he… He found this report, right? Something about officers being sold into slavery after the botched kidnapping."

Mel had known that part of Marcus' story, or at least pieces of it. She had seen the document Marcus' had found on some public 'net terminal equipped to service ogres. He'd dug it out of the Legion's public data sector, the place where reports and memos went to die. Later, once she'd convinced Marcus to get her 'net access of her own, Mel had done her own digging and found nothing to refute the document he had found. It never actually mentioned Helena by name but the account did refer to several men and women in Legion officers' uniform.

He was grasping at straws and Mel had told him as such but it was like trying to convince a Follower that Primus had not been some Godking offering salvation with a side of divine justice.

"He got it in his head that she was still alive." continued Mel. "It's… He's been searching for her for almost three cycles now."

"Primus save us from fools." said Diana in a low voice. "He goes searching for a slave matching my sister's description and somewhere along the way he picks up *my* trail."

"I guess so." said Mel with a shrug. "Was that some kind of cover? A slave? And that Regis guy was what, your master?"

Diana pointedly did not look at Mel as she spoke. "Something like that. Regis was a friend."

"A friend?" said Mel, somewhat incredulous.

Finally looking back at the pixie, Diana met Mel's gaze with those emotionless eyes. "Yes. A friend. One who is dead now thanks to you." She shot a glance passed the pixie and out towards Marcus. "Both of you."

"What?" barked Mel. "Screw you! We had nothing to do with that."

"No?" asked Diana, the steel in her face seeming to grow sharper. "So who forced the Finders to move in then? Who dragged a whole pack of mercs through my front door to make that firefight? I knew the Finders were watching me and in another turn's time I had planned on making it off Bounty, Regis and I both. But now he's dead and I'm stuck with some Feyling spy and the man who got my sister killed."

Diana's mask slipped yet again, revealing barely contained rage the likes of which Mel had only seen a handful of times. Her eyes became a boiling storm and there was a space of heartbeats in which Mel felt the aetheric pressure around Diana increase dramatically.

She took one quick breath and the mask returned, leaving Mel to gape at her with a mixture of confusion and amazement.

When she finally found her voice again, Mel was almost shouting. "What? Are you insane? Marcus loved her. You have no fucking clue what he's been through looking for her on the Queens' cursed *off chance* that she is still alive. How could you even think he had something to do with those pirates?"

The mask cracked again as Diana sneered. "Of course he didn't have anything to do with the pirates."

"But you just said-" began Mel.

"He's why she was there." said Diana, her face and voice hardening once again. "Helena joined the Legion because of me but she stayed because of him." She pointed at Marcus, with an accusatory finger. "She was promoted because of him. And she died defending the Prince because of *him*."

Mel swallowed and was quiet for a long moment, unable to respond.

It wasn't that she did not want to; it was that she could not. Because at the end of the turn, Diana was right.

Chapter Nineteen

16 Standard Imperial Cycles Previous

Helena ran a hand down the front of the dress she wore, frowning at herself in the full length mirror. She turned to the side and looked again at the new angle, her frown deepening into a scowl. The shoulderless garment seemed to fall flat against her form, its pale violet color accenting her eyes but doing very little else in Helena’s opinion.

Ilza had insisted that it looked good on her when she had dragged her former squad-mate out shopping and Helena had nervously agreed at the time. Now though, the dress seemed wrong.

It felt wrong. All civilian clothing did, to be fair, but this was much worse. It was far too thin for one thing, no armored sections at all. Even when compared to their off duty fatigues in the Legion, it felt as though she was barely wearing anything at all. Helena felt exposed in this dress, unprepared should she need to leap into action. Which was an insane thought all by itself.

What action would she need to leap into? She was on Imperia for Primus’ sake. The ceremony was going to be taking place on the grounds of the Imperial Palace, the very seat of power for House Khanus. It was possibly the most secure place in the entire Western Reach, perhaps the whole galaxy. At worst she might have to move quickly up a flight of stairs and even that depended on her being late.

Looking away from the mirror for a moment, Helena eyed the shoes Ilza had helped her pick out as well. Those heels made her think twice about moving on stairs at *any* speed.

Snorting in frustration, Helena paced across her quarters with nervous energy. She took a deep breath through her nose and stared up at the ceiling as she exhaled. With one hand she absently scratched at the back of her head, brushing at her now shoulder length hair, while the other rubbed at the too-soft fabric that flowed along the curve of her leg.

Why was she even doing this? It was ridiculous, getting all worked up like she was. Absolutely silly. She felt like a child again, not the battle-hardened young woman who had survived one of the bloodiest wars in Imperial history. She was a warmage damn it, not some nervous school-girl! Her actions during The Shattering, as they were calling it now, had earned her several commendations and even a chance to join the Thronegaurd of the new Empress. She was not someone who got the jitters over trying to look nice at some fancy party.

Why had she even insisted on buying new cloths in the first place? She had been to official functions before and her dress uniform had always sufficed. No one had ever thought any less of her; she was a soldier after all. What was it about tonight’s ceremony that had brought on her sudden lack of confidence?

Of course she knew why she felt the way she did, even if she did not immediately admit it to herself.

It was because of *him*.

*He* was going to be there.

Helena sighed heavily and stormed back to the mirror, glaring at her reflection as if willing it to change.

She clenched her fists and bit her lip in an agonized snarl. What she wouldn’t give to be back in the middle of a warzone at that very moment. It seemed like a less stressful situation.

Helena took a deep breath and stood up straight, running her hand down the front of her dress again.

It was fine. She looked fine. Though, glancing over at the high heeled shoes again, there were some lines even the warmage Helena Istara wasn’t willing to cross just yet.

It felt like she was stepping into a new reality and Helena stopped abruptly, more partygoers still streaming in around her. She had been through the Khanus Gardens before, touring them was one of those things you did if you were ever on Imperia, but they had been transformed for tonight’s celebration.

Somewhere a band was playing. Classical electronic hums and tones weaving through a string section led by two violins and cello, a voice with a lightly synthesized ring to it rose above it all, singing in ol-khanic. It was a bouncing but regal melody that encouraged some to dance on a large flattened expanse of smooth stone just beyond the main lawn.

Floating crystalline globes nearly the size of Helena’s head twinkled with crimson and silver light, dappling the wide lawn that held the bulk of the partygoers in the colors of House Khanus. The hovering devices moved slowly in a winding pattern, creating a constantly flowing path of light and shadows that played across the hundreds of people gathered below.

They were members of the High Houses and courtiers from across the Empire, some having come from nearly half the galaxy away for today’s events. The official coronation of Nassaeya Sohlus Pollious Khanus and the gala that followed.

Technically the Empress had been crowned just after her mother’s assassination at the hands of the Dominion but it had been her farther, Zeno, who had taken on the role of Arch-Praetor during the war. Zeno Khanus had effectively held absolute power within the Empire for the last three cycles and now that the Dominion had been utterly destroyed he was stepping down from that position and his daughter would take her rightful place on the throne.

The ceremony itself had been brief enough, as far as these things went, mostly consisting of the entire Senates Major and Minor ratifying a bill that transferred executive power back to Nassaeya and the High Houses at large. The only truly interesting part of the whole ordeal had been the witnessing statements from the gnome ambassador of Fingelurf and the representative from the Court of Air.

Like most gnomes, the former had been tiny, large-headed and slightly grotesque in his proportions though he had radiated with so much aetheric power that Helena could sense him from nearly halfway across the massive Senate Hall. The latter witness was far stranger. He appeared almost elf-like, with long willowy limbs and slightly tapered ears but Helena could have sworn that his actual facial features kept shifting throughout the ceremony. Introduced only as the Harlot of Air, the creature was a Sidhe lord, one of the few that had found his way out of the Fey and taken up residence in a mortal’s body. Strange lines of silver script had danced just above the skin along the fairy’s forearms and brow, giving him an alien look.

Even that strangeness though was dwarfed by the splendor of those who paraded around the open lawn of this… The only word that came to Helena’s mind was soiree. Their suites and dresses reminded her of the more ridiculous plumage she had seen on birds in the Southern Reach. All of it was accented with flashes of aethite, its coloring matching the Houses and corporations these people represented.

Heavily present was the scarlet and silver of House Khanus but among the throng she also saw the crimson and black of Zolorus, the blue and emerald of Mafey, even the purple and gold of House Farside.

In fact the latter was moving directly toward her and it took a long moment before Helena recognized Julian’s face as it emerged from the crowd.

The former member of Assault Zero-Seven was dressed in his pressed dress uniform that nonetheless bore accents of his House. His slim face and intelligent eyes lit up as he looked up the stairs leading back into the palace proper.

“Lieutenant!” said the man that Helena was just now realizing was several cycles her senior. “Down here.”

Realizing she had been standing at the top of the stairs gawping – undoubtedly with everyone noticing her slackjawed expression – Helena quickly descended.

“Staff Sergeant.” said Helena excitedly, noting the new bar and chevrons on Julian’s uniform.

As she met him halfway down the stairs Helena was again struck by the oddness of everything. Where once Julian would have simply saluted her, he now bore down on her for a hug and she found herself returning the embrace with gusto. It had been phases since she’d seen any other member of Zero-Seven besides Ilza, who had wound up becoming something like an aide since they had both found their way back to Imperia, and it was genuinely good to see a familiar face amidst the swirling pageantry of this place.

Holding the slightly slimmer man out at arms length Helena said, “Look at you, the proud little noble.”

Julian grinned and said, “What about you? Miss Probably on the Thronegaurd.”

They released each other and Helena smirked, cocking an eyebrow as she asked, “How did you hear about that?”

He shrugged with that casual nonchalance that indicated that perhaps even Julian did not know how everything he said wound up in his head. “Word gets around. The Thronegaurd doesn’t change up all that often. Lots of the House brats with any military experience are jockeying for the position.”

“Even you?” asked Helena, her grin softening slightly.

Sometimes she forgot about Julian’s heritage, especially considering how young House Farside was within the Imperial landscape. It was only in the last few decades that her former squad-mate’s House had become both a relevant player within the Senate Major and come into a few dozen systems worth of holdings. It also did not help that, within the context of the war, Julian had been very atypical for nobility. Most High Houses found ways to position their younger members, if they served in the Legion at all, into the officer ranks and out of harms way.

Julian Farside had gone through basic just like any other conscript, rising through the Legion’s ranks through merit rather than political clout. According to Julian the patriarch of House Farside, his father, was a firm believer in doing things traditionally and not cutting any corners.

The young noble shook his head and raised his hands. “No. No Sir. I don’t want any part of that circus. Father floated the idea around but I don’t think it stuck anywhere.”

“Besides,” continued Julian as he glanced to the side, towards a long table where mountains of food were being picked at by the guests, “How is anyone supposed to compete with a recommendation like the one you’ve got?”

Helena followed his gaze and eventually saw the man standing near the end of the table, looking awkward amidst a veritable swarm of nobles surrounding him.

It was *him*.

Marcus Crassus had a slightly pained expression on his face as he spoke to one of the chatty partygoers but within a second of spotting him, Helena saw his eyes dart upwards to meet hers.

Amidst everything around her, despite the profusion of aethite lamps and accoutrements, Helena could suddenly feel the connective hum resonating from the Magus.

Dragging her eyes away from *him* was difficult but eventually Helena looked back at Julian, who met her gaze. He had clearly not missed what had just happened.

“Look, L.T.,” said Julian softly, shaking his head again. “I’m not going to ask but you should know that there are people starting to talk.”

Brow furrowing slightly, Helena asked, “About what?”

Julian gestured with his head, indicating that they finally get off the stairs.

Helena let out a sharp sigh and nodded, following the young noble into the gathering at large. Julian led her away from where Marcus was positioned, a fact Helena was slightly annoyed by, and over to a long bar set up atop the wide lawn.

“I hear things, is all.” said Julian conversationally, not lowering his voice to a conspiratorial level but rather talking at a normal clip and tone. “Nothing like the High Court gossip or anything, but certain circles take notice when a no-name Legionnaire gets propped up by a Magus.” Julian shot another glance in Marcus’ direction. “Let alone *him*. They wonder why?”

Helena grabbed herself something clear and bubbly from a tray that gently floated up and down the bar, occasionally refilled by the stewards.

Taking a quick sip, she gave Julian a sharp look and said, “No-name?”

The young noble blushed and grinned weakly. “Sorry.” he said. “No offense, but you know what I mean.”

Helena took another, longer, draw from her drink and considered Julian’s words, her social standing aside.

“It’s nothing like that.” she finally said, though Helena wasn’t sure about the conviction of her own words. “We’re just…”

Her words trailed off as she considered just what she was saying.

Julian put up a hand of warning and grinned at her slightly, saying, “Like I said, I won’t ask. Less said, the better. Just know that there are people watching and it’ll only get worse if you make the Thronegaurd.”

Glancing down at the ground, Helena gnawed at her lip without realizing it. Inevitably her gaze was dragged down to the dress she wore. Next to the pomp and lavishness of those who talked and danced around her, she felt plain and out of place.

Again the question of what exactly she was doing here struck her.

“Oh Hells.” said Julian suddenly, making Helena glance up at her friend.

The young noble was staring down the bar with an annoyed expression and when he looked back at Helena he smiled weakly.

“Sorry Hel, I’ve got to go.”

“What?” asked Helena. “Why?”

Julian gestured at an extravagantly dressed woman stalking down the bar towards them, pulling up the hem of her dress with one hand while she shoved others aside when they got in her way.

“Arrah Pelgon.” said Julian, backing away into the crowd even as he spoke. “She’s been hunting me all day. I hope you have a good evening L.T.”

The young member of House Farside disappeared into the mob of other nobles, leaving Helena slightly dumbfounded, just as Arrah broke through a small clump of people that had just blocked her path.

The woman, perhaps just as old as Helena or slightly younger, was dressed in the whites and blues of House Pelgon though the extravagant gown seemed to be a bit much. More of a ball gown than something to where to an outdoor event.

Arrah looked around with a slightly wild look in her eyes and when she settled her eyes on Helena they twitched up and down once before she let out a derisive snort.

“Where’s he off to now?” said the young Pelgon woman with a snarl and shooting Helena a dirty look. “Were you supposed to make me jealous?”

Helena, still a little taken aback by Julian’s sudden departure and now this woman’s tone, said, “Excuse me?”

Snorting again, Arrah shoved passed others that had formed a knot near the bar and off into the crowd to chase Julian. Helena was left staring after her, confused by what had just happened and still mulling over Julian’s previous words.

She was being watched?

By who? Who would care about the private life of some, as Julian had put it, no-name legionnaire?

Admittedly that life had become increasingly entangled with some of the most powerful individuals in the galaxy. If she did receive the position on the Thronegaurd, as Ilza and now Julian believed she would, that would not exactly decrease that entanglement.

Helena emptied her glass and placed it down on the bar, taking in a deep breath through her nose.

“Her type makes me sick.” said a voice from behind Helena and she turned to find a man leaning casually on the bar. He was watching Arrah Pelgon’s wake as she disturbed other partygoers in her hunt for Julian.

The man was of a medium build, clearly in good shape but with none of the muscular bulk like the kind Helena had seen some legionnaire’s put on. His face was full with a slightly weak jaw that was hidden by an unfashionable full beard. He wore a well tailored suit of dark gray, similar in color to those worn by the Legion officers, and it totally lacked any of the colorful accompaniments that might mark his House or corporate allegiance. His eyes were a dark blue speckled with lines of paler shade that caught the light and gave the impression of lighting in a storm. He was also young, clearly in his late teens or early twenties at most. Though Helena had to keep reminding herself that she was just as old as he, barely beyond her twenty first cycle.

“I’m sorry?” said Helena, taken aback for the second time in as many minutes.

“Her.” said the man, gesturing with a beer glass that he held loosely in one hand. “The climber type. Farside is on the upswing right now, they just made a deal that will grab them six more systems right out from under Mafey’s nose, and now leeches like her are starting to take notice. Three phases ago a member of Pelgon, even a distaff cousin, wouldn’t be caught dead trying to court a Farside. Now this one is trampling feet trying to chase down a middle son. It’s disgusting.”

Helena wasn’t quite sure what to say but she nodded noncommittally, despite his apparent youth he spoke like someone already wearied by life within Imperial politics.

“I mean,” he continued, now gesturing at himself. “What am I, a chopped slagworm?”

Helena couldn’t help but let out a brief laugh at that. The laugh made the young man turn and give her an appreciative look.

“Now you.” said the man, tipping his glass towards Helena. “You’re not like them. You’re not strutting about, trying to show off plumage.” Helena snorted at the bird comparison that mirrored her previous thoughts. It brought a wicked smile to the man’s face. “You’re downplayed. Comfortable shoes and everything.”

Feeling suddenly self-conscious again, Helena frowned, glancing down at the somewhat stylish – or at least not combat oriented – flats that she wore.

“No.” said the young man, his smile replaced with a look of concern. “No, I didn’t mean it like that. Damn it all. There I go again. Foot please enter mouth. You’ll have to forgive me Lieutenant. I’m told my words can wander too far ahead of my brain at times.”

Helena was halfway towards smiling at the young man’s awkward apology when she froze and looked up into his eyes. It had taken her a moment to remember that she wasn’t in uniform.

“I’m sorry sir,” she said evenly but firmly, “I’m afraid you have me a disadvantage.”

The young man smirked to himself and shook his head, pushing himself up and away the bar.

“You really don’t know who I am, do you?” he asked with more than a little amusement in his voice.

“Should I?” asked Helena, putting a fist on her hip as frustration crept into her own tones.

The man let out a soft snort and looked skyward as he said, “Primus preserve me.” He looked back at Helena with an apologetic expression. “I’m sorry, again. The whole mouth to brain thing. Father says it will be the death of me, or possibly him.” He extended his free hand toward Helena. “Galen Sohlus Pollious Khanus, a pleasure.”

Helena was not sure whether she should bow, salute or maybe even curtsy considering the dress she wore.

This was Galen Khanus, Lord Duke of the Khanus Empire and current heir to the throne.

Settling on an awkward mixture of bow and salute, Helena said, “My Lord, my apologies, I didn’t realize-”

“Stop. Stop.” cut in Galen, grabbing Helena by the elbow and dragging her upright. “Primus, I don’t need people bowing at me all day and all night. It’s just refreshing to meet someone who didn’t know me on sight.”

Standing straight, Helena swallowed, not quite sure what to say. She eventually settled on three nervous words. “It’s the beard.”

That made the Duke crack a grin again. “Oh good. It worked.”

Helena stood silently for a long moment in front of the Duke, eyes wide and fighting the urge to run.

Letting out a sigh, Galen grabbed a drink from one of the passing trays and pushed it into Helena’s hands. She took it gratefully, not even sure what it was before she brought it to her lips.

“I’m just here to talk Lieutenant Istara.” said Galen after Helena had calmed down slightly. “Nothing official. I just wanted to meet you.”

Helena glanced around nervously, only now noticing the ring of empty space that had formed around them. Two paladins, clad in demure suits but wearing aethite longswords on their hips, stood nearby keeping the crowd at least a meter away. One did not approach the Duke of the Khanus Empire without his express consent.

Across the party Helena could still feel the distant hum of aetheric contact, sensing Marcus as he moved about the lawn. Could he feel her as well, she wondered. Either way, the connection gave her strength.

Turning back towards the Duke, Helena said, “Of course, my Lord.”

“Please Lieutenant,” said the second most powerful person in the Khanus Empire, extending his hand again, “it’s just Galen.”

“My Lord Galen,” compromised Helena as she took the proffered hand and shook it. “I’m First Lieutenant Helena Istara of the Ninth Forward Legion, at your service. It is an honor to meet you.”

Galen rolled his eyes and grinned at Helena’s suddenly officious manner. When they released their grip on each other, the Duke gave her another appraising look under which Helena now squirmed.

This was the Duke.

*The* Duke.

This man’s sister had just become Empress of the Khanus Empire. His Father had just led their Legions through one of the most destructive and violent conflicts in recent galactic history. His mother had been assassinated by the tauro, setting the spark to the flame that eventually swallowed the entire Minos Dominion. His family line could be traced back to Primus Khanus himself, the first magus, the first emperor, the man that had unified the Old Holds and freed midrian-kind from the oppression of the Dominion in the first place.

What did you even say to a man like that?

Helena waited for the Duke to say something, anything really, but he just kept staring at her with that half-smirk on his face.

“What can I do for you, My Lord Galen?” asked Helena at last, clasping her still unidentified drink in both hands.

“I just came by to talk.” said Galen, taking a sip from his own drink. “Take the measure of the woman who is going to be protecting my sister.”

Helena almost dropped her glass, her fingers tightening again just before it’s rim slipped below their reach. “I’m sorry. What?”

“Nothing’s been announced yet.” said the Duke, casually leaning back against the bar again. “It’ll probably happen in the next turn or two. But the Thronegaurd position will be yours if you want it.”

Helena was again struck silent, this time out of overwhelming relief rather than shock or confusion. She had the job. She would join the ranks of the Thronegaurd, the sworn paladins to the royal family of House Khanus. What exactly that meant, she still wasn’t sure.

She hadn’t even submitted her own name to be considered, that had been someone else’s doing. Possibly Commander Honnius, he had certainly supported her when she’d asked him about it, but more than likely she guessed that it had been *him*. Though why Magus Imperia Marcus Crassus Khanus would do such a thing still confused and frightened Helena.

None of those feelings were necessarily bad though. It was the confusion of figuring out some new puzzle. It was the fear of facing the unknown. Not bad, per say, just new and different.

There was a connection between them, of that Helena was certain, it was practically a physical force within her aetherics. Since the fall of Minos and the end of the war Helena had neither seen nor heard from the Magus but he was the only thing on her mind. The bond they shared, whatever wavelength they both tapped into, it was a profound thing that gripped Helena at her core.

That irresistible pull had kept her here on Imperia. It had made her follow through with the rumors of her consideration for the Throneguard. It had led her to this event tonight and to this conversation with the Lord Duke, Galen Khanus himself.

Suddenly feeling much more relaxed, Helena raised her own glass in a brief salute. “Thank you My Lord. I won’t let you or the Empress down, not so long as I draw breath.”

“A bold sentiment.” said Galen, raising his own glass.

The Duke and the warmage drank simultaneously, both finishing off their respective drinks and slamming their glasses down onto the bar almost in unison. Helena was slightly faster.

Grinning again, Galen said, “Commander Honnius speaks very highly of you. In fact, everyone speaks highly of you. Anyone you’ve ever commanded or been under, even some who only know you by reputation.”

“Warmages tend to build those, My Lord.” said Helena with her own grin now.

“And what’s that?” asked Galen.

“A reputation.” said Helena.

The Duke laughed, a rich, full sound that drew the attention of several partygoers just beyond the paladins withering outward stares.

Once he settled down Galen’s eyes still crackled with amusement. “I love a legionnaire with some wit. Too many of you Legion types are so dour and serious.” said Galen, looking just passed Helena as he continued, “Speaking of…”

Turning, Helena was suddenly confronted with *him*.

Magus Imperia Marcus Crassus Khanus was striding towards them from down the bar. The crowd seemed to part just in front of him, presenting no barrier like it had for Arrah Pelgon. Even the Duke’s paladins were no deterrent to the Magus, in fact they simply nodded at him as he approached.

Galen spoke from behind Helena, coming up beside her as the Magus drew close. “How fares the party Marcus?”

“Well enough My Lord.” said the Magus, stopping just in front of the two younger midrians.

Helena was struck at just how much smaller he looked. Not shorter, though Helena did stand several centimeters taller than the Magus, but rather he looked diminished. Weary beyond even Galen’s complaints about the courtiers or her own exasperation with the expected fashion of a woman in court. Marcus Crassus looked exhausted and defeated but it was a visage that faded as he looked at Helena.

Did the others even notice the color returning to his pallid complexion or the straightening of his posture? They all seemed to only see the demigod, proud and strong. Not the man, tired and broken.

“I was just informing the Lieutenant of her eminent appointment to the Thronegaurd.” said Galen. “Though I’m sure you already knew.”

The Magus gave the young Duke a weak smile. “Yes, I like staying informed My Lord. After all, I was captain-”

“During my great-great grandmother’s reign.” finished Galen. “Yes, of course, how could I possibly forget?”

Helena was barely paying attention to the interplay between the two men, being wholly focused on the Magus before her and the connective tether within their aetherics. Almost unconsciously their auras began to mingle just as they had on Minos and their eyes met again. Violet staring into blue.

Glancing between the two, Galen asked, “I take it you approve?”

Dragging his gaze back over to the Duke, the Magus nodded. “Yes My Lord. Farris actually recommended her to me and I was the one that submitted her name for consideration.”

“I see.” said the Duke, not sounding surprised in the least.

The statement reaffirmed what Helena already suspected though that confirmation elated her.

Turning toward Helena, Galen gave her a slight bow before he said, “Well I’ll not take up any more of your time Lieutenant. I look forward to working with you in the future and I pray you enjoy your free time while you can.”

Helena muttered something in the affirmative. She wasn’t sure what she said exactly but it was apparently enough to let Galen Khanus take his leave without feeling offended. It also left her standing just in front of the Magus, who adopted an expression just as awkward as Helena felt.

The two just stood there for a long moment, each glancing nervously from the other’s eyes to points to either side or downward.

Eventually the Magus said, “I just wanted to-”

“I never actually-” said Helena at the same moment.

They both stopped and Helena smiled in what she thought was a placating expression.

She gestured towards him and said, “Please, I didn’t-”

“I’m sorry for-” said the Magus simultaneously.

They both cut off again and this time the Magus laughed.

“I’m truly terrible at this, aren’t I?” he asked with a weak smile on his face.

“At what?” asked Helena gently, afraid she might break that tension that thrummed between them with the wrong sound or movement.

“This.” he said, waving a hand between them. “People. Normal people, I mean.”

“Who says I’m normal?” said Helena with a smile.

“I didn’t…” stammered the Magus, licking his lips. “I mean… It’s just, I just wanted to talk to you. I wanted to thank you.”

“For Minos.” said Helena quietly. “I should be thanking *you*. You saved me, my whole squad. You saved us from that thing.”

“The Mino-Taur.” said the Magus gravely. “He… It… I was just doing my job.”

“Still.” said Helena, reaching out and taking one of his hands. “Thank you.”

There was a tension in the muscles of his fingers and drained away even as Helena held them. They both stared down at the touch and Helena could feel the sensation of peaceful contentment spreading between their aetheric bond.

“Thank you.” said Marcus. “Thank you.”

Helena studied the lines on his face even though he would not look up from their clasped hands.

When he looked back up into her eyes they released each other, suddenly aware of just how long they had stood hand in hand. Even after he had taken a step backwards Helena could still feel a strange pressure, a longing and a need to touch him again. It was a tugging from somewhere in her chest to stay close, to hold his hand in hers, to lean close and be supported by one another.

For his part, Marcus seemed to stare at her with a similar sort of longing but he took in a deep breath and steadied himself against whatever feelings stirred within him.

“Again, thank you.” said the Magus, some formality coming back into his voice. “Hel- Lieutenant Istara. For… everything you did back on Minos. I don’t…” What ever words he tried to say next never found their way out. He coughed uncomfortably, looking away from Helena with a slight grimace before saying, “If you’ll excuse me.

He was only a couple steps away when Helena spoke without thinking.

“Marcus.” she said sharply.

The Magus turned, looking into her eyes. She felt their mutual need hum across their aetherics.

“When can I see you again?” asked Helena.

The awkward, confined emotions fled the Magus’ face and his eyes brightened as he smiled.

“Soon.” said Marcus. “Soon, I hope.”

Chapter Twenty

Mel spared one last glance back at the ring-like structure of the orcish monastery before picking up speed and soaring up into the cool evening sky. She could still make out the forms of half a dozen dark-clad figures assembled outside the building’s front gates. The Finders, or whatever they were, presumably. One of them moved about in front of the group in an agitated pacing motion, constantly stopping to stare towards the monastery. Mel tried to keep the light cast by her aether under control but her roiling emotions made it difficult to stop the silver light from leaking off of her wings.

That look on Marcus’ face still clung to her thoughts. That forlorn dejected weariness that had always been simmering beneath his motivated, if somewhat troubled, exterior was now obvious on his features. Just before he had fallen asleep beneath the drasil tree he had looked like a man who had finally given up. It was heartbreaking and frustrating and, if Mel were honest with herself, a relief.

For so damn long now the former Magus had clung to the idea of Helena’s survival like some kind of raft adrift in an ocean of his emotional turmoil. Mel had always thought, or perhaps prayed, that when they had finally found an end to his search Marcus might finally learn to swim, so to speak. That he, or maybe *they*, might actually be able to make some kind of life beyond the tatters of their mutually destroyed past.

There might still hope for that but from where she sat, Mel could not see it. At the very least Diana was a problematic force in anything she and Marcus might do from this point forward. Whether the elder Istara liked it or not. She clearly didn’t, Mel had seen that much behind the other woman’s tightly controlled mask.

She had stood in silence for a long moment after accusing Marcus of killing her sister and the only sound between them had been the buzz of Mel’s wings. Then she had let out a breath that did nothing to relieve her tightly wound posture and began asking the pixie rapid-fire questions.

How exactly had they found her? Who were the mercs who had attacked them? How had they arrived on Bounty? What had been their means of leaving if they had actually found Helena?

There had been more, some mundane and most specific. Some seemed random and disassociated with what was going on but Mel had recognized them for what they were. Intel, Raw data, a detailed map of their situation on a whole. In order to act Diana wanted as many puzzle pieces as she could get in an attempt to see large swaths of the bigger picture.

It was an intelligence gathering technique that was familiar to her and helped solidify some of the suspicions Mel already had about the other woman. Diana had been a spy of some kind, of that much Mel was sure. At some point in her military career Helena’s sister had gotten mixed up in Operations, the shadowy branch of the Legion that ran spec-ops and spy games against the Empire’s many enemies. What that meant specifically Mel could be sure but Diana’s non-comments about StRATa definetly gave her an uneasy feeling.

Mel had answered as truthfully as she thought necessary, leaving out details that she wasn’t one hundred percent sure about or anything having to do with Marcus’ aetheric affliction. It wasn’t because she trusted Diana, she definitely did not, but there was a glint in the other woman’s eye, or perhaps a slant to her stance, that keyed Mel in on the idea that she was formulating some sort of plan. She wanted to get off of Bounty just as badly as Mel did.

The big thing that Diana had focused in on had been the *Amal’hiam*.

“You have a ship of your own?” the midrian spy had asked.

“Yeah.” Mel had said. “Dwarf-make blockade runner. It’s how we got here. Though when we left to find… you, I guess, she was grounded. A cracked absorption panel in the drive-core.”

Mel had explained how she’d found a dealer with the part they needed to repair and Diana shot an unreadable look at Marcus.

“And he went to find *her* first.” Diana had said with a hint of disgust creeping into her voice.

After that she had adopted that distant look again and turned to Mel. She’d asked if the pixie could still get to the parts dealer and get the parts they needed to fix the *Amal’hiam*.

“I guess.” Mel had said, glancing nervously towards where Marcus still slept.

With a stern but polite tone Diana had asked her to go, just in case the orcs couldn’t help them before the Empire’s patience wore out or Ark’s mercenaries showed back up.

Despite her feeling about leaving Marcus alone at the moment, Mel had agreed. The *Amal’hiam* was a much surer bet to getting off Bounty than any possible help these orcish monks might provide.

Mel had heard the stories of course. The Rokra Fables, the tale of Princess Naga and, of course, the legend of Primus Khanus himself. Each had heroes finding sanctuary and safe passage with the orcs at some point in their journey, provided their need was found just and worthy. But for all their mentions, most references to what the orcs actually *did* to help those people were pretty vague. Master Ruk had said that Marcus’ honesty had earned him the aid of the orcs but Mel still really did not know what that meant.

She knew she would be happier with some sort of solid means of escape, from both the Empire and Arkon-no-Sek. Which meant getting the *Amal’hiam* fixed.

As she flew across the darkening sky over Panimberg Mel glanced south towards where the public berths held their ship. If the *Amal’hiam* had been operational, how easy would it have been to fly her right into the middle of the monastery and grab both of the midrians before any of their adversaries could know what was happening?

Angling west by a few degrees, Mel lined up her flight path with the address Ariel had given her. As she sped up, feeling the crackle of silver aether unavoidably generate as she quickened, she hoped the dealer was still open. It was still relatively early but with a specialty store like this, one never knew. All Mel could do was pray and bargain with any all-powerful being that might be listening to a banished pixie on an Outer Kingdom agworld.

When she reached the storefront a dozen minutes later Mel almost whooped with joy to see the lights in the place still on and a glowing sign that said *open* on the front door. The store looked more like a boutique than any kind of parts dealership that Mel had ever seen, but then again, from the description she’d received, that was exactly what it was.

The front of the store was lined with a long bay window that displayed two long tables filled with Old Hold and Steder artifacts as well as more than a few things that looked dwarvish. Larger items flanked the tables, including a stumpy golem that bore the graven resemblance of a fiery-faced demon and a long, aethite tipped spear which had the look of a lian weapon, sturdy but elegant. Some of the items, especially the dwarvish ones, would have been illegal to *have* let alone *sell* in the Empire or Freeholds. Within the bounds of an Outer Kingdom though, common trade laws became a hole-ridden patchwork of what was profitable and what was convenient. The sign over the front door read, *Slevin’s Treasures*.

With some effort, Mel forced the door open wide enough to squeeze inside. Despite her size some sort of automatic bell was triggered as she tumbled into the slightly musty air of the shop.

The interior went much deeper into the building than Mel had been expecting and the amount of stuff inside took her off guard for a moment. She glanced around at the winding racks and shelves that were filled with untold trinkets and legitimate pieces of history. It wasn’t cluttered, per say, but Mel definitely got the sense that whoever had curated this collection did not let any item off his shelves idly.

There had been a time when this was exactly the kind of place Marcus would have dragged her if he found a moment to wander upon a newly incorporated world. He would move from item to item, blue eyes seeming to look not at the objects themselves but the weight of history that surrounded them. The look of joy that would spread across his face whenever he found something particularly heavy, so to speak, was something Mel wished she had paid more attention to in those days. It was an expression she rarely saw anymore.

“Just a moment.” said a creaky voice from somewhere off in the stacks. “I’ll be right there.”

Ambling around a shelf, an old midrian appeared in the center isle of the store. He wore slightly threadbare clothing that looked as though it may have fit him better before age had stripped him of some of his mass. The way he stooped slightly certainly did not help that look. His face had a regal look to it that belayed his otherwise shabby appearance though, with sharp features and sparkling, intelligent eyes that gleamed behind a pair of glasses that clearly had some sort of heads up display built into their lenses. Overall, Mel thought he had the look of someone caught in the past, unwilling to change despite the inevitable wear and tear of time.

When his eyes caught sight of the pixie Mel half expected the first words out of his mouth to be *we don’t serve your kind here*.

Instead she saw his eyes change size slightly as the lenses autofocused onto her smaller frame and he said with a respectful nod, “Hail Lady Fey, how may Dann Slevin be of assistance this evening?”

Mel was slightly taken aback by his courtesy and hovered in place, glancing around quickly to make sure no one else was in the store that the shopkeeper might be talking to. A Lady of a Sidhe House perhaps or some other Fey nobility.

“Um, hey.” said Mel after a beat of silence. “Sorry, I was just… I mean, look, no need for the classy talk man.”

Mel could not remember the last time any stranger had looked at her with anything but fear or suspicion. The formal way in which Slevin had addressed her made her feel squirmy and awkward. Respect, right out of the gate, was not something she had received since she had fled Imperia after Marcus’ apparent death.

Slevin laughed gently, mostly to himself, and pulled his glasses off to clean them on one of his sleeves as he said, “Heh, sorry if that threw you little miss. Old habits, you know? It has been a dreadfully long time since I’ve had a chance to speak with any of the Feyfolk.”

“Oh?” said Mel, not actually interested but unable to come up with a better response that wasn’t totally inane or outright rude. She had once regularly conversed politely with members of the High Houses of the Khanus Empire and it was taking her a moment to shake the cobwebs off those particular skills.

“Yes.” said Sleven, maintaining an air of nonchalance as he replaced his spectacles and smiled at Mel. “Once upon a time I parlayed with most every Court, even spoke with an Acolyte or two back when I couldn’t find good sense if it was tossed right into my lap. Mind you, I did learn my lesson after the Warlock of Storms decided I’d stuck my nose where it didn’t belong. Might have had my doctorate otherwise.”

Mel just nodded, a little dumbstruck by the way the old midrian carried on. He spoke so brazenly of the Sidhe, something very few midrians did outside of the powerful or the collegiate. Acolytes. Warlocks. They were powerful players in the political interplay of Sidhe Houses and Courts; beings of immense power within the Fey and even more so the Metafey. From a pixie’s point of view they were the next best things to gods, perhaps not revered in the same light as the Queens but at least seen as direct instruments of their will.

“But you didn’t come here looking for tall tales from an old midrian.” said Slevin with another grin and flashing look at Mel.

Shaking her head and blinking away ominous thoughts of her former Sidhe masters, Mel said, “No, its okay. It’s just a little weird hearing a midrian talk about them is all, especially in the middle of-“ Mel cut herself off just before she said *middle of nowhere* and continued, “On an Outer Kingdom like Bounty.”

Slevin gave her an amused look as if the data displayed on his glasses were telling him what Mel had been about to say.

“We are a bit out of the way, aren’t we?” asked the shopkeeper. “Which begs the question, what brings one of the wee folk to my door this night? Do you hold a proxy by which I might conjure?”

Mel snorted and hovered up a few centimeters to reach his eye level. “No.” she said with a wry smile as some formality crept back into her words. “I am myself by both token and name. Conjure me by Meliantheena if you have needs, though Mel will suffice.”

Slevin’s smile widened fiercely, the lines of his face folding naturally into the expression. “Mel it is then. And you shall know me as Dann Slevin, by name if not by token.” Dipping his head in a gracious nod, the shopkeeper finished. “What can I do for you tonight Lady Mel?”

Mel flew forward to close the distance between herself and Slevin, taping a few controls on the miniature holodisplay at her forearm. “I was actually hoping to find a part for a dwarvish ship.”

The sentence made the shopkeepers features take on a curious glint that looked like a sort of hunger to Mel.

“What sort of ship?” asked Slevin.

Mel hovered close and pulled up a rough holo of the *Amal’hiam* that spun gently over her forearm. Even to the pixie the holo was barely larger than a toy so Slevin was forced to lean in close enough that Mel could actually see the crystalline panes that made up the midrian’s glasses shift their structure ever so slightly. The almost inaudible sound was like the tinkling of thin silver bells.

Lines of text began appearing on the shopkeeper’s lenses and Mel struggled to read what they said from her reversed position.

“Mmm.” said Slevin, placing a long-fingered hand over his pursed lips as he studied the holo for a long moment. Finally he turned, glancing back over his shoulder to his shop at large, seeming to scan every item it contained from where he stood. Turning back to glance at Mel, he said, “I’m not sure I can help you my dear. I generally only collect pieces of history, not literal *pieces* of history. What precisely were you looking for?”

Mel sighed, having known all along that this had been a crap shoot. “An absorption panel for one of their weird drive-cores.” she said dejectedly. “One of ours cracked.”

Slevin’s expression grew bright again as Mel spoke and he let out a wheezing laugh as he began stutter-stepping deeper into the store.

“Haha!” laughed the shopkeeper and spoke as if to himself. “What are the odds? What *are* the odds?” He glanced over his shoulder as he ambled away. “Come, my dear, this way. I may have just what you need.”

Mel hovered in silent disbelief, her mouth agape in surprise, before flying after the old man.

“Seriously?” she asked as she began to move besides Slevin. “You have a dwarvish absorption panel just lying around?”

Slevin gave his own derisive snort this time before saying, “*Lying around*? I should think not. Khagrish tech is finicky enough without some corporate lordling coming around and poking at it because his daddy let them open the expense account. No, my dear Lady, the good stuff is under lock and key, as they say.”

Mel was led towards the back of the shop where more and more of what she saw was under glass or sealed in what looked like specially crafted displays with hyperbolic seals covering their shelves. The latter hummed gently as power flowed through them to preserve the pieces contained within to the best ability of modern aetherics.

As they drew near the rear wall of the building Mel came to the conclusion that she had been in small towns that probably used less aether than Slevin used to protect some of his wares.

Slevin spoke as they walked, now gabling about the ship more than anything else.

“Can’t say I’m shocked you cracked a panel.” said the shopkeeper. “Those Usulv models always tended towards the dangerously spectacular rather than the reliable. What’s more shocking is that she’s lasted as long as she has. Blockade runners like that saw more than a little use during the Deep War near the end. To see one in working shape is the next best thing to a miracle in this age.”

Mel was only half listening, trying instead to batter down the flood of emotions that screamed at her as she followed the slowly moving midrian.

Fear. Hope. Desperation. Annoyance. Hunger.

It was only then that Mel realized that she had not eaten all day and her stomach cramped painfully once she started thinking about it. With the amount of flying she’d been doing today she would need to tuck into a large meal when she got back to the monastery. It was even worse than it might have been a cycle ago, with her increased size she needed more and more calories to sustain herself. It made her feel slightly disgusting now that she could eat so damn much and still be hungry. Though the worst of it was that if she overshot, eating enough to actually stuff herself at each sitting, she risked gaining excess weight which could lead to a vicious cycle of energy consumption.

And that was all, she told herself, simply a practical approach to what was going on with her body. Simple economics of caloric intake. That was it. She definitely was not concerned with the fact that as she grew, becoming more and more noticeable as she flew around, any spare grams on her lithe frame were also more and more noticeable.

Reaching into a pouch near her belt, Mel grabbed a small bar of hardened protein and began to gnaw on it. It tasted like shit but it was hardy and sated her hunger for the time being.

“Here we are.” said Slevin, drawing Mel’s thoughts away from her own fractionally wider hips.

Just in front of them was a low, wide case, its frame exuding that same low hum that indicated that it was using an aetheric charge to keep its contents in stasis. The side facing Mel was made of a finely polished quartz-aethite, almost totally clear but for the minute currents of crystalline imperfections that ran through it. Within were four smallish panels, each one slightly larger than the next with the first being a bit bigger than Mel and the last looking as though it were a perfect copy of the ones that surrounded the drive-core of the *Amal’hiam*.

Mel struggled to keep the idiot grin off of her face and failed.

“Queens and Court!” exclaimed Mel. “Mr. Slevin, that’s it. That last one on the end.”

The shopkeeper’s smile took on a satisfied edge. “I thought it might be. And please, my dear, Dann will suffice.”

Mel glanced over the case again, searching for some kind of indicator of price. “How much is it?” she asked eventually.

“Normally, for tech such as this, the going rate would be about one point five.”

Mel turned to look at the antiques dealer with an arched eyebrow as she asked, “One point five what?”

“One point five million jules.” said Dann Slevin graciously and the bottom dropped out of Mel’s stomach.

Chapter Twenty One

Light surrounded Marcus. He felt weightless and alone, a familiar cold rippling across his flesh. For a brief moment the brilliant eternity of the Dragon’s Wake spiraled out before him. Each star winked at him in an asymmetric dance of light. A million, billion stars spread out before him in a glorious band of illuminated infinity. Each one of those points of light was connected through the aether. With his aetherics Marcus could feel each world out there as if his boots already stood upon their soil.

Then came the Green Hells in a violent flash.

Emerald light seared his vision, a cascade of appalling radiance that surrounded him and bit at him in a way the vacuum of space never would. Hungry tendrils plucked at his limbs and caressed his face. The horrid, consuming thrum of the Void surrounded him.

It was said that terrible things lurked within the Green Hells. The giants of shadow. The cold harbingers. The leviathans of antimatter.

Such were the stories told to frighten those new to spaceflight.

But in that green darkness Marcus felt the stygian gloom coalesce and become tangible. He felt it squirm over him and through him. It consumed and was consumed, forever devouring while being itself devoured. Endless nuclear chaos. Substance without flesh. A will without a mind. Hunger without end.

The shadows formed around him and twin pools of violet light flashed out from an unknown source.

“Where were you?” asked Helena, her voice warped by grief. “Marcus, where were you when I died?”

Marcus tried to say that he was sorry. He tried to cry out and ask for forgiveness from the woman he loved. He had been weak. He had been scared. He could not handle life without her.

Marcus wanted Helena to know these things but no sound came out of his mouth. No breath escaped his lungs. There was no air in the Void.

The shadows twisted into a beautiful face, screaming and racked with pain. The violet light became a pair of eyes that rolled wildly, looking for escape.

“Marcus.” said Helena. “Marcus, I’ll see you- Ahhrg!”

Her screams of torment made the former Magus struggle against his weightless prison. He strained against the Void, trying to find motion and action or at the very least his voice.

All he managed to say was her name.

“Helena.”

The face made of darkness writhed and screamed, struggling against some unseen torture. Again she screamed his name as if in prayer.

“Marcus!”

Again he used every scrap of strength he possessed just to whisper her name in response.

“Helena.”

Suddenly a new voice broke through the shadows of the Void.

“She’s dead. Give it up already.”

Marcus awoke with a start, looking around wildly as his hand snapped down to his revolver. His breathing ragged, the former Magus’ eyes settled on Diana standing in front of him in the growing gloom of the evening. It seemed as though there were no lights in the gardens of the orcish monastery other than those cast by the stars and Bounty’s two moons.

Helena’s sister stood before him with one fist on her hip and a disgusted look in her eyes that did not reach her face.

“How long was I asleep?” asked Marcus blearily.

“Not long.” said Diana in a flat tone. “Your fairy just left.”

Marcus wiped at his face and blinked several times before licking his lips and saying, “What?”

“The pixie went to see if she could get your ship repaired in case the orcs can’t come through for us.” said Diana.

For some reason the words did not connect. Marcus could hear Diana speaking, could make out the shape of what she was saying but somewhere between his ears and his brain everything broke down. The face from his dream, Helena’s perfect features stretched and twisted in pain, consumed too much of his mind for anything else to matter.

“What?” he said again, shaking his head in an attempt to clear the image from his thoughts.

Diana sucked in a long breath through her nose and Marcus could see her jaw working in a strained grinding motion.

“You were saying her name.” she said, a hard edge making her words sharp. “Were you thinking about her?”

Marcus did not answer, his gaze dropping back to the ground as he placed a hand over his face as if it were a shielding mask. He stared through his parted fingers for a long moment before closing his eyes. Helena’s face waited for him in the darkness.

Taking a shuddering breath, Marcus reached down to feel the place where his flask should have rested, finding nothing. He clenched his hand into a fist and opened his eyes to look back up at Diana. She still stood just in front of him, staring intently.

“What happened to you on Atok Delta?” asked Diana, her voice returning to its passive chill. “The pixie explained how you found me but that still doesn’t explain how you’re here, alive.”

Marcus swallowed dryly, taking his hand away from his pants pocket to flex it nervously at his side. He tried to speak but just like in his dream it felt as though he had run out of air. The words would not come.

Watching him with a slight squint, Diana spoke again. “If you listen to the public feeds your death was a tragedy, a few of the nationalist ones even tried tying it to pirates that attempted to kidnap the prince. They said the Empress glassed the world to avenge you.”

There was a long moment after that in which Diana just stared at him. Eventually Marcus looked away and found his first word in a cracked voice.

“No.”

Diana was silent for a beat and then asked, “No what?”

“The planet…” Marcus voice trailed off before he took a deep breath and forced himself to say, “Atok Delta burned before I was… before I…” The words wouldn’t come but he tried again. “I glassed the planet on Nassaeya’s order just before…” He took a deep, steadying breath. “After the second continent was when I heard…”

Marcus could not believe his own words. They sounded so abstract coming out of his mouth. Glassing worlds under orders from the ruler of the Khanus Empire? He was just one man, as powerless and adrift as any other. How could someone like him hold that sort of power? Who had made the decision to let Marcus Crassus wield such a terrible thing as that? What gave them the right?

“That was when you heard about Helena.” finished Diana coldly.

Marcus nodded, unable to find any more words beyond the tight knot in his throat.

In barely more than a whisper, Diana asked, “And then what?”

Looking up at her once more, Marcus couldn’t read Diana’s expression but was caught by the intense look in her eyes. They did not share Helena’s distinct violet color but there was something about them, their shape and intensity perhaps, that still reminded Marcus of her.

Marcus felt the tears welling at the corners of his eyes as he said, “I couldn’t…” He swallowed one last time. “I tried to end it. Tried to kill myself.”

When the words escaped him Marcus felt something suddenly drain from his chest. A heavy smothering weight that he hadn’t even realized was there. It was the first time that he admitted to anyone but himself what he had tried to do on Atok Delta. He was sure Mel knew or at least guessed at what had happened and somewhere, deep in a vault beneath the palace on Imperia, the twin to his Focus crystal had shattered as well, giving Nassaeya everything she needed to know about what her Magus had done. Even when he had spoken to Master Ruk, telling the entirety of his story, he had been oblique when it came to how things had ended on the last world he had conquered for the Khanus Empire. This was the first time he had just come out and said it.

For the first time in nearly twenty cycles Marcus Crassus sat exposed in front of another sapient, waiting to be judged for what he had done.

He stared up at Helena’s sister and waited. He remembered the soft hands that had touched his face in the wake of The Shattering, the kind but firm words that had let him stand upright again. Those violet eyes staring at him with intense pride when Helena Istara had looked at him.

As Marcus watched, the steel of Diana’s face began to crack. Her lips twitched and then curled down, her mouth breaking into a jagged snarl. The smooth lines of her brow creasing and arcing down as the blue-green storm in her eyes broke free. Rage filled Diana Istara’s features and when she spoke it was nearly a scream.

“This is how you honor Helena?! You piece of midrian garbage, this is how you remember my little sister?!”

There was a crackle in the air and even without his aetherics Marcus could feel the increased pressure around them as Diana called on her own substantial power. Pink-red light danced around her forearm and arcing bolts of the energy leapt from her legs onto the ground, burning away grass and searing dirt.

“You two-faced, traitorous coward!” bellowed Diana, her fists trembling with the pressure of raw aether that had now scorched a meter-wide ring around her. “She gave you everything!”

Lunging forward with a frightening speed, Diana was in the air when her punch connected with Marcus’ chest.

The former Magus was sent sailing backwards, rolling off the drasil tree and tumbling back through the garden towards a wide bed of intricately raked sand. The blow should have killed him. Though now, on top of the physical pain, Marcus also felt that dull, numbing sensation in his solar plexus where all of that aether had been absorbed and dissipated. The tingling sensation began to spread out to the rest of his torso and limbs as the force of Diana’s strike wore off. He managed to get his arms beneath him as he shook his head and gave out a wheezing cough.

Looking up, Marcus saw Diana’s eyes widen from where she stood atop the bench he had been sitting on. More neon aether poured out of her, this time arcing up into the branches of the drasil tree. In a strange moment of slow, lucid observation Marcus noted that while the stone beneath her feet was beginning to blacken and char, the leaves and bark of the drasil barely stirred in reaction to Diana’s aether.

Marcus found this mildly interesting right up until Diana streaked at him again. Again her speed and strength were enhanced by the ferocious levels of aether she could summon up through herself. Marcus dully wondered if she had any aethite secreted on her person that she was drawing upon as she crashed into him with a vicious kick to his midsection.

The blow sent him spinning away again, this time rolling all the way into the well manicured sand pit.

Again Marcus had a series of analytical thoughts as pain spread out from somewhere in his gut. One was that, again, the attack should have outright killed him. If not for his curse there would have been a smoking hole in his stomach the size of Diana’s foot. His second thought was that Helena’s sister was strong, both physically and aetherically. Anyone with proper training could use their aetherics to enhance their strength and speed to some degree, it was one of the first things they were drilled in Legion Basic, and even a toddler with a modicum of aetheric power could focus that energy into an instinctual shock layered atop a physical strike. But to do all three at once with such potency, while still maintaining the presence of mind to attack with deadly precision? Assuming Diana was not drawing on any other source of aether besides what was produced naturally by her own body, it spoke of a terrifying level of skill and power. Warmages could study and train for cycles trying to accomplish with useful and bulky chems what Diana was doing out of wrathful spite.

Mouth now full of sand, Marcus coughed again, blinking rapidly as his eyes tried to focus back on Diana. As he struggled to get up again he heard her let out an animalistic howl.

Before he could do anything other than turn himself over, Diana was on top of him. She straddled his stomach and began hammering at him with aetherically charged punches. Each blow was punctuated by her words and each word becoming more ragged as she spoke.

“Why. Won’t. You. Stay. Dead. That’s. What. You. Wanted!”

With the ninth punch Diana sagged, her brutal aetheric display finally taking its toll on her. Her hands were still curled into shaking fists and her breath came out in equally shaking bursts.

In a low, trembling voice she asked, “Why aren’t you dead?”

For his part, Marcus was now covered in lumpy bruises, more than a few of them on his face. He could already feel a place on his left cheek that was beginning to swell nicely. But for that though, he was perfectly fine, his body having diffused the deadlier side of Diana’s assault.

“I don’t know.” he said weakly, his own breath now evening out as the attack let up.

Diana shifted her weight and pivoted off of him, stumbling forward a few steps before falling to her knees with a puff of sand. Though he couldn’t see her face Marcus could see the wretched shudder of her shoulders and hear the gasping sobs of her breath.

“Do you know who came to her funeral?” said Diana, almost to herself.

Marcus pushed himself up into a sitting position, cursing the cowardice that stopped him from trying to comfort the sister of the woman he had loved. Instead he just said, “I don’t.”

“No one.” said Diana through a sob that turned into a manic sort of laughter. “She’s buried the same day on nearly the same plot as you and not one gods’ damned person shows up for her. It’s all about the hero, Marcus Crassus.” She said his name like a curse. “They showed respect, oh they all showed their damned respect but not a one of them knew her or cared. It was all about you!”

On the last word Diana pounded a fist uselessly into the sand.

Marcus hadn’t known. How could he have? He and Helena’s funerals had happened as he had been making a desperate effort to make his way off the rim of Imperial space, hopping masstrans and begging rides off any kind stranger willing to trade transport for hard work. By the time he had seen footage of the ceremony honoring both of their passing it had been nearly a phase after the fact. The solemn faces of that crowd and the impassioned words of Nassaeya Khanus still haunted him some nights.

“The citizens of the Empire owe everything to Magus Imperia Marcus Crassus Khanus of Verge.” the Empress had said on the recap feed of the event. “I most of all. When his Empire called for him to serve, he answered that call. When he proved himself to be the best of his fellows, he rose to the greatest station my Legion may bestow. When the enemies of the Empire sought to destroy our core, from both within and without, he brought them low. Marcus Crassus was an exemplar, he was all that we may hope to accomplish. May Primus have the good sense to let this man stand by his side, for what other is more deserving or has done more to follow by the First Emperor’s ways and will? Through light and through darkness. From the High Heavens unto the Green Hells. Eons broke before him as our enemies lay broken behind. Magus Imperia Marcus Crassus Khanus of Verge died as he lived, in service to the Empire and all of her peoples. May his memory serve as a guide for all of us in what we may accomplish and in what we may become.”

Much like Diana, Nassaeya had always been good at hiding her emotions, wearing that calm icy mask of deference before her subjects. On that day, though Marcus had only witnessed it through a holo, he had seen the Empress filled with such a terrible sadness that he had almost thrown himself back into the jaws of the Empire that had broken him. If for no other reason than to comfort the woman he had seen grow from an awkwardly forward princess to this regal, forlorn locus of Imperial power.

At the time he had not even noticed the total lack of mention of Helena and in hindsight it made him sick.

“They weren’t there for me either.” said Marcus with a bit of a growl in his voice. Diana looked over her shoulder at him as he continued. “They were there for the Magus.” He paused for a moment as bile rose in his throat. After he swallowed it bitterly, he said, “They came for Primus Reborn. None of them knew me, nobody actually cared about *me*. Nobody but *her*.”

Diana stared at him for a long moment that dragged on for most of a minute. Then she said, “And you repay that by trying to kill yourself?”

Marcus’ head fell into his hands and through his arms, his eyes met Diana’s.

“I’m sorry.” His voice cracked as he said it and he wasn’t sure if he was speaking with the woman right in front of him or her sister, long dead.

The garden within the orcish monastery was quiet after that. It was a silence that was not altogether peaceful and yet it did not contain the same quality of despair that it had held as Marcus had sat beneath the drasil tree.

Somewhere in the near distance an owlbear let out a soft hoot.

Sniffing and turning away from Marcus, Diana wiped at her face and struggled to stand up. When she turned back her features had returned to a semblance of its former steel though cracks still showed in her blotchy cheeks and damp eyes.

“Get up.” she said, her tone deadpan. “Someone is coming.”

Marcus glanced up to see the young orc, Torg, approaching from across the garden. His eyes seemed to gleam like those of an animal in the dim sunlight that still hung just beyond the monastery’s walls.

Managing to push himself up on the second try, the former Magus found his feet just as Torg reached the edge of the now ruined sand. Orcish expressions, especially male ones, were tough to read but Torg definitely wore some form of dismay when he spoke.

“I apologize for the, um, interruption.” said the orc, still staring down at the sand that was now thrown asunder and blackened in some places. “But your presence is required in the great hall.”

Licking his lips, Marcus asked, “Are we leaving?”

Torg’s frown deepened as he looked back up at the two midrians. “Unfortunately, no, not as of yet. Master Ruk is still in parley with the large lykin.”

Both Marcus and Diana froze at that, both exchanging a quick look with each other. Torg either took no notice or chose to continue as if he hadn’t.

With a nod towards Marcus he said, “It seems though, that you have a visitor sir. I’ve been told he is allowed to see you so long he does not break our gift of sanctuary.”

Marcus’ brow furrowed and he asked, “Who is it? What do they want?”

“All he said was that he was a former associate of yours and that you would want to speak with him.” said Torg, standing to one side and gesturing back towards the ornate door they had come through hours before. “He’s waiting in one of the antechambers at your convenience.”

Terrible visions flooded through his mind after Torg’s answer. Of the khag, Arkon, or the ogre, Greg, somehow finding them here and damning all political or social morays that forbid violence within an orcish monastery just to get what they wanted. Or, worse still, one of the Thirteen waiting for him. If one of the Finders had recognized the former Magus for who he truly was then there had been more than enough time for them to have sent word back to the Empire and for a real Magus to have been dispatched. Would it be one with whom he had been friendly, trying to coax him back, perhaps Baston Scalebreaker or Castor Unneal? Or would it be one of the monsters sent to destroy him, like Belius Tornak or Ninder of Forl?

Standing up straight and taking a deep breath in the clean evening air of Bounty, Marcus decided that he did not care. No matter who or what waited for him it did not matter any more. He was done. Done with sneaking and scraping by. Done with hiding who he was and what he had done. Done with this ruin of a life he had been wallowing in for almost half a decade.

Diana had been right to rage at him as she had. Helena would have probably done the same if she had seen him as he had been for the last four cycles. It was not how she should be remembered, not how her memory should be carried on.

Walking back towards the great hall, Marcus glanced back at Diana and asked, “Are you coming?”

Diana was just staring at him with a curious expression wrinkling the steel. “Are you okay?” she asked as she moved to catch up with him.

Marcus took another deep breath, inhaling the cool, crisp air through his nose. “I’m better.” he said and gave her a weak smile as they walked. “Thank you.”

“For what?” asked Diana, her tone displaying more confusion than her face did.

“For kicking my ass.” said Marcus.

The former Magus had been beaten and bruised, tortured and nearly crippled on multiple occasions but it had been nearly three centuries since someone had beaten some sense into him as Diana had this evening.

“Any time.” said Diana and there was a sharp edge to her voice that made Marcus think that she would be more than willing to make good on that offer.

Eventually they were led through the great hall, orcs still bustling about even as the hour grew late, and brought to one of the smaller waiting rooms like the one Marcus had sat in before being brought before Master Ruk.

As he entered Marcus saw the midrian waiting for him and froze.

A lanky form from Saul’s Rock lounged lazily on one of the long benches, his legs stretched out and his arms thrown to either side over the backs of the seat. The gangmage’s expression changed from one of absolute boredom to a pleased sneer as he looked up at Marcus. He sat up straight, casually adjusting his rolled up sleeves so that the ruby-aethite cufflinks rested comfortably against his forearms.

“Mr. Gaius.” said Rufus Hedgemire, right hand of the crimelord Edward Stoat. “Pleasure to see you again.”

Chapter Twenty Two

“That’s robbery!” shouted Mel, making Slevin’s smile falter slightly.

The shopkeeper looked at her with an awkward expression as he said, “Actually my dear, it’s more than a fair price. Such an item could easily fetch me three or four times that from the right buyer. Working khagrish tech being as scarce as it is and with the khag themselves being ever so zealous in regards to pre-collapse artifacts such as this, it says something about the out of the way nature of Bounty that I’ve held onto them as long as I have.”

Mel looked at the old midrian and then shot an exasperated glance back at the absorption panel.

They needed it if the *Amal’hiam* was ever going to fly again or if they wanted to get offworld without the orcs’ help. That said, one and a half million jules was a ruinous amount. Well, Mel amended to herself, it would have been a cycle ago.

When she and Marcus had left Saul’s Rock they had also left some rather unique dwarvish tech in the hands of Edward Stoat and he had compensated them to the tune of four million jules. Admittedly they had also left Stoat in near total control of the smuggler’s moon after dispatching one of his rivals and putting him in a prime position to negotiate the world’s annexation by the Khanus Empire. Needless to say it had been a transaction that left a sour taste in Marcus’ mouth, mostly because he had only been working for Stoat in the first place so that he could find some clue as to Helena’s whereabouts.

That four million had gone a long way in the last cycle. Food, supplies and basic maintenance on the *Amal’hiam* had all been necessary costs. Then there had been all the bribes like the one they had paid on the way into Bounty airspace; people tended to ask far fewer questions with a large number of jules freshly padding out their accounts. Add that to the money Marcus always left with those poor souls who they had freed from slavery over the past cycle and they had spent just over a million of the jules Stoat had given them.

Another one point five would not bankrupt them, not by any definition of the word, but it would still put a sizable dent in their remaining savings. It would be enough to easily survive on, that was good enough for her.

“*One* million.” said Mel boldly, turning back towards Slevin with a shrewd expression.

The shopkeeper raised an eyebrow and his smile returned in full. “Is a fairy attempting to make a bargain with me?” asked Slevin energetically.

Mel grinned back. “One million *and* you come to our ship to install it.”

That made the shopkeeper’s eyebrows rise in unison, a hungry look making his eyes wide. “You’d let me onto your ship?” he asked somewhat incredulously. “Who’s to say I even know how to fix what is broken?”

“Just for the repairs.” said Mel wolfishly. “And maybe a tour of her once you’re done.”

Slevin clasped his hands together and rubbed them together in an anticipatory gesture. “One point five.” said the old midrian. “Assuming I can do the repairs we’ll call the extra five hundred grand as payment for services rendered.”

Mel was about to respond with a complaint when Slevin raised a hand and continued. “If I can’t fix your ship, we’ll call it one million even. After that I may be able to put you in contact with someone who can help, assuming I can’t.”

Giving it some thought, Mel finally nodded and said, “Sounds fair to me.”

Slevin pulled a small paper notepad out of his pocket along with an old fashioned ink pen. Mel practically marveled at the archaic tools as the shopkeeper wrote out a receipt in a beautiful flowing script. When he was done he capped his pen and carefully tore the piece of paper out along its perforated edge. He hesitated in the middle of proffering it to Mel, his mouth contorting as though he were working out some logic problem in his mind, then folded the paper four times so that the pixie was not holding something nearly as big as herself.

“You’ll find all my relevant account information there.” said Slevin, indicating the receipt with one hand while pulling out a small device from a pocket. He held out a miniature holodisplay rigged into a tiny, complex chem. “And now if I can just verify your own accounts.”

Mel gave him a scandalized look. “What? Don’t you trust me?”

Slevin gave her another fierce smile and a nod of his head, saying, “I don’t mean to sound rude but I would have not made it to where I am today by taking my customers at their word. Don’t misunderstand, this whole encounter has an air of destiny about it.”

Mel moved forward, placing one of her tiny hands on the device’s chem and attuning to it so that she could relay her metanet account information. Hardware like this was a common practice among the bureaucratic and corporate elite within the Dragon’s Wake and Mel had seen their use at plenty of functions among Empire bigwigs.

“What do you mean, *destiny*?” asked Mel as the chem processed the information she was transmitting aetherically.

Slevin met her eyes and even through the lenses of his glasses she could make out the hungry fascination there.

“You must sense it.” he said. “One of the wee folk in great need comes to find an old midrian in possession of an artifact of great power and worth. It’s like one of the old tales in reverse.”

Mel smiled at that and the words that followed seemed to well up out of her of their own accord, “Have you ever heard the one about the Magus and his pixie companion who flew from one end of the Wake to the other, searching for his lost love?”

Slevin’s eyes widened. “No. No I can’t say I have.”

Mel’s voice contained a quiet intensity as she said, “You will.”

Some part of Mel’s brain was screaming at the information she had just divulged but some other, deeper part of her shared her smile. Why shouldn’t she be able share? Marcus had after all and Dann Slevin seemed to have a much deeper appreciation for the grandiose nature of what was going on than Master Ruk. Or at the very least he seemed more impressed by it.

There was a soft beep as the device completed its autoreference over the metanet and it shone with a soft blue light.

Slevin did not look away from Mel for a long moment but eventually he tore his eyes downward and gave an approving nod before tucking the device back into a pocket.

“Well, that seems in order.” he said, looking back up at Mel and speaking as though his words did not reflect what he was actually thinking about. “I’ll most likely be able to be along tomorrow morning, once I’ve secured transport for myself and the panel. Where abouts might I be able to find your ship?”

“Southern public berths. Number Nine.” said Mel as she flitted backwards to hover in front of Slevin at eye level again. “But tomorrow won’t work.”

Dann Slevin sighed wistfully and smiled as he said, “Of course it won’t. Getting a porter here on such short notice may take a little while though. Call it an hour or two?”

Mel beamed at the midrian and he returned her smile with one just as bright.

“Thank you Mr. Slevin.” said Mel. “I can’t really say what this means to me and,” Mel paused coyly. “to my friend.”

The shopkeeper gave the pixie a slight bow, his eyes never leaving hers. “Of course little miss. I look forward to meeting your… friend, for myself.”

“Southern berths.” said Mel again as she headed back towards the front of the door. “Number nine.”

Slevin’s smile became wry as he made a shooing motion with his hand. “Away with you fairy, do not make me renegotiate our deal.” he said with mock severity before adding in a more serious tone. “One or two hours.”

Mel left Slevin’s Treasures feeling lighter than she had in cycles, a smile still spread across her face as she darted to the southeast, towards the *Amal’hiam*.

Greg lowered his wrist for the third time in as many minutes, trying not to think about the second hand on the device slowly gliding away the moments before he was free of his Contract. There were still no new notices on his datapad about a new incoming employer so for the time being it looked as though he would be a free ogre in just under twenty minutes time.

It was a terrifying concept.

The war-merc felt his hands clench and unclench nervously as he paced in a corner of the berth containing the *Amal’hiam.* His Contract was not just some document tying him to Ark, if that had been all then perhaps Greg might not be on the verge of a panic attack. His Contract, every ogre Contract, was a summation of their lives. It was a living document that changed and grew as the ogre did. It reflected their skills and abilities, listed the locations and length of their formal schooling, surmised their family and background. Greg’s Contract was as much a part of him as any limb, more so perhaps, because a severed limb would eventually grow back. His Contract was a reflection of himself back out into the galaxy.

Presumably the Masters at the War School would have already posted his availability onto the metanet. Seeing as Ark had made no plans of renewal and had either shrugged off or outright ignored every mention Greg made of it, it meant that he was now publicly available. All of the Dragon’s Wake, or at least those with the credentials to contact the War School of Gobwar, could see his Contract. They could see *him*. They could judge him. They could find him wanting.

If he had received no notice of a new Hob by now it meant that the entire galaxy had looked upon Gregory Vesuvius Wilhelm Von Statun XIII and then looked elsewhere.

He could feel his heart pounding against his ribs as more seconds bled into minutes.

Somewhere in Greg’s past there was a terrified young man, too stupid to see the social trap he had walked into and too foolhardy to get out once the trap was sprung. That young ogre, last in a long line of Von Statun boys being trained in the greatest of the Law Schools of Gobwar, had done the right thing in an impossible situation.

It had cost him his future as a lawmerc within his father’s firm but more importantly, especially in the senior Von Statun’s eyes, it had left his Contract with a blemish that could never be removed. The only thing left for such a young fool was the War School on Gobwar’s farthest moon, the next best thing to exile as far as a Von Statun was concerned.

Even now Greg did not regret any of his decisions, he would not change a one, but as the deadline approached and his freedom loomed, he was forced to wonder if the entire galaxy thought as his father did. After all, the war-merc’s Contract only revealed facts, with the shades of gray that might color specific situations stripped away to leave abrupt phrases such as, *dismembered* and *murdered*.

Those people who might prefer these qualities could not generally afford the War School’s rates. Then again, Ark had said on more than one occasion that Greg had been a good bargain.

He did not like to think about the fact that he was discounted goods, but that thought hung over him like a storm cloud given his current situation.

Greg was a highly skilled, highly experienced war-merc, at a markdown no less, and still nobody would have him. His Contract was up for grabs and there were no takers.

What did it say about him that no one in the galaxy would want his services?

Glancing down at his watch again, Greg sighed.

Across the berth, Red’s Dogs had set up a rough camp around the *Amal’hiam*, several of the low class mercs had set up a makeshift card table out of a few supply crates. Red Bartlett himself was not present, having left an hour or so ago to scout the city with another of his mercenaries. Ark sat in front of the *Amal’hiam*’s forward hatch, still staring at his attunement breaker and growling under his breath in a steady stream of curses in khagrish, mid-khanic and other languages he knew just enough of to swear in.

Walking over to his employer, at least for the next fourteen minutes, Greg coughed gently as he sidled up under the belly of the *Amal’hiam*.

Ark flicked his gaze towards Greg and he grunted in acknowledgment of the ogre’s presence.

“How fares the door?” asked Greg lamely.

Snarling Ark said, “How does it look? Still closed, yes? I don’t know what that pixie has done to the ‘tunement algorithms on this ship but it keeps changing, rust take it.”

That actually got Greg’s attention. “What?”

“Changing!” exclaimed Ark, gesturing in frustration. “Cogfather’s Tools, but I’ve never seen anything like this. It’s as though it can sense me trying to find the attunement signature and changes just enough to make it impossible to establish a baseline.”

Greg did not know enough about aetheric locking mechanisms to understand exactly what Ark was fighting against within the door but he knew that what the khag described was not something his people had originally built into the vessel.

“It is like its alive.” muttered Ark, more to himself than to Greg.

“Is that possible?” asked Greg.

Ark shot him a bewildered look that was part incredulously questioning eyebrow and part disgusted scowl. “No.” said the Prospector. “A chem on a door cannot be alive.” He shook his head and snorted. “Was there something you needed Greg?”

The ogre checked his watch again. “Ah, well, it’s just…” began Greg, entirely unsure how this conversation was supposed to go. His only other Hob before Ark had been a merchant looking for a bodyguard while he traded along the Outer Kingdoms within the Southern Reach and when the man had eventually settled in with a rhini supply convoy he had just told Greg that his services were no longer required. Ark did not even seem to be aware that anything was about to change.

“Out with it.” said the khag, finally turning fully to face Greg.

“My Contract.” said Greg lamely. “You see Ark its-”

“Ten more minutes by my mark.” said Ark in the moment between words where the war-merc had taken a breath.

“You’re aware then.” said Greg on the exhale.

Ark rolled his eyes and, in the most dismissive gesture the ogre had seen since the last time he’d seen of his father, the Prospector turned back to his work on the door.

“Did you need something else?” asked Ark as he fiddled with his device and readjusted some setting on it.

“No.” said Greg, a little sullenly. “Just a reminder.”

Ark snorted again and squinted at the oscillating waveform displayed on his device; changing radically even as he attempted to compensate for it. “I do not need reminding, Greg. Thank you for your service. If you see the pixie in the next ten minutes, I need her alive.”

Greg deflated slightly.

That was it.

That was all he was going to be getting from Ark in the form of a goodbye.

Looking away dejectedly, Greg almost jumped out of his skin when a woman’s voice just above them said, “By the Tower, I knew you were a bastard, dwarf, but that’s cold.”

Whipping around and staring upwards, Greg caught the barest hint of distortion in the air above the *Amal’hiam*’s airlock before there was a flash of silver light and the pixie, Mel, shot through the air towards Ark.

Trained instinct taking over, Greg dove towards his Hob, already knowing he was not close enough to get to the khag before Mel did.

Ark was already reeling backwards as the pixie hit him square in the brow and then grabbed a large hank of his hair near the edge of his scalp and dragged him backwards. Screaming, Ark stumbled awkwardly away from the *Amal’hiam*, more from his own lack of balance than Mel’s apparent strength.

The mercenaries within the berth, slow on the uptake as always, scrambled for their weapons and then cast about wildly, unsure where the threat was coming from.

Greg was only one long stride away from Ark, already stretching out a long arm to grab at Mel, when she let go of his employer and flew up and over the ogre. As she shoved off of Ark there was another crackle of silvery energy and the khag gave out another shout, this time in pain. It forced Greg forward those last few meters to check on his Hob rather than immediately pivoting to go after Mel.

A large burn covered the side of Ark’s head, most of the hair near his temple had been seared away and some of the skin just above his left eye looked blackened. Upon closer inspection it looked as though all of his injuries, including the burn, were superficial. The skin on the side of his scalp may have been scorched, but as it flaked away Greg saw healthy pink flesh beneath. Mel, it seemed, had not been trying to kill.

There was a hissing sound behind him and Greg turned just in time to see the *Amal’hiam*’s outer airlock open, Mel flying inside and turning to look straight at him. Even from a distance of several meters, Greg could make out the silver sheen of her eyes as she winked at him just before the airlock closed again.

The ogre could not help but grin as Ark cursed and stood.

“I don’t care what you have to do!” shouted Arkon-no-Sek, Greg’s Hob for the next seven minutes. “Tear open the airlocks, break through the hull. I don’t care. Get in there and get her!”

Mel could not help but laugh as the inner airlock finished cycling and she flew through the *Amal’hiam*, towards the mess. In all likelihood she could have just waited for a good moment to slip into the ship without letting anyone notice but the looks on their faces had just been too good.

When she had arrived at the berth she had not been expecting the dwarf and his mercenaries to still be hanging around. Though, she supposed, if they had managed to track Marcus and Diana up to the orcish monastery as the Finders had, there probably would have already been another firefight. It meant they had lost Ark and company in their flight to the orcs and the dwarf had just decided to fall back to the only place he knew they might return.

Smart, thought Mel as she zipped towards her ‘netpad once again, but not smart enough.

Mel had heard enough of the conversation between the dwarf and the ogre to know what was going on between them. The specifics of the thing did not matter, what mattered was that in a few short minutes Ark’s most powerful tool would no longer let himself be used.

Mel had seen Greg fight before, Hells, she had sort of fought the ogre herself. She wasn’t sure if pushing someone out of an elevator qualified as fighting but in the case of the ogre, it had sure as shit felt like it.

So when he had said he was going to be free of his Contract with Ark in just a few minutes, Mel had been struck with the next best thing to inspiration: poetic justice.

There was a thunderous sound from outside the ship and Mel looked up as the sounds of heavy boots tromping along the top of the *Amal’hiam* moved overhead. Several sharp *clangs* were followed by a terrible screeching noise from somewhere farther up the ship.

Mel moved more quickly, she didn’t have much time by the sound of things.

Bringing up her ‘netpad, she placed her hands on the sides of the device, feeling its reaction to her aetherics. As more pounding sounds rang down the halls from the converted airlock chamber that now served as the *Amal’hiam’s* cargo bay, Mel felt as though her progress was sluggish. Searches and scrolls through different ‘net feeds took a tremendous amount of time as someone or something attempted to tear its way through the ship’s smaller, weaker airlocks.

A blue light flashed near a windmill shaped icon near the edge of her screen, letting Mel know that Ariel was online though he had not messaged her directly. Pausing, she gave the icon a long look and in that quiet moment there was a huge *clong* sound and the clatter of something landing on the polysteel deck inside the *Amal’hiam*. It was followed shortly by the *thud* of huge boots hitting the same surface.

Inside.

He was inside.

Mel was out of time. She glanced at the chronometer on her ‘netpad. One minute. She was moving too slow.

There was one way to speed things up. One way to get what she needed on the metanet at the speed of thought.

Mel took a deep breath and willed her heart to slow and her mind to drift into her aetherics. She felt the ebb and flow of the metanet surge through her fingertips and into her nervous system.

Without ever taking her eyes off the hallway leading towards the ogre war-merc that no doubt stalked her way, Mel dove into the metanet and the real world slipped away.

Chapter Twenty Three

Marcus wasn’t sure if he should laugh, cry or simply shoot Hedgemire dead where he sat. The day had started to become so surreal that he might just be able to do all three without much effort.

It was Diana who finally broke the shocked silence.

“Who is this?”

Hedgemire’s gaze shifted passed Marcus and he focused on the woman standing just outside the sitting room. He nodded slightly, his eyes slithering up and down Diana with calculation, and he said, “Rufus Hedgemire ma’am, pleased to finally put a face to the puzzle.”

Marcus shifted, blocking the gangmage’s view and taking a step forward to stand just in front of where the man sat. The former Magus’ right hand hovered wearily near his revolver. “How did you find me?” Marcus growled through clenched teeth. “What do you want?”

Hedgemire seemed to stare through Marcus for a lazy moment and then he focused back up at the stockier midrian, taking him in under the soft light of the room.

“You’re not looking so hot Mr. Gaius.” said Hedgemire. “Though to be fair, last time I saw you, you were covered in another man’s blood and dragging his unconscious body around. Tough to top that look.”

Marcus felt the bruises on his face heat up but he stared at Hedgemire just the same. He crossed his arms to stop any nervous tremor that might run through them.

“What do you want?” repeated Marcus.

Hedgemire sighed and shook his head. “Always straight to the point.” said Hedgemire with a sardonic grin on his face. “What, no time to chitchat with an old friend?”

“We are not friends.” said Marcus flatly. “You work for the man who blackmailed me into doing his dirty work.”

“Which you were also handsomely paid for.” said the lanky midrian with a hint of sourness entering his tone. “More than I’ve ever been paid, I might add.”

“What do you want?” asked Marcus a third time, putting his hand on his revolver and flicking the safety strap off.

Hedgemire put his hands up but before he could say anything the young orc, Torg, sidled into the room and was holding Marcus’ wrist before the former Magus even realized he was there.

“This man has been given sanctuary by Master Ruk.” said Torg in a soft but serious tone, though he did eye Hedgemire wearily when he added, “At least temporarily.”

Marcus stared at the gray-skinned orc for a long moment, studying his slightly tapering ears and broad features. In his simple homespun and short stature, Torg appeared as a monk, calm and peaceful. But there was a strength in his grip that forced Marcus to pause and study him, eventually finding a deep reservoir of iron will within his otherwise demure eyes.

Easing his hand away from his gun, Marcus nodded to the orc, who nodded back before taking several steps away to stand across from the trio of midrians.

“See, we can all be gentlemanly about this.” said Hedgemire as he finally stood up.

Marcus growled unintelligibly, taking a step back so that he stood closer to the still open door of the sitting room. He noted that Diana had never actually stepped into the room, standing with her arms hanging loosely at her sides in what Marcus recognized as an easy stance that could violently shift into action if the need presented itself. Catching her eyes over his shoulder, he nodded to her.

“It’s okay, I’ll hear him out.” said the former Magus, more to Torg than anyone else.

“Good.” said Torg, moving once again so that Marcus barely registered it until the orc was already out of the room. “We shall give you some privacy then.”

Diana did not say anything but her steely gaze shifted from Marcus to Hedgemire and back again. Finally she nodded, stepping aside so Torg could exit and close the door.

Once the door was closed an abrupt silence fell over the two midrians and it wasn’t until Marcus turned back to look at Hedgemire that he saw that the other man stood with his head cocked slightly, as if listening to something.

“You hear that?” asked the gangmage softly.

Marcus listened for a moment but did not hear anything. “No.” he said finally.

“Exactly.” said Hedgemire. “No creaking, no wind, not even the pad of feet outside. No sound at all.” He looked back down at Marcus with a serious expression. “I just wanted you to take note of that.”

Marcus nodded, understanding. This room had been silenced. Whether by aetherics or just simple insulation, no sound was getting in or out of this room. Which meant they could speak freely.

Hedgemire nodded in kind and proceeded to flop back down onto the bench behind him, letting out a short but audible sigh as he did. “Please, Mr. Crassus.” said the gangmage. “Sit, relax. You look half dead.”

Marcus moved into the room but he did not sit. Instead he paced so that he stood directly across from Hedgemire and then glanced upwards at the Waeth’ort that hung above him. The aethite crystals in this one glowed brightly, none of their charged diminished by crack or imperfection.

“So he told you.” said Marcus dully, not looking away from the gently floating ornament.

“Been a long cycle since I saw you last.” said Hedgemire, inspecting one of his hands as he rubbed his thumb and middle finger together. “You could say I’ve been moving up in the Wake. As has Mr. Stoat.”

The jab was a subtle one. Marcus had inadvertently put the crimelord Edward Stoat in a position to negotiate the annexation of Saul’s Rock by the Khanus Empire. At the time it hadn’t meant much, the smuggler’s moon was just a parasite within the Dasa system, one that the Empire would have most likely left to rot after they used it as a staging ground to take the trade hub of Dasa itself. At least for a few phases though, it had given Stoat access to people of importance within the Empire. In a cycle’s time there was little doubt in Marcus’ mind that the crimelord had managed to leverage himself into bigger and better things through that connection.

“Out with it.” said Marcus sternly. “You didn’t come all the way out here to chat and brag.”

Hedgemire shrugged. “Well, yes and no.”

Growling, Marcus fought the urge to go for his gun again. He had had enough. Enough games. Enough pandering. Enough double talk. Just enough.

Marcus felt his shoulders bunch up and his fists begin to tremble as he said, “Why are you stalling?”

That made Hedgemire lift an eyebrow with a grin. “Who says I’m stalling?”

“Enough!” shouted Marcus, slamming a fist into the wall behind him.

From above the two midrians there was a soft tinkling sound as the Waeth’ort shifted and for the briefest flash of a second the lights cast by the charged aethite dimmed.

Hedgemire’s eyes darted upwards and he swallowed, adjusting his posture as he focused back down at Marcus. The former Magus barely noticed though as he stared down at his own hand and then back up at the Waeth’ort.

Had he done that? It did not seem possible. Then again he had seen aetheric technology go haywire when it was around him throughout the last four cycles. Scryers exploding, indoor plumbing reversing its hot/cold settings, delicate chems melting or simply ceasing to function. He had never caused something as simple as lights to malfunction though.

“Right. Sure.” said Hedgemire, a nervous edge creeping into his voice. “Sorry about that.” He sat straight and took a breath to calm his obvious nerves. “Just seemed as though you’ve got yourself in a sticky situation is all. Had to press that, you know how it goes.”

Marcus sucked in air through his nose and snorted it back out. He did know how it went. How many times had the Magus preyed upon a world that had been just on the brink of collapse? How many times had the Khanus Empire swooped in to *help* just when things seemed at their most dire? Most of the planets he had incorporated had barely even had a choice in the matter if they hoped to survive. Marcus had not thought about it that way at the time but in hindsight he could not see it any other way.

“You’re here with an offer.” said Marcus darkly, it was not a question.

“The same offer actually.” said Hedgemire as he spread his hands in an open gesture. “You’ve found the girl. Happy to see she’s still alive. Mr. Stoat figured with that out of the way, you might be willing to see things a little more clearly now. He’s still willing to offer you protection, in exchange for your services.”

Marcus had known what was coming but Hedgemire’s words still took him off guard. Edward Stoat himself had made the offer a cycle ago on Saul’s Rock. The crimelord had worked out who Marcus was, *what* he was, and, thinking he was still bargaining with a Magus, had offered him a job. Marcus did not think Stoat knew about the curse, about how he had been stripped of his aetherics and based on Hedgemire’s reaction to the lights it seemed as though he still did not know.

Their assumption was that he still possessed the powers of a demigod.

Smiling bitterly, Marcus asked, “And who could Stoat protect me from?” He gestured out the door. “Finders? The Empire? Does he seriously think that if the Empress learned I was alive she would send anything but one of the other Thirteen? Can Stoat protect me from a Magus?”

Any hint of cynicism left on Hedgemire’s face drained away and his sharp features became a blade of tempered steel.

“You would be surprised what Mr. Stoat can accomplish.” said the gangmage evenly and when he spoke his tone reminded Marcus of how the Followers of Primus used to speak of *him*. There was faith in those words.

Marcus gave the other midrian a long look, reappraising the man. In their brief interactions together he had always thought of Hedgemire as just another goon. A disposable pawn in whatever game Edward Stoat had been playing. And while that may have been true from Stoat’s point of view, it was not the same for Hedgemire. On the outside the gangmage was nothing but relaxed braggadocio but what Marcus had just caught a glimpse of was something far more dangerous. A true believer; someone who would die for the cause they fought for and would do so at the expense of any enemy they faced. In a word, Hedgemire was a fanatic, though of a sort Marcus was unaccustomed to seeing.

“Let’s say I agree.” said Marcus cautiously. “I say yes, and then what?”

Hedgemire’s posture returned to its relaxed slump and he swept out a hand, casually letting flickers of red aether dance between his fingers.

“Well, that’s the easy part, ain’t it?” said Hedgemire with a grin. “Got a tran waiting outside, we take that to a waiting shuttle, then we’re in low float before you can spit.”

Marcus finally sat down on the bench along the wall, scratching at the rough stubble that coated his jaw. He hadn’t shaved since before their misadventure on the slaver ship the day before. The idle thought was a brief distraction as he weighed the options now laid out before him.

He had three real options if he wanted to get himself, Mel and Diana out of here.

One was to wait for the orcs and their quasimystical aid, the specifics of which were completely unknown to him.

Two was to wait on Mel and pray that the *Amal’hiam* was repaired as quickly as possible. It was probably the plan with the longest odds given the dwarvish ship’s peculiar craftsmanship and the nature of the repairs needed.

Their third and final option was for Marcus to take Hedgemire, and by extension Stoat, up on their offer for protection. It meant getting back into bed with a man who had gone through an extraordinary amount of effort in an attempt to secure the services of what he thought was a Magus. What would Stoat do when he found out that Marcus was not what the crimelord believed him to be?

“And what about the Finders?” asked Marcus after a brief silence. “Are they just going to let us walk out of here?”

Hedgemire laughed slightly. “Ha! Right. As if your fairy friend can’t let us stroll right out of here with one of her veils. Besides, they’re in talks with the head orc as far as I can tell. They might as well have said as much when they shoved me in here.”

Marcus shook his head and scowled. “Won’t work. Mel’s not here right now. Besides, there’s a bigger problem. Even if Mel could veil us there are the lykins to worry about.”

“Lykins?” asked Hedgemire, though he did not sound concerned.

“Basheen Grimm to be specific.” said Marcus simply.

Hedgemire’s face flickered for a moment and then he burst into a fit of hysterical laughter. “Basheen… oh, hahaha! Basheen bloody Grimm? Oh, that’s rich. So that’s what happened to him and his.”

Marcus’ scowl deepened and he was taken aback by the other man’s reaction. “What do you mean?” he asked sourly.

Hedgemire calmed a bit but he still sounded overly amused when he spoke. “You remember that business on Saul’s Rock, of course.” Marcus nodded. “Well, after the Empire got their foothold, Dasa was quick to follow suite. Inside of four phases and the whole system got got, as it were. So then the Empire starts cleaning up, right? Shutting down the Rock was just the first bit. So all the rats start jumping ship,”

“Some sooner than later.” said Marcus pointedly.

The other midrian gave him a look that lacked any shame. “Exactly.” continued Hedgemire. “But some got their teeth in, wouldn’t go quietly to some other corner of the Wake. And when it comes right down to it like that, Imperials only really give you two options.”

“Join or die.” said Marcus bleakly, staring back down at the floor.

“You’d know best of all.” responded Hedgemire glibly. “Seems like ol’ Basheen joined up.”

Marcus considered that. It was not unusual for local security forces to be rolled into the existing Legion structure when a planet or entire system was incorporated. There were even times in Marcus’ memory in which larger factions of organized crime syndicates had been forced to legitimize themselves under Imperial rule.

This was not the same.

The Grimms had been a street gang, dangerous to be sure but nothing a squad of well trained, and well armed, legionnaires could not have handled. Now their leader was suddenly one of the Finders, or something very much like them. It did not make any sense. One could not train to join the Special Operations branch of the Legion, though they generally had cycles of military experience under their belt before they were even considered for a position there, they were selected. Agents of the shadowy organization were culled from some of the best and most powerful personnel that the Legion had to offer.

If someone like Basheen Grimm had been elevated to such a position so quickly it spoke of either political conflicts within the upper echelons of the Imperial Armed Forces or instability within the Empire itself. Most likely it meant both and someone up the chain of command within Spec-Ops had made the call to begin recruiting more recklessly.

The whole scenario of Saul’s Rock was raising more and more questions, now that Marcus took a moment to think about what had happened there. They were questions he did not have time to get answers to but they bore thinking about.

Of course there was really only one question that Marcus needed answered at this very moment and he asked it without much fanfare despite its importance.

“How long have you known I would end up here on Bounty?”

That seemed to catch Hedgemire off guard.

“What?” said the gangmage.

“You knew I was here somehow.” said Marcus, still not looking up as he spoke and his mind reeled to keep up with his own words. “You had the *Amal’hiam* bugged but Mel found them all within a turn or two. I find it hard to believe she would miss one. So that means you knew we would be coming here eventually.” Marcus looked up and stared hard into Hedgemire’s eyes. “You knew, or maybe just Stoat did, that the person I was searching for was on Bounty. That’s how you’re here to approach me like this. I want to know for how long?”

Hedgemire’s face was placid as he said, “Phases, at least. I’ve only been here a turnspan though. Even without the bugs Mr. Stoat’s been following your progress. He knew you’d end up here.” He inclined his head towards the closed door behind Marcus. “He knew she was the one you were looking for.”

Stoat had known. For the better part of a cycle Stoat had known where Marcus would end up. Even if he did not know that Diana was not exactly the woman Marcus had been looking for, he had known where the former Magus’ search was going to end.

Marcus wanted to feel angry, he wanted to feel justifiably outraged at this whole situation and vent those emotions onto the lean face of the man who sat in front of him. But he did not. All he felt was a hollow finality, an endcap on his search for Helena.

The last cycle of his life had been a penance. Seeing all of those women, the possible Helenas, abused and abandoned by whatever lives they had possessed before, not all of them able to walk away from how Marcus had found them. The memories of those he had been unable to save would be a heavy weight on his soul for however much of his life was left. It was a pressure he bore without regret though because it was better than he deserved.

Diana had been right. He had disrespected Helena’s memory for far too long.

Standing up, Marcus made for the door as he spoke sharply at Hedgemire. “Tell Stoat I don’t need his help. Not now, not ever.”

The abruptness of the former Magus’ answer left Hedgemire speechless and staring as Marcus strode passed. The door to the waiting room was open and he was out into the great hall of the monastery before Hedgemire had even managed to stand.

“Wait.” called the gangmage after him. “Hold on a second.”

Hedgemire almost slammed into Marcus’ back when he stopped abruptly just outside the waiting room door.

Putting a hand on Marcus’ shoulder to push himself away, Hedgemire began to speak, “You can’t just throw an opportunity like this…”

Hedgemire’s words died as he looked up passed Marcus and saw the thing that the former Magus had been fixated on after his third step away from the waiting room.

Basheen Grimm stood in the middle of the great hall flanked by two other Finders, black fur highlighting the silver scars that streaked the wolf-man’s body. Garbed in the tactical outfit of a Finder, the lykin was not holding any sort of weapon but his clawed hands more than made up for the lack of gun. He sniffed the air once and turned slowly, his ears pricking back and his hellish eyes sweeping over the three midrians and the orc that stood only a few meters away.

Torn lips pulling away from jagged yellow fangs, Basheen growled in a voice that sounded like ragged thunder. “Hedgemire.”

Chapter Twenty Four

As the world twisted away Mel let out a gasp that released no air. It was less of a sudden inhalation of breath than it was a sudden intake of sensation, expressed within the metanet as a gasp. Her awareness expanded, her senses becoming, if not sharper, than deeper as she took in her surroundings.

The metanet expressed itself differently depending on what you were doing, reacting and coalescing in concert with those minds that were tapped into it. Mel had been told that once upon a time, long before anyone in the Wake had ever dreamed of traveling between the stars, the galaxy spanning network had been a sparsely populated phantom realm. Wayward Feyfolk and lost wisps would sometimes make their way there and the occasional mortal with exceptionally powerful aetherics might connect to what they thought was some sort of spirit world. This had been before the widespread use of chems of course and the modern understandings of aether as a whole.

Now, with the help of technology, almost anyone could access the metanet. Mortals traded and stored information on it, they played games over it. They could even contact the Fey, that weird out of sync swath of space that dominated the Northern Reach, through its connection with the metanet.

This sort of universal connectivity had transformed a once desolate plane into a chaotic other-world that danced and transformed depending on which direction one looked and where they focused.

To Mel, her surroundings had suddenly become a huge, bustling city. Fractal buildings spiraled around her into a sky that pulsed with a verdant, bright green. Each building was a system or a feed, each with its own set of rules and functions and each open to her with a thought. One moment she could bear witness to historical recreation holos of the Deep War, surrounded by the ancient war hulks of the first great conflict that had engulfed the galaxy, and in the next moment she could find herself halfway through a seminar on the finer points of cooking lian cuisine.

All the while she could feel others moving about her on the streets of the not-city. Other ‘divers took on full bodied forms, each appearing how they pleased in this mind-space, sometimes giving her a look to acknowledge her existence on their level; a virtual handshake that let her know that they saw her as one of their own. There were more on the streets, trillions more, most folk in the galaxy foregoing metadiving in favor of the far simpler browsing through interactive datapads or holodisplays. They swarmed around Mel and the other ‘divers on the street like semitransparent ghosts, unable to assert their wills as directly but no less present within the metanet.

As Mel took it all in, she felt an uplifting sensation, a weightlessness and sense of freedom that she had not felt in almost half a decade. Despite the fact that her metanet avatar, her ikon, required no oxygen she took a moment to breathe deep in the virtual space and savor her bustling emotions.

Contentment. Joy. Exaltation. Fear.

The last was that nagging, cringing sensation that she could not help but feel every time she used the metanet.

As a pixie, Mel was one of the Feyfolk, the people of the Northern Reach, the servitors of the Sidhe. Even if they did not admit such openly or even know it themselves each sapient bound to the Fey served the Queens, one way or another. The fairy matriarchs were omnipresent in the Fey, knowing all that there was to know within their territory. Their personal courts were like pantheons of old gods to the Sidhe of the Houses. Their wills pierced reality itself, changing huge patches of the Northern Reach into the bizarre hybrid of real and digital known as the Metafey. Through that space the six Queens of the six Courts could send their agents anywhere, so to speak. The Sidhe could not physically escape their dimensional prison, the Fey itself, but they could walk amongst mortals through the ‘net.

Luring. Bargaining. Scheming. Always looking for a way out.

While she was in the Metanet, Mel had to be on her guard.

She was about to execute a search function when a blue sensation winked at her. It was not a light or color that she actually saw, it was just a feeling that blinked in the periphery of her mind and it felt blue.

On the street of the not-city a gap appeared between two impossibly tall buildings and suddenly a windmill had always been there. In normal space its spinning blades would have broken as they sliced at the structures to its left and right but here in the metanet those buildings curved slightly inward, making way for the virtual motion.

The windmill looked anachronistic amid the chaotic not-city’s riotous profusion of architecture, with solid red-blue bricks forming its base and old timbers of some dark wood making up the bulk of the structure. At the same time it fit right in within the metanet, creases and lines of its construction were filled with softly glowing blue light. The blades of the windmill spun with a slow deliberation, the cloth sails between wooden frames dragging traceries of wispy blue power.

A door at the base of the structure did not so much open as it did fade from existence and a lithe figure appeared, walking out towards Mel.

It was Ariel.

Mel had no idea what the ‘diver looked like in the real world and it had never mattered. Here in the metanet, he presented himself in an ikon that resembled a slight, effeminate youth with large, sparkling blue eyes. His skin too was that same shade of piercing, sky blue; becoming so pale as to almost be white around his eyes and near his fingertips. A cloak of some strange, nonexistent material was draped about his slim shoulders, flowing around him like clouds buffeted in a strong wind. In contrast, his hair, a long blue-white strip along the top of his otherwise bald scalp, fell limply across the right side of his face.

He grinned when he made eye contact with Mel.

She grinned back.

“So Wings finally takes the dive!” said Ariel, his expression so cheery as to almost look insane when contrasted with his synth voice.

“And Ariel comes with the wagon.” responded Mel.

Ariel laughed and said, “Dive and wagon, wake the dragon.”

Coming close, the other ‘diver clasped Mel’s hand, the gesture a metaphor for the private chat request the pixie had just accepted.

“How is life out on the dick-end?” asked Ariel.

Their surroundings suddenly changed to a large hotel room that overlooked the not-city. From this high up Mel could look out over the spiraling structures, each one a winding fractal pattern that pierced the heavens and yet they were somehow now overlooking them. It would have been a maddening experience if they had been in the real world. As it was, Mel took it in stride.

“Not bad. Not bad.” said the pixie, appreciating the view. “That info you gave me was perfect, thanks Ariel.”

“No problem.” said the ‘diver as he poured himself a drink over at a small bar within the room.

It was something like one of the suites she and Marcus had stayed in during their time on the diplomatic circuit with Empress Alessia after the Bruthius Rebellion. It was much more spacious than any of the hostels and motels they had stayed in recently, with enough room for a lounge, a bar and a long deck that seemed to encircle the top level of whatever building supported them.

In all likelihood there was no building beneath them. There didn’t need to be. It was all just an affectation, a representation that Mel’s mind created along with Ariel’s in the virtual space. Even the drink Ariel was pouring was just something he thought would look cool.

Grasping the nonexistent glass in unreal fingers, Ariel took a sip through his grin. He walked over to where Mel stood and stopped just behind her. His cloud garment still flowed like there was a wind blowing, this time from behind him so that it whipped out to Mel’s right.

A moment ago there had been no glass obstructing their view of the metanet but now Mel saw Ariel’s reflection standing next to her own. Eyes widening, the pixie suddenly realized that she was the same size as the metadiver.

She took a step back and looked down at herself in shock, lifting up a long fingered hand and turning it over as she inspected her arm.

“Something wrong with your ikon?” asked Ariel, looking her up and down as well.

“No.” said Mel only half certain of her own words. “No it’s just… I haven’t ‘dived in a while. Not used to seeing myself like this.”

And that was true enough, though what she actually meant was that she was taken aback by what she looked like now.

Mel had ‘dived before, it had been something she’d done frequently as Marcus’ Spymaster, but she had always taken time to mask her own aetheric profile. To put on a disguise, as it were. This time she had entered the metanet on pure instinct, her artificially enhanced aetherics letting her ‘dive on a device that had never been designed to do such a thing. In hindsight Mel was actually surprised she had been able to do it.

The result was a form that she had not chosen but rather one that her subconscious had chosen for her, projected into an ikon she had never seen. And the way she looked…

The way Mel looked stole the breath she did not need.

She looked like a midrian.

Tall and athletic, her form was not some scaled up version of what she looked like as a pixie but a new thing. She looked like herself, generally speaking, but her features were softer and less angular, her complexion darker and more tan than Mel had ever been. Her auburn hair had taken on a more fiery hue and now fell nearly to her waist.

She was still herself, still Meliantheena in basic shape, but she had become *more* somehow. Gone was the pixie and here stood some mortal woman that Mel thought she knew, though she did not know from where.

A slow, distant sound came from beyond the world and Mel had to concentrate for a moment before she realized that it was the thunder of footsteps on a polysteel deck. Only seconds had passed in reality and already she could hear the ogre approaching. Any thoughts on how she saw herself subconsciously could wait.

Clenching her fist and shooting Ariel a wicked smile, Mel asked, “What do you know about hiring war-mercs?”

A running leap had taken Greg to the top of the *Amal’hiam’s* nose and a few long strides had gotten him halfway down her length to the upper airlock. Flicking out the long prybar he had grabbed from his gear, the ogre wedged it between the ancient airlock’s polysteel teeth and shoved with all of his weight.

The sound that issued forth was not a pleasant one. That particular door would be useless as anything other than a window in the future and from below he heard Ark go berserk. The khag could not see what was going on from where he stood but he knew the sound of tearing metal when he heard it. It led the war-merc to believe that perhaps his Hob had not meant precisely what he had just said about tearing open the ship.

It a minute’s time it would not make one bit of difference to Greg but before that minute was up he was determined to prove his quality. Not just to Arkon-no-Sek, though that was certainly part of it, but to himself, and perhaps the galaxy as a whole.

Gregory Vesuvius Wilhelm Von Statun XIII was not some tool to be discarded so easily. If nothing else he would make it clear to all those watching that he was worth every jule spent, at a discount or not.

Falling the ten meters down into the improvised cargo hold of the ship, Greg landed in a crouch and came up holding the prybar like a club. It was a clumsy, imprecise thing as far as weapons went but he didn’t need to be blowing any more holes in the *Amal’hiam* trying to shoot at a target that he needed alive.

The pixie had bested Greg three times now and he grinned as he thought of his old Hobs at the War School screaming until they popped blood vessels in their bulging eyes.

No matter what happened in the next handful of seconds, there would not be a fourth encounter like this between Greg and Mel.

“Here.” said Ariel, his voice echoing in the vast, column filled structure.

The War School ‘net profile resembled a vast, ancient structure made of some kind of polished white stone, its interior stretching out in every direction with sinuous hallways that intersected at precise intervals. Each hall was lined with alcoves and each alcove held a large gray bust of an ogre. There were hundreds of thousands of the things, some standing alone while most were organized into clustered groups. The majority of the alcoves were darkened, their statuary hidden by deep shadows but a small number were displayed in a luminescence that seemed to shine out from the very stone itself.

Every single one represented a war-merc, trained and Contracted through the War School of Gobwar. It was only the well lit ones that were currently for hire though.

A quick search function had directed the pair of ‘divers here, their surroundings shifting as rapidly as they could become aware of the place. Mel had been a little overwhelmed by the search actually, she had not been fully aware of just how many different kinds of ogre mercenary there were.

When she thought of a mercenary, Mel really only associated the word with the combat variety; ogres on the other hand, did not have such a narrow view of things.

There were combat mercenaries, to be sure, but there had been others, so many others.

Law-mercs and teach-mercs. Drive-mercs and cook-mercs. Mercenaries to tailor clothes and mercenaries to look after children. The folk of Gobwar seemed to use the word less as a job description and more of an honorific. If an ogre was trained to do a thing and they could be hired to do a thing, they would be. The more prestigious and expensive Contracts were available through the Schools of Gobwar but even a quick look at some of the other search results showed Mel that there were literally billions of ogres out there in the galaxy looking to ply their trade for jules.

If she had time, Mel would have wondered why. Why, or possible how, had a culture developed into such a state to where everything they did revolved around selling themselves in one form or another?

It was yet another question for another time and one she would be sure to pick Greg’s brain about just as soon as she had his Contract under her name.

Mel was beside Ariel in the space of a heartbeat, perhaps quicker thanks to the time dilation of the metadive, standing before a shadowy statue of an ogre from the chest up. The brass nameplate below read, *Gregory Vesuvius Wilhelm Von Statun XIII Esq.*

“He’s an esquire.” said Mel in flat disbelief, thoroughly befuddled for half a moment.

“Your boy has some fancy pants.” said Ariel with a grin.

“Esquire and pants, don’t take no chance.” responded Mel, still staring at the bust. “I don’t get it; he said his Contract was up any minute now. Shouldn’t he be available already?”

Ariel snapped his fingers four times in quick succession, the motion more like a nervous tick than an attempt to get Mel’s attention.

“He is.” said the metadiver, squinting at the statue. “Someone is blocking it though. Mucking with the feed from the War School to make it look like he is already taken.”

Mel stepped forward, inspecting the data more closely. Nothing seemed to separate this statue from the other darkened ones, her mind translating Greg’s unavailability as this shadowy alcove.

“How can you tell?” asked Mel.

“How can you not?” chided Ariel.

He stepped up next to Mel and she tensed as his ikon took one of her hands and pressed it gently to the plinth that the bust sat on. It was all just a representation, her interpretation of the interaction between their individual aetheric presences within the ‘net, but it felt real enough in the moment. Having another sapient, at least one who was not Marcus, that close was not something she was going to get used to in a hurry.

“Here.” said Ariel again, pressing his own fingers against the stone through the gaps in Mel’s own digits. His voice was a soft breath in her ear and for once Mel did not hear the synthetic quality the metadiver generally used to mask it. The word was a deep, resonant sound; both a subtle comfort and something that sent a shiver down the pixie’s spine in both worlds.

Regardless of what she felt at his closeness, Mel immediately saw what Ariel was trying to show her. It was not a block, not exactly. It was more like an illusion, at least here in the metanet; an aetheric alteration that changed the appearance of things but not their intrinsic nature.

“Who would do this?” asked Mel in a whisper, though she did not know why she spoke in such a low tone. For the purposes of their conversation the pair might as well have still been in the hotel room.

Pulling away, Ariel left Mel’s hand pressed to Greg’s statue as he shrugged. When he spoke the dull synthesized tone had returned to his voice. “No idea. Digging into a secure Gobwar feed is not exactly my bag of cats.”

Mel looked over her shoulder at her virtual friend and smiled. “Doesn’t stop you from being curious though, right?”

“Cats and curiosity.” said Ariel, his hands held up in a gesture like weighing scales. “A bit of animosity.” He shook his head and chuckled slightly, throwing his hands apart. “Also I am told it does not end well for the cat.”

Mel shifted her focus back onto the statue, her mind gaining instant access to the ogre’s Contract despite its appearance.

The document that basically summed up Greg’s life whirled through her mind. She was immediately aware of who he was, where he had come from and what he had done to get where he was now.

A prestigious heritage, the scion of a line dating back to before the Deep War and the ascension of the ogres into galactic society.

A promising childhood, nothing but perfection from the son of such a lineage.

A following of footsteps, the Law School seemed like a natural fit.

A grisly murder, the victim dismembered to make sure he did not regenerate as ogres tend to do.

A trial, in which guilt was found but the sentence was reduced.

A new vocation, graduated from the War School at the top of his class.

In the nearly ten cycles since, Greg had only held two jobs. One with a merchant named Graam DeVeer in the Southern Reach and the next with a dwarvish treasure hunter, Arkon-no-Sek.

There was no physical document for Mel to look at but she stared all the same. Despite the exacting way in which it was worded, she could read the Contract for what it was; a testament to someone whose life had been set adrift. Greg had been thrown into a wild float by one particularly bloody incident and since then it seemed as though he had made the best of what little his society had been able to offer.

He had filed action reports from dozens of fights over the cycles, always doggedly reporting back to the War School in case his former teachers saw fit to increase or decrease his Contract holder’s rates. The more recent ones under the dwarf were not immediately accessible but from everything else Mel could see, including personalized reviews from the War School itself, Greg might be a brutal and efficient killer when the need arose but he was not a monster.

Gregory Vesuvius Wilhelm Von Statun XIII Esquire was a mercenary, through and through, to his very bones. He did what he was paid to do, what he had been trained to do and what he was good at doing. But he did not let that mentality bankrupt his otherwise honorable code of ethics.

He did not act without consideration.

He did not follow without conscience.

He did not kill without necessity.

One of his former employers and even some of his teachers had seen this as a weakness in Greg. That, along with the criminal charges on his record, made his Contract a bargain at only ten thousand jules per phase plus expenses.

Everything she read reminded Mel of another man and she was more than happy to verify her payment information, sending off her request to hire the war-merc. If nothing else, thought Mel as she pulled away from the statue, Greg might set a good example for Marcus.

There was movement that pulled at the pixie’s attention. It was not in her peripheral vision, not exactly, it was through her real eyes that she caught the motion of a massive frame filling the door leading out of the mess.

The strange, layered vision made her feel queasy as she tried to hold focus on both the real world and the metanet.

“Thanks for all the help Ariel.” said Mel in the ‘net, the other ikon’s outline overlapping slightly with Greg on the *Amal’hiam*. “Seriously, I couldn’t have done all this without you. But something’s come up and I gotta ditch.”

“Not a problem Wings.” said Ariel with a half-grin. “Maybe next time we can actually do something *fun*.”

The pixie paused for a moment in the metanet, Greg moving with exaggerated slowness in the real world thanks to her warped perception of time. Pulling her focus so she could look directly at Ariel’s blue-white ikon, she said, “The name’s Mel actually.”

Ariel’s ikon beamed. “Mel.” he said, as if tasting the word. “That short for something?”

Grinning, Mel spoke one last phrase just as she pulled herself away from the metanet, “Something and actually; you don’t know naturally?”

Mel gasped as she came back into the real, her hands stiff from gripping her ‘netpad with a white-knuckled grip. Across the room, Greg sped up as her point of view normalized. She managed to shake herself free of the device and get airborne just before he drew even with the galley.

Buzzing up into a shadowy corner of the room, Mel tried to use her nanite webbing to throw up a veil but there was a heaviness to her that had not been there just a few minutes ago. The subtle, twitching motions in her hands that controlled the webbing had become gigantic and clumsy. Even her aetherics acted sluggishly, allowing her instinctual control over her wings and little else.

Greg’s gaze tracked straight to her at the sound of her flight and she hovered in midair to stare directly at him.

Swallowing, Mel had just enough time to see Greg tense as he prepared to lunge at her and wonder just how long it took to hire an ogre war-merc. Was there a waiting period on that sort of thing?

Greg’s weight was on the balls of his feet and he had a look on his face like a pouncing cat when a soft tone filled the quiet between pixie and ogre. It made several beeping and booping noises, repeating them in a somewhat soothing pattern for a long moment.

“Excuse me.” said Greg politely, his whole body relaxing as the tension from just a few seconds ago drained away. “Apologies but I have to take this.”

“Please.” said Mel, still trying to catch her breath. “Take your time.”

The ogre casually lowered the long polysteel rod he had been holding and Mel let out her first real breath since exiting the metanet. She watched as Greg pulled out a small datapad from a pocket on his vest, he poked at an analogue button that had been designed specifically so that the ogre could interact with the aetheric device.

He pursed his lips, reading the tiny screen more than once before looking up at Mel and then back down at the screen once more.

After another long moment, this one full of awkward silence, Greg slipped the datapad away. He placed both hands on one end of the prybar he held, its point against the floor like some sort of makeshift sword.

“Well.” said Greg in a matter-of-fact voice. “What can I do for you today Ma’am?”

Chapter Twenty Five

There was a heightened awareness that came with combat. A thrumming tension that sang in the nerves and changed one’s perception of time. There would be moments where everything would slow, the time between seconds becoming a widening gulf that no amount of thought or action could fill. Then, when the brutal pace of war became a regular thing, there would be turns or even turnspans that would pass in the space of a few breaths. A look back would leave the mind reeling at how much had occurred.

Marcus had felt these experiences at their most extreme while he had been a Magus. There were wars he had fought in, campaigns he had overseen, that he barely remembered at all. In sharp contrast, like stars against the black of night, there were moments and experiences that he could recall perfectly despite the centuries that separated them.

The smell of burning air and mildew that had surrounded him during his transformation into a Magus.

The look of shock and fear on the vampire’s face just before he had exploded in a fountain of fiery aether.

The way the Mino-Taur’s left ear had twitched as they fought in the sky above the Temple City on Minos.

They were all little things that Marcus could never shake even as the events around them became hazy with time. Each was a little gem of memory that had, for some reason, been captured as his brain pumped his body with adrenaline and aether.

As he watched Basheen Grimm move across the hall towards them, Marcus knew that one of those moments was crystallizing right in front of him.

The lykin was not fast, that did not do him justice. Basheen moved with such a terrifying speed that Marcus barely had time to recognize that he was moving at all before the wolf-man was on top of him. One of those clawed hands reaching straight for his face. Basheen’s eyes blazed with a bloody red intensity that glowed without even a wisp of aether. It was the eyes that transfixed Marcus. Even if he’d had time to stumble backwards, which he did not, those eyes rooted the former Magus to the ground.

It was like staring down two twin wells, each a deep pool of hate and rage. This was not some righteous, focused emotion but a terrible, all consuming anger that Basheen was simply choosing to direct towards him in that moment.

The lykin’s broad hand wrapped itself around Marcus’ head and he could feel the edges of Basheen’s claws scrapping against the sides of his face.

With a brutal shoving motion, Basheen hurled Marcus to one side, causing his head to slam against the tiled stone of the monastery’s floor.

People were shouting now. Indistinct noises that sounded as though they were being screamed through layers of pillows.

Growling thunder sounded and a firm hand was on his arm, pulling him upright.

Marcus stared up into Diana’s face, fighting every synapse in his brain that was overjoyed to see Helena once again.

It wasn’t her.

Helena was dead.

Marcus let out a growl of his own and finally got some of his weight under his own legs. In front of him the orcish boy, Torg, stood with his arms outstretched between Basheen and Hedgemire. One of the other Finders, a midrian, had come up next to the lykin and was speaking in a clipped, angry tone. The other Finder, this one a female lykin with a glowing aethite eye, stood back passively with one hand on the strap that held a massive rifle to her back.

“There will be no violence in this place.” said Torg, his blunt features set in determined lines. “You will leave at once.”

“Stand down Grimm.” said the midrian Finder, reaching a hand out to touch the lykin even as his other hand moved towards his sidearm. “I don’t know what’s going *hrrk*-“

The midrian’s words were suddenly choked off as Basheen’s claws found his throat and the Finder’s head nearly came off with a quick spray of blood.

Turning, the black lykin spoke, “Our world ruined, my pack in chains. You will pay. I will send your heads to Stoat myself.”

Torg still stood resolutely in front of Basheen and it was then that Marcus noted the dozens of orcish eyes that watched the scene from nearly every corner of the great hall. Even Master Ruk stood just beyond the second lykin, her blind eyes watching everything with a look of solemn regret.

Marcus only had half a second to realize what that look meant.

“No!” shouted the former Magus, scrabbling for his revolver blindly as he pushed himself up and towards the young orc.

He wasn’t nearly fast enough.

Torg was thrown aside as another spray of blood, this time from the orc’s chest, spattered Basheen.

“Hunter’s Right.” snarled the scar-streaked lykin.

Hedgemire caught Basheen with a bolt of crackling red aether just as he finished cleaving through the orc and just before the other lykin pulled up her rifle in a smooth arc, aiming it at the gangmage.

Marcus let out a frustrated scream as he finally got his gun loose. Diana was shouting something behind him but he barely heard her through the heartbeat pounding in his ears. She was further drowned out as his revolver erupted with its own cacophonous barks.

A few of his shots may have hit their mark as Basheen let out a bone jarring howl of pain but more than half went wide. Marcus’ stance had been sloppy and his grip shaky at best. The buckling recoil almost sent the gun leaping from his hands as he continued to move towards Basheen.

Hedgemire, his forearms now alight with more of that buzzing red lightning, spared a dispassionate snarl down at Torg. The orc’s chest still rose and fell in gurgling gasps but there was a blank look in his eyes that Marcus had seen too many times on the battlefield not to recognize.

A Magus might be able to save someone in such a state but all Marcus could do was turn towards Basheen, coming up beside Hedgemire as he reloaded his gun. This time his motions were smooth and he took a deep breath through his nose.

As he loaded the fifth dwarvish slug into the revolver a bolt of aether from the other lykin’s rifle took him straight in the chest, sending Marcus staggering backwards. He dropped the last few bullets but managed to snap the chamber of his gun closed as he took a hard step forward and looked up to stare at the rifle-wielding lykin.

From beside him, Marcus heard Diana curse in a low voice, “Blood of Primus…”

The female lykin’s aetherically powered, prosthetic eye widened alongside her real one as Marcus took another step forward. There was a large ragged hole in the front of his shirt now and the force of the blast had knocked the breath out of him but other than that and the odd tingling sensation that was now diffusing across his chest, Marcus was fine.

Taking a wide stance and a firm, two handed grip, Marcus leveled his revolver and fired again.

Basheen Grimm moved impossibly fast for a person who had just been blasted by a mage and then shot by a dwarvish gun but he blurred to one side, knocked the other lykin down and took Marcus’ fire himself.

The black lykin roared as gobs of meat were torn from his body but after the last shot was fired he lowered his muzzle and stared back at Marcus with those hideous eyes.

Just as the former Magus had been unaffected by the rifle’s shot, Basheen seemed unfazed by the merciless assault on his body. He let out another pain-fueled roar as he shot forward.

Hedgemire was ready again, crackling aether dancing out in a spiky net that lashed at the huge lykin. Basheen hit the lines of energy and seemed to be slowed momentarily as he tore and fought the gangmage’s spell.

“Marcus!” shouted Diana, right next to his ear.

“What?” snapped Marcus, realizing the she had been talking at him since just after he had been knocked to the floor.

“We need to get out of here.” said Diana, her steely eyes dancing around the room. First to Basheen’s struggling form and then over to the other side of the hall.

Glancing over Marcus saw that the huge room was quickly emptying of orcs, each and every one moving with calm deliberation towards a door on the west side of the building.

“What…” started Marcus but he was cut off as Hedgemire took a step backwards towards them, his arms uplifted as he funneled energy into the net that held Basheen.

“Lady’s right.” said the gangmage through gritted teeth. “Trans outside, get moving. Shuttle’s in a berth on the north side of town. Number nineteen. It’ll take ya to Mr. Stoat.”

Basheen let out a savage growl and Marcus sucked in a breath as the lykin seemed to be tearing apart the aetheric construct with his bare hands.

There was no time to debate ethics or moral quandaries, Marcus just nodded and turned to follow Diana as she headed towards the large double doors that led out of the monastery. It seemed as though he had suddenly agreed to Hedgemire’s offer.

Diana hit the doors at speed, slamming both open before rushing outside at a pace quickly approaching a sprint.

There was indeed a tran parked not far from the monastery’s entrance, an inconspicuous older Vorpal Corp. model. It seemed to be sitting alone on the darkened street, just to one side of the boulevard Marcus, Diana and Mel had taken to reach the orcs.

Charging down the stairs from the monastery, Marcus looked around, trying to pierce the shadowy nooks and alleyways that surrounded their position. Finder teams did not consist of just three people and Marcus distinctly remembered there being others among the team that had attempted to ambush them outside of Regis Gaius’ home. There would be more operatives and they would most likely be close by.

As they crossed the street, Marcus kept his revolver held low near his thigh and made brief eye contact with Diana. She did not seem shaken by the gory scene that had just transpired, though perhaps the mask had hardened a bit. Her lips drawn tighter, her eyes more focused. She was also glancing around as they reached the tran. It did not look as though Diana expected things to be so easy either.

“You drive.” said Marcus firmly, not needing the awkward conversation about how he could not actually operate a tran.

Diana did not seem to need any more prompting though, and she moved around to the driver’s side of the tran, finding the door unlocked. Before they could actually enter the vehicle a shot rang out and Marcus felt another hard bolt of focused aether take him in the back.

He was slammed forward into the side of the tran, his breath knocked out of his chest yet again. Other than that and the return of the numbing tingle along his spine, Marcus was unharmed.

The former Magus caught Diana’s face, the mask broken in astonishment and said roughly, “I’m fine, move!”

From behind them a voice sounded clearly through the empty night, “They killed the Lieutenant! Stop them!”

As Marcus wrenched open the passenger side door he spared a glance back to where the female lykin stood atop the monastery steps, still aiming her rifle at him. He saw movement in his peripheral vision but did not spare it any focus as he swung himself into the tran.

Diana coaxed the vehicle to life just as the rifle began to glow with hungry blue aether again and Marcus saw other dark-clad figures rushing out of hiding positions around the open block that surrounded the monastery.

Bolts of focused aether streamed towards them as the tran shot forward, pushing Marcus back into his seat with velocity’s rough shove.

“You might want to strap in.” said Diana, never taking her eyes off the street in front of them as the tran’s steering column glowed with her own violent pink aether.

Marcus swallowed and licked his lips, wishing, despite himself, for a drink. He clenched his fists and tried to still the shaking he felt along his arms.

Gunfire buzzed through the air around them and the tran jounced several times as some of the Finders hit their target despite Diana’s serpentine movements. There was also another sound that Marcus recognized. Howling.

Long and ululating, it split the night with one vicious angry note that was soon joined by others. The sound sent a cold chill running down Marcus’ spine.

The last time he had heard such a sound had been a cycle ago on Saul’s Rock just after Basheen’s pack had slaughtered a building full of people and had then hunted down the stragglers. If Marcus remembered it correctly, that had been over some minor slight, the proprietor of a gambling den having not paid his protection dues on time. For that, and now that Marcus thought about it most likely for the den’s association with Edward Stoat, the Grimms had killed dozens of people. For no other reason than to make an object lesson for those who opposed them.

Now those same howls erupted from the night behind them.

Soon after the howling began another sound joined the dissonance, the whining hum of drivebikes. The smaller, personal trans would be able to move much more quickly in the more cramped streets of Panimberg that had never been built for anything much more than foot traffic.

“Where are we going?” asked Diana as Marcus craned his head to glance back towards their pursuers.

“What do you mean?” asked Marcus distractedly. Speeding up behind them, out of the shadows that had quickly swallowed the monastery, four bikes were quickly catching up. Each one was matte black and looked more like a lunging animal than any sort of vehicle. The Finders riding the bikes were essentially straddling barely contained drivecores, capable of much more quick acceleration than your average tran but with the added danger of violent explosion if it collided with anything at speed.

“North or south?” Diana asked impatiently.

Turning back around just as Diana took a hard left into an alley that was barely wide enough for their tran, Marcus gritted his teeth and clutched at his seat. The tran evened back out and plowed through several metal garbage cans that rolled down and under their anti-grav chems, making a gods awful racket. As they cleared the alley and took another hard turn out onto a dimly lit street, Marcus suddenly realized what Diana was asking. Just because they had taken Hedgemire’s tran it did not mean they had to go where he had wanted them to end up. The *Amal’hiam* was still an option.

Looking down at the dashboard in front of him, Marcus’ eyes locked on a fairly primitive comm nearer the driver’s side.

“Can you call Mel?” asked Marcus gesturing at the comm. Behind them the bikes flew out of the alley more quickly than their tran could have ever managed, closing the distance between the hunters and their prey more drastically.

“Callset.” said Diana sharply as their tran jerked again, this time to the right. What little inertial dampening the vehicle was capable of had never been designed for such precision driving and Marcus was flung to the side.

As they straightened out again and veered around a restaurant’s protruding outdoor sitting area, Marcus said, “Three five seven zero nine point five six nine two, alpha wild two two seven.”

Diana did not even reach for the comm’s manual controls just to her right, instead her eyes took on a distant look for half a second and her aether pulsed in a contained burst of pink static. She was accessing the tran’s comm directly through the vehicle’s internal aetheric network and it took her less time than it took Marcus to recognize what was happening. It was yet another display of both raw power and instinctual control the likes of which Marcus had rarely seen. Aetherically speaking, Diana was better than most Warmages Marcus had known, with one possible exception.

But where the former Istara sister had wielded a torrent, an unstoppable tide of aether harnessed by her emotions, Diana wielded her aether like a scalpel. Subtle and sharp but no less effective.

It forced Marcus to take a moment to wonder about Diana Istara. He really knew nothing about the woman other than the fact that she had been in the Legion, joining alongside her sister. He wasn’t even sure what branch she had served in.

As it was, driving this old but well maintained tran, Diana was bringing more performance and precision out of the vehicle than Marcus thought possible. He had seen professional racetrans handle corners with less exactitude than how they darted through the streets of Panimberg.

Diana took another hard turn and then suddenly another, cutting through a T intersection that suddenly brought them into a more populated part of the city. Street lights illuminated the way in front of them and while it was night, it was not exactly late in the turn. Pedestrians suddenly became yet another hazard to weave through.

Finally reaching to fumble for his seat’s safety harness, Marcus heard the comm tone softly as it dialed Mel.

After what felt like an eternity, Diana having swerved around two groups of people and taking a hard left to avoid an elderly man crossing the street with his arms full of boxes, the comm clicked once. Mel’s first words were cut off as the hum of the drivebikes drew suddenly close and the snapping sound of rapid-fire aether bolts filled the air with an arrhythmic buzzing.

The rear window of the tran exploded inward as the Finders got close enough to start firing on them. Thankfully they were close enough now that Marcus was not too concerned with their gunfire going wide and injuring any innocent bystanders. These operatives were professionals it seemed, unwilling to take their shots until they were sure they would hit their target.

Which was exactly what Marcus *was* concerned with.

Chapter Twenty Six

“Hello!” shouted Mel over the sound issuing from that miniature comm strapped to her forearm. “Marcus, is that you?”

It was a guess, but Mel did not honestly know if anyone else in the galaxy had her personal callset. Every time she had needed to contact someone in the past, unless it was over the metanet, she had used a burner comm, something she could just destroy or throw away when she was done with whatever call needed to be made.

From her arm there was a roar of sound that overwhelmed whatever sound receptors were being used by the chem on the other end of the call. Mel could make out shouting, maybe Marcus’ voice, and there was gunfire. At first it was just the aetheric variety but then she distinctly heard the barking cough of Marcus’ revolver. Was there screaming in the background? Had that been an explosion?

She glanced nervously up at Greg who still loomed nearby, his hands crossed over the prybar he had been ready to swat her with not moments before.

“Is everything all right?” asked the ogre with what might have been genuine concern.

“I…” stammered Mel. “I don’t know. Just… Just give me a second, okay?”

Greg nodded curtly. He made it seem as though the gesture could have just as easily been a bow. “You’re the Hob.” he said passively.

Mel flitted over to the other end of the mess hall, alighting at the end of one of the long tables that took up most of the space beyond the small kitchen area.

More sound was erupting from her comm. Rushing wind, more shouting, another burst of aetheric gunfire.

Suddenly Marcus’ voice came through, clear enough to be understood. “Shit.”

“Marcus.” said Mel emphatically. “Marcus, can you hear me now?”

“Mel?” said Marcus’ voice, sounding confused at first but then growing excited. “Mel! Mel, where are you?”

“The *Amal’hiam*,” said the pixie. “Where are *you*? What’s going on?”

“She’s at the ship.” said Marcus to someone else.

“Good,” said another voice and it took a moment for Mel to recognize Diana’s flat tone over the low fidelity of whatever comm they were using.

“Mel.” said Marcus again.

“Yes. I’m here.” said Mel, a bit frustrated as she just spoke at her arm. They apparently did not even have basic holo features wherever they were. “What in the Hells is going on?”

“No time.” said Diana. “We’re coming to you.”

From the other end of the call, Mel heard Marcus shout, “Whoa, whoa! On the left. Hold it steady.”

His last words sounded distant, as if he had pulled away from the comm as he spoke. Then there was another bout of sound as Marcus’ revolver fired again. Three rapid shots that broke into their call with furious noise and little hiccups of static.

Mel practically shouted into the comm, “Will someone please tell me what is going on?”

“Being chased.” said Diana in clipped sentences. “ETA fifteen minutes.”

Mel’s eyes widened as she stared in horror at the small display on her forearm as it calmly told her the length of her current call, the callset she had been contacted by and the option to disconnect.

“Mel!” shouted Marcus again, his voice gaining clarity again. “Mel, can you still hear me?”

“Yes.” said Mel, fighting to keep the panic out of her voice. “I can hear you.”

“Is the ship safe?” asked Marcus, the howl of wind causing his question to be muffled slightly. “Is the *Amal’hiam* secure?”

Mel bit her lip and glanced up at Greg with a nervous look. “Um… Yes?” said Mel.

Marcus either ignored the question in her voice or he hadn’t heard it because he said, “Good. Good. We’re coming to you and we’ve got the Finders on us. We’ll try to- ack!” Marcus made a gagging sound and more wind sounds filled the comm followed by the continued buzzing of gunfire.

“We’ll try to lose them.” finished Marcus, sounding a little out of breath. “Make sure the- Primus, get down!”

Marcus’ last words were a screaming warning just before the comm went dead.

Mel stared down at her forearm as the finished call time winked at her from the display. After a stunned moment Mel’s hand flew to the comm, trying to resend to the callset that had last contacted her. She tried three times and each time she would immediately get the same insanely calm, synthesized voice saying, “We’re sorry. The callset you are trying to reach has been disconnected. Please disconnect and try again or contact your local service provider.”

“Arrg!” groused Mel, stopping just short of smashing the thing against the table. It was still on her arm after all.

Letting out a frustrated sigh, Mel took a step off the table and let her wings do the rest. She flew up and over, coming to hover a few meters away from where Greg still stood. The ogre looked perfectly happy to just stand there all day long if Mel told him to.

“So,” started Mel awkwardly, “You, what, work for me now, right?”

Greg inclined his head and gave her a grin that was half sardonic and half worried. In his deep, cultured voice he asked, “You did read over my Contract before you signed it, yes?”

Mel turned away and ran a hand through her short hair as she hovered first in one direction and then another. It was a hovering pixie’s equivalent of pacing. She stopped herself after the third turn, looking back at Greg.

If she were honest with herself, Mel was now realizing that she had not exactly thought her plan through all the way. Yes, she had the services of the ogre war-merc who, up until just a few minutes ago, had been helping to try and steal the *Amal’hiam* but then what? Was she ready to turn Greg back around on the dwarf he had been working under for the last eight cycles?

Yes. Yes she was.

Mel had no qualms about sicking Greg on Ark. The scheming little bastard had it coming. But what filled her with uncertainty was what came after.

It was those Imperial operatives that bothered her.

They were after Diana and, at this point, presumably Marcus as well. The two midrians would lead them here and then… What? Would Mel have Greg attack them as well? Admittedly Basheen Grimm was among their number and Mel did not feel bad about the idea of putting that monster down but the others were just folk. Not all that long ago they would have been the kind of people that Mel had overseen and worked with. Men and women of the Empire doing their job. They knew the risks that came with their careers, to be sure, but that did not mean Mel had to put them in harms way unnecessarily. Though all of that was moot if they turned out to actually be StRATa as Diana had inferred.

StRATa was scarry.

Sucking in a breath through her nose and snorting it back out, Mel decided to burn that bridge when she came to it. One crisis at a time, she thought to her self. Marcus and Diana were on their way here, Finders in pursuit. Ark and his mercs were still inside the berth, trying to claim the *Amal’hiam*. Two problems, only one of which Mel could readily solve with the resources available to her.

Mel glanced up into Greg’s eyes, noting their curious golden sheen that clashed with his chestnut skin. It wasn’t a bad sort of clash but it made his eyes stand out more than they might have considering his heavy brow and long features.

“If I ordered you to go back outside and kill everyone, would you?” asked Mel suddenly, getting the words out before they caught on her conscience.

The ogre gave her a solemn look and said, “Yes.”

Mel stared at his passive features for a long moment, trying to read him. Emotions were tricky enough before mortals tried to hide them beneath layers of control or, Queens forbid, other emotions.

Uncertainty. Fear. Anger. Panic. Satisfaction.

A storm of her own emotions forced Mel to shake her head and begin to buzz around nervously again. She could order Greg to do anything so long as it fit within his purview as a war-merc; he wouldn’t be doing the cooking and cleaning any time soon but she could use his Contract to compel him into any fight she wanted so long as it wasn’t an out and out suicide mission. Not long ago, just a few minutes ago in fact, the idea of her own personal ogre death-dervish had sounded great but now she wasn’t sure.

It reminded her too much of the feyfolk’s relationship with the Sidhe and that thought upset her to no end.

“Do you want to kill those mercs out there?” asked Mel, her train of thought was meandering and she decided to follow it.

Greg seemed to give the notion thought but never looked away from her before he said, “Not particularly, no.”

“I see.” said Mel, now even more uncertain. “And the dwarf, Ark, what if I told you kill him?”

Greg’s amber eyes hardened into something that resembled the mask Diana constantly wore. “That would be regrettable if it were necessary.” said the ogre with a hard tone.

Mel rubbed at her face and let out a frustrated sigh. The pixie was not one of the Sidhe and the ogre was not one of the Feyfolk but somehow Mel could sense all the same trappings of that relationship here. If she allowed it, Greg could be the next best thing to her slave.

“Look,” said Mel, exasperated, “can you just talk to me. You can speak your mind, you know?”

Greg arched an eyebrow that was nearly as wide as Mel was tall. “Is that an order?”

Mel waved her hand as she said, “Sure. Whatever.”

The ogre let out a sigh and suddenly relaxed. Though his posture did not seem to change much, Mel sensed a tension drain away from him that she had barely even noticed before.

“Thank Gob.” said Greg, relief in his voice. “I wasn’t quite sure how that was going to play out. You’ve no idea how many Hobs don’t ask for an honest conversation. They told horror stories at School about assignments where the Hobs were dumb enough never to ask for advice.”

Mel was having trouble processing what was going on, so she just said, “What?”

“Begging your pardon.” said Greg with another nod that may have been a slight bow. “I did not mean any insult by that last remark.”

“None taken.” said Mel cautiously, suddenly trying to work out if the ogre had insulted her.

“I did not mean to interrupt your line of questioning.” said Greg politely as he gestured with one mammoth hand. “Please, continue.”

“Wait.” said Mel, her brow wrinkling in confusion. “You’re telling me you wouldn’t have said anything if I hadn’t asked?”

“Unless necessary for your safety.” said Greg. “You’ve hired a soldier ma’am, not a therapist. Those tend to cost a bit more.”

Mel couldn’t help but laugh a bit. “Ha. Okay, sure. But what if I told you to do something stupid or something you didn’t want to do?”

Greg shrugged, though his face still held some concern. “Part of the job ma’am. You do the best that you can, hope you can turn things around and if not… Well, you do the job.”

Snorting again, Mel stared incredulously at the ogre. He sounded like Farris, Marcus’ old second in command, on one of his tirades about the duty of legionnaires. Greg and Marcus were going to get along famously, assuming the former Magus did not die of a heart attack when he found out what Mel had done.

They may have been practically rich, but that did not really mean that hiring a full time ogre mercenary had been in their budget.

“So, you *don’t* want to kill those mercs out there?” clarified Mel.

“I would rather not.” said Greg. “I don’t like killing all that much, if I’m to be honest.”

Mel squinted at the ogre and said, “But you’re a war-merc.”

“I said I don’t much like it,” said Greg with a twisted, wry smile, “I didn’t say I wasn’t good at it.”

“Okay.” said Mel, shaking her head, she could figure out her new employee’s likes and dislikes later. “Okay,” she repeated, “Fine. I need the berth clear though. Marcus is on his way back and the dwarf and those other clowns need to be gone. What do you recommend if you don’t want to kill them all?”

Greg’s smile turned genuine when he asked, “Are you asking for a tactical appraisal?”

Mel sighed again. “No,” she said, nearing the end of her patience, “I’m asking you to clear the berth, I don’t care how.”

The ogre leaned his prybar against the counter that separated the mess proper from the kitchen and then held up his hands just in front of his chest. Clenching them into fists, all of the joints in those huge mitts cracked in succession, sounding to Mel like falling boulders just before an avalanche.

His face took on a roguish smirk as he said, “All you had to do was ask, ma’am.”

Greg took a deep breath as he reached the center of the *Amal’hiam* again, looking down at the airlock beneath his feet.

“What did you do?” asked his new Hob from behind him.

Glancing back over at the pixie, the ogre glanced up to where she stared, up at the airlock above them that he had pried open.

“Ah, yes.” said Greg apologetically. “I’ll beg your pardon again. We’ll need to be sure that gets closed before we take off.”

“You gave us a Queen’s cursed skylight.” said Mel, running her hand through her hair again. Greg could already tell it was something she did when she was frustrated and nervous.

“I am sorry.” said Greg, and he was. “But if you’ll be so kind to hit this door’s release, we can focus on that problem after I resolve our current situation.”

Flitting over to the underside airlock’s controls, Mel gave the war-merc a questioning look. As she hovered near the release, she asked, “What are you going to do? I assume you have some sort of plan after I drop you in the middle of a bunch of half-charged mercs?”

Greg tightened his grip around his prybar and smiled at his new Hob as he said, “I’ll do as you asked.” He gave the pixie a wink. “I’m going to clear the berth.”

Mel gave him one last look and then hit the airlock’s release and Greg braced himself as the floor opened up beneath him.

It was not a long drop to the ground; in fact if Greg stood upright his head would have still been inside the *Amal’hiam*, but he landed in a slight crouch, moving forward just as the toes of his boots hit the dirt.

He did not run but his long strides took him across the berth faster than any of the midrians or Ark could have. Despite his silence, all of the mercenaries left turned toward the sound of the airlock opening and saw Greg’s advancing form.

Ark, back on the other side of the *Amal’hiam’s* primary entrance, poked his head around the corner to stare at the ogre.

“Greg?” intoned the khagrish Prospector. “Did you get the pixie?”

Greg did not speak, not yet. He moved across the berth towards where his gear was still stowed in a well organized pyramid of trunks and a rucksack. He had known that today might be his last turn in Ark’s service, so he had packed the tran accordingly the night before. When the khag and his other mercenaries had set up shop around the *Amal’hiam* earlier, Greg had taken the time to gather his things in preparation for his possible departure.

He hadn’t wanted to leave Ark’s employ but he was prepared to leave nonetheless.

“Gregory.” said Ark when Greg did not answer him.

The ogre calmly opened one of his trunks and found a long black and gray case to one side of his undergarments. Pulling out the case and opening it carefully, Greg removed his short-barreled miniature shard-launcher from the soft, contoured foam that cradled it. From a compartment on the reverse side of the case, Greg began retrieving nine gleaming rounds of charged aethite ammunition for the gun.

From behind him, nervous footsteps sounded and as he turned Greg cracked open the barrel of the heavily modified weapon. What had once been a shoulder-mounted projectile launcher was now something more like a scattershot or portable mortar. It was far too heavy for a midrian to use, even with aetherically enhanced strength, but Greg carried it gingerly in the crook of one arm as his opposite hand slid shells into its chamber.

Red’s Dogs had formed a loose semicircle around Greg, some of them with their hands straying nervously towards their own weapons. Red Bartlett himself was a few paces behind his men, having apparently returned while Greg had been inside the *Amal’hiam*, and Ark was still lurking in the shadow of the ship.

“What is going on?” asked the khag, his attention torn between the silent ogre and the still-open airlock into the ship behind him.

Greg sucked in a breath through his nose as he calmly looked around him at the midrian mercenaries. He put the last of his rounds into the shard-launcher and snapped the chamber closed, after which the air in the berth filled with a brittle silence.

Clearing his throat, Greg finally spoke once he was sure he had everyone’s attention. “I do apologize about the abruptness of this, but I’m going to have to ask you all to leave the vicinity at once.”

Red Bartlett chomped on one of his fowl cigars with a sneer and crossed his arms as he asked, “What’re you on about stretch?” He turned to look at Ark. “What’s he on about beard-face?”

Greg looked towards Ark as well, staring the khag right in the eyes and giving his former Hob the barest of nods as realization spread over his face.

“Rust and Ruin.” breathed Ark, taking a step back.

Glancing back at the other mercenaries, Greg held his weapon in both hands now, shifting its homemade stock so that it rested against his right shoulder. “I am giving you one last warning.” said the ogre calmly. “I am no longer working for Arkon-no-Sek and all of you need to vacate this area immediately.”

“Rusted fairy witch!” shouted Ark, taking a few more stumbling steps backwards. “Bartlett, stand down you idiot. Tell your men to get out of here.”

Red Bartlett’s eyes bulged slightly and he pulled a repeater from where it hung on a strap under his arm, in the same motion he pulled a small lever that pushed the weapon’s chem into place. It glowed with an evil green light.

“Stuff that. You want a crack at us big man, ‘s fine by me.” said the merc leader around his cigar. “One ogre ain’t so tough.”

Greg looked at the midrian and smiled.

“Mr. Bartlett,” said Greg pleasantly. “You are a rude, unprofessional individual and quite frankly sir, I have never liked you.”

Then the ogre war-merc proceeded to clear the berth.

Chapter Twenty Seven

“Primus, get down!” shouted Marcus, shoving Diana to one side as a bolt of aether shattered the rear window of the tran.

The vehicle jerked to the left as Diana did the same but she managed to keep them on the road as a chunk was torn out of her seat and destroyed the comm just in front of her.

Marcus swore and leaned out the window again, firing the last of his bullets at the Finders. It did not really slow them down but it forced them to swerve wildly, both to avoid being shot and to dodge obstacles and pedestrians. What it did do was lend Marcus and Diana precious moments in which they weren’t being actively fired upon.

Leaning back into the tran, Marcus spared the comm a quick look. What little was left of the dashboard was a charred mess but somehow the Finder’s gunfire had managed to tune the comm over to a local music station. Now the blaring of a brass section and the thrum of an upright bass sounded from the discreet amp system of the tran. A woman was singing as well but Marcus could not make out the lyrics of the song over the returning sound of gunfire.

A sudden drumbeat rolled as Diana hurled their tran to the right, cutting across the path of one of the approaching bikes, forcing it to slow down or crash into them.

As they flew down a bisecting street, Diana glanced up at her rearview and said, “I don’t think we’re losing these guys.”

Emptying the spent shells from his gun, Marcus patted himself down once more just to be sure he hadn’t miraculously started producing bullets in his pockets.

“I’m out of ammo.” said Marcus with a growl.

He anxiously fumbled with his safety straps as Diana shot him a look but did not say anything. There were wheels spinning behind her eyes, thoughts in motion, but she did not give any concerns she had a voice. Instead she focused back on the road, driving intentionally through a stand outside a shop so that it sent barrels of melons smashing over their tran and rolling backwards towards their pursuers. With a static charge of aether, the smaller detritus on the forward window was atomized while the larger chunks were shunted aside by a sweeping arm of energy.

The bikes, momentarily slowed by the deluge of fruit, were quickly gaining on them again. Marcus only saw three of them now. He hadn’t been certain but during his brief conversation with Mel he thought he had got a lucky shot in, hitting one of the drivebikes and forcing it to slow lest it explode.

There had still been an explosion, two actually. The Finder’s errant shots finding a couple of parked trans thanks to Diana’s driving. Marcus was fairly sure she had actually swung close to the other vehicles on purpose to get just such a reaction. Civic minded legionnaires might have stopped to help those affected or at least slowed to avoid possible aether burns. The Finders had charged straight through the rippling waves of overloaded aether, relying on the speed of their bikes to carry them through fast enough to remain safe.

Up ahead, Marcus saw the berths on the southern outskirts of Panimberg. Large circular, prefab structures, they stood out against the more rustic architecture of the town.

“Which one are you in?” asked Diana as she sent them swerving around a bodega at the last second.

Marcus realized he was unconsciously gripping the front of his seat with one hand and worked to loose his white knuckled grip before saying, “Number nine. The one on the end there.”

Watching Diana, because it was either that or look helplessly back at their pursuers, Marcus saw her eyes darting around.

Brow suddenly furrowing in a look of concentration, she gave the former Magus another quick glance. Despite her obvious efforts, Marcus could see the storm of questions boiling behind Diana’s eyes.

Some of them were obvious. Why wasn’t Marcus helping? Why wasn’t the all powerful Magus, Primus Reborn, doing more? Had he really severed all ties with the government that had made him into what he was? How was he still alive?

They were the questions almost everybody asked when they discovered his identity these days.

But there were other questions in that look. More calculating, more precise questions. Questions that Marcus was not sure he had answers for.

Diana remained silent during her brief look at him but when she turned her attention back to the road, she said, “Hang on to something. I’m not sure if this is going to work.”

Marcus found his own concerned look and he started to ask, if *what* was going to work? The words never had a chance to find the air they needed to exist.

Their tran rocketed forward suddenly and Diana’s aether crackled visibly around her hands as she fed more power into the vehicle.

Marcus tried to ask what she thought she was doing. Didn’t she know the inherent dangers in overloading a standard tran like this one? Most chems in the galaxy weren’t made to work beyond their internal charge; it ran the serious risk of disrupting the circuit and frying the entire aethite matrix. Not to mention the risk of accidentally starting a feedback loop, finding that once you tapped into the power of something as big as a tran, you could not stop it from forcing all of that stored aether back into you. It was a good way to crystallize your internal organs.

Marcus tried to say all of this but all that came out was a drawn out, “Nooo!”

They roared down the street and Diana hunkered forward, forcing more and more aether through the steering column of the tran. Beneath them, the grav-chems of the small vehicle popped with excess power, causing them to bounce up and down. Each successive bounce got them a little farther away from the ground and Marcus stared forward in wide-eyed horror as the walls of the berths came hurtling towards them.

“Diana?!” Marcus half screamed.

Looking over at the slender woman beside him, Marcus actually saw a sneering grin form on her face. For better or worse, it was a somewhat familiar look. Helena was apparently not the only Istara sister that found a sort of sadistic joy in insane stunts.

Just before they cleared the last block before the berths, Diana jerked the tran to one side, timing their turn just before their largest bounce yet. The grav-chems let out a snapping pop beneath them that sounded like a giant balloon exploding and then they were in the air, doing a barrel roll towards the wall of the berth.

Marcus wasn’t quite sure what happened next, having closed his eyes after the first revolution of the world and sky outside the passenger window. All he knew was that there was a thunderous crash beneath them and he felt every bone in his body trying to escape through his feet. Just as gravity was reasserting itself on the situation and Marcus felt everything sliding down – a direction that he now knew was just to his right – there was yet another explosive pop from the grav-chems. It was followed by one more moment of horrifying weightlessness and then another crash that could have woken up a sleeping god.

When Marcus finally opened his eyes they were still moving at speed though there was an unsettling clattering coming from beneath the tran. It was the sound of crystal dragging across clay tiles. They were on the roof of one of the buildings running parallel to the berths, bits of grav-chem and broken solar panels scattering out behind them and raining out onto the street below.

“One more.” said Diana fiercely, eyes locked forward and lines of violent pink power surging out of her hands. “Just one more.”

Ahead of them, Marcus saw where the roof slanted slightly upwards, forming a wonderfully laid out improvised ramp for anyone who happened to be driving on top of the building.

The former Magus did not need his aetherics to tell that the tran was about to die. The bottom of the vehicle was actually dragging across the roof like a sled more than actually driving, their speed keeping them from sliding back down into the street for the moment.

Before Marcus could say anything to the effect of her being completely insane, Diana gave them another burst of speed, shooting forward. What little life was left in the grav-chems burned furiously for the moments just as they passed over the impromptu ramp.

Marcus was sure that he screamed, actual words were beyond him at this point, and he definitely heard Diana shouting as well. Hers was less terrified and more triumphant though.

As they sailed upwards and their windshield crested the rim of the berth, Marcus saw the *Amal’hiam*. The long, squat ship sat exactly where he had left it. Though, in another of those perfectly preserved moments of observation, he noted that the upper airlock looked as though it had been broken open.

Then the bottom of the tran smashed into the outer lip of the berth, the polysteel of the vehicle warping around the thicker, sturdier construction. In an instant of simultaneous good and bad luck, their front end was carried forward with a whipping smash, the windows around the pair of midrians shattering in a frenzied storm of glass. Then there was a grinding, scraping sound as the tran lurched forward, sliding down the inside wall of the berth and towards the dirt floor nearly twenty meters below.

The last thing Marcus saw was the floor of the berth screaming towards them and then everything went black.

Mel watched Greg work from a perch on top of the *Amal’hiam*.

There had been a brief moment, just after Greg had turned to confront the other mercenaries, when she thought that it might look like a fair fight. Eight midrians, armed with repeaters and scattershots, against one ogre who had equipped himself with something that looked like what a child thought a gun should look like. It was mostly barrel with a strange, almost improvised looking, stock, like something designed to fire melons by backwater sapients with too much time on their hands.

Then, when the ogre had begun loading that huge, gleaming shard-ammo into it, Mel had actually started to feel sorry for the other mercenaries.

What followed had not been a fight, not really. Shots had been exchanged and Mel was pretty sure the merc with the cigar had actually managed to hit Greg in the head but, like all of his kind, the ogre simply shrugged the gunfire off. When they stopped shooting for half a moment, Greg had simply wiped his face with a handkerchief produced from somewhere on his vest and then apologized before opening returning fire.

Shard launchers were not like standard aetheric weaponry, they weren’t quite the oddity like Marcus’ powder-round revolver, but they were rarely seen outside of war zones. While they packed far more firepower than any sort of gun that simply amplified and focused the user’s natural aetherics, they tended to cause much more collateral damage. Like the name suggested, they fired shards of aethite and these specifically crafted chems of overcharged, unstable crystal would detonate the moment they impacted with anything.

Mel had seen smaller models, shoulder mounted and only firing one shard at a time, used to take out seraphs and other armored vehicles.

Thankfully Greg was not actually aiming at any of the men around him or it might have made the berth look as though a meat stew had been dropped from a low flying aircraft.

As it was, there were several huge, terrifying explosions that rained dirt and chunks of ground down amidst the mercenaries. A few of them were knocked aside by the blasts, maybe one or two hit by flying shrapnel, but it did not look as though any of them had been sent to an immediate and violent grave.

Greg strode forward like an impassable juggernaut, ratcheting the barrels of his weapon around so that the next round was ready to be fired. A few of the mercenaries continued to fire at him but as their shots fizzled and sputtered against the ogre’s hide, they began to fall back. Slowly at first but with escalating rapidity once the one with the cigar called a retreat.

Moving forward with that unchanging, deliberate pace, Greg lowered his gun and bent over, grabbing one of the fallen mercenaries around the neck with a single hand. He dragged the midrian to one side, like some kind of struggling luggage, and followed the retreating men as they fled the berth. When he made it to the door, he flung the other mercenary outside with a casual flick of his arm, sending the fully grown midrian sailing out in a smooth arc.

“And stay out!” shouted Greg, wiping the hand that had clutched the mercenary on a pant leg. Glancing down at the hand and rubbing his thumb against his first two fingers, the ogre seemed to be considering some sort of residue the midrian had left there with a somewhat disgusted look.

The whole affair had happened faster than it had taken Mel to make up her mind about what to do just a few minutes ago and, needless to say, she was impressed. The mercs were all gone and of the dwarf there was no sign. Mel was pretty sure that Ark had been the first to turn tail and run but just to be safe she did a quick circuit of the berth, looking behind the *Amal’hiam’s* landing struts and the forward protrusion that held the main airlock.

Flitting over towards Greg, she met the ogre after he had shut and locked the berth’s door.

“How did I do?” asked Greg with a cocky grin on his face, eyes alight with mirth.

Mel could have laughed she was so happy; it felt great to finally have a clean win today. Instead she just smiled broadly and said, “Perfect. Just perfect.” Her smile faded a bit when she added. “We’re going to have to make sure they’re not still lurking around outside. Marcus and Diana are going to be here soon.”

“Who is Diana?” asked Greg amiably as he moved towards the rest of his belongings across the berth.

Mel paused and she drifted behind the ogre slightly. *That* was a tricky question. Probably the first of many tricky questions she or Marcus would have to answer if Greg stuck around. Marcus might not have been as big of a celebrity outside of the Khanus Empire but it had only been nineteen cycles since he had personally killed the Minos Dominion’s head of state. He was pretty well known regardless of what circles they ran in. Unless they met someone who had literally been living in a cave somewhere, the name Marcus Crassus and the events associated with it was about as common as common knowledge got.

“She’s… a friend.” said Mel awkwardly.

Greg gave her a look over his shoulder but did not push the subject as he removed the unspent shards from his gun and repacked the weapon away.

Then the tran crashed into the berth.

A twisted wreck of polysteel and splintered aethite, it fell to the ground just to the right of the door leading out onto the street.

Shouting for Greg, Mel shot forward and the ogre loped up behind her. They reached the ruined tran at about the same time and Mel put a hand to her face when she saw the bloodied, still form of Marcus in the passage seat.

Without being asked, Greg strode forward, reaching down with his huge hands and gripping the frame of the tran. Mel saw broken glass biting into the ogre’s palms but he did not seem to worry too much about such minor cuts as he made a wrenching motion. The muscles on his shoulders and back bulged with strain, just barely losing the fight with the material that made up his shirt and utility vest. The polysteel of the tran was not so lucky.

Placing a boot to one side of the door, Greg tore it off its hinges and tossed it aside. Drawing out a combat knife that Marcus could have used as a full sized sword, the ogre gingerly cut the midrian out of his safety harness. The straps of thin polyweave had probably saved the idiot’s life.

“He’s alive.” said Greg somberly, gently laying Marcus out on the ground to one side and moved to circle the tran.

Mel let out a breath and flew down to the supine man. His face was bulging with lumpy bruises and there was a nasty gash on his brow where it looked like glass had slashed at him. A thousand little cuts and scrapes covered his body and there was a huge circle burned into his shirt just over his heart. As she helplessly looked over his injuries Mel admitted that she had definitely seen Marcus in worse condition but she was still kicking herself. In the last cycle she had not thought once to try and restock her supply of potions.

On Saul’s Rock, when Marcus had been beaten six ways to the Hells by a couple of thugs in a bar, Mel had been able to get him back on his feet in a miraculously short amount of time thanks to the last of her techno-organic restorative. The T-Rez was a Sidhe made concoction that could heal injuries faster than any well trained field medic and was probably on par with a skilled medikus. Even a small dose right now would have Marcus up and dancing in a matter of moments.

Well, maybe not dancing.

They’d had a cycle for Mel to acquire more. It would not have come cheaply, especially considering she had no intention of dealing directly with any of the Sidhe, but considering their financial situation it would have not been a problem.

“Void and Queen’s Cursed Tower.” cursed Mel, running a hand over her head and rubbing at the back of her neck. Her shoulders ached immensely from all the flying she had been doing over the last turn and a wave of exhaustion was suddenly catching up with her. Despite herself, she yawned and started blinking rapidly.

There was another sound of ripping polysteel and a woman coughing roughly as Greg helped Diana get free of the tran as well. Somehow she had managed to say awake through their ordeal and though she did so shakily, she stood on her own. She did hold onto Greg’s hand until she had taken a few steps but with a deep breath, Diana stood up straight and glanced around.

“Um, thank you.” she said awkwardly, giving Greg an appraising look and then turning to stare at Mel. “Who is this?”

Mel sighed and said, “Diana, Greg. Greg, Diana.”

Greg gave the midrian a charming half-smile as he said, “Charmed, I’m sure.”

“Where did he come from?” asked Diana flatly.

Mel rolled her shoulders wearily and then buzzed back up into the air, though if she didn’t get some food and sleep soon she doubted she would even be able to do that.

“I hired him.” said the pixie evenly. “He’s protecting me.” She glanced up at Greg and amended, “Us.”

Diana shook her head, seeming to dismiss any other lingering questions she might have at the moment. She began walking towards the *Amal’hiam* as she said, “Fine. Let’s just get out of here. Is your ship working?”

Mel felt her jaw suddenly go slack as the actual reason she had left Marcus’ side at the monastery came crashing back into her brain like the tran into the berth.

“Shitting Sidhe.” said the pixie under her breath.

Turning slowly, Diana gave her an unreadable look and said, “What?”

Mel glanced down at the display on her forearm. They had at least another twenty minutes before Slevin showed up, though it could be as long as an hour twenty considering his arrival estimate had been anything but exact.

“There’s a guy coming to fix her up.” said Mel weakly, looking up with a pained expression. “He said he’d be here soon.”

It was not a lie. Not exactly.

Outside the berth there was a whining, buzzing noise; the distinctive sound of drivebikes moving at a decent clip.

“Soon is not fast enough.” said Diana, some strain finally entering her voice as she glanced towards the berth’s entrance. “It won’t take long for them to figure out where we landed.”

“Finders?” intoned Mel.

Diana just nodded, still staring at a spot on the wall as though she could see through it.

There was a polite cough behind them and Mel turned to look over at Greg. The ogre smiled at her but there was a fragile awkwardness to the expression now.

“What’s up?” asked Mel.

“If I’m not overstepping my bounds,” said Greg softly, not breaking eye contact. “I may have an idea.”

Mel flew over to him and for the first time in a long time, she landed on someone’s shoulder that wasn’t Marcus’. Greg struggled to maintain his gaze but settled for just looking at her out of the corner of one massive eye.

“I’m all ears big guy.” said Mel as she silently bemoaned the pain running through her back and shoulders.

“You say your vessel is broken, yes?” asked Greg, still clearly unsure how he should be addressing someone who was standing on another part of his body.

“You got it.” said Mel.

“And that your aid may not arrive for some time yet?” he asked.

“Wanna get to your point any time soon?” replied Mel, some of her frustration bubbling out.

“Well,” said Greg cautiously, glancing towards the main airlock of the *Amal’hiam*, “I may know someone who might be… persuaded to help.”

“Oh?” asked Mel, following his gaze and seeing the dwarvish device still attached to the doors outer lock. Her voice dropped into a deadpan and she said, “Oh.”

Chapter Twenty Eight

4 Standard Imperial Cycles Previous

“Bad news?” asked Galen, swinging his nephew Alexander around and eliciting excited shrieks from the young prince.

Throneguard Captain Helena Istara stared down at the memo that Ilza had just handed her, more specifically at the insignia displayed on its folded exterior. It was from the Office of Imperial Intelligence. Notifications from them were rarely good, especially ones delivered via courier rather than over her personal comm.

“Not sure.” said Helena, looking back up at her aide before continuing. “Thank you Ilza, you were right to bring this straight to me.”

Ilza nodded and gave Helena a concerned look. “If you need me to run anything back I’ll be nearby.”

Helena nodded distractedly, looking back down at the folded note in her hands. “Thank you Ilza.” she said again.

Once the younger woman was gone Helena continued to stare down at the note until Galen moved closer, Alexander’s legs held on his shoulders while the prince dangled upside down across the Duke’s back.

Looking up at him, Helena smiled warmly as the prince laughed breathlessly from his inverted position. Unlike most, Galen had never made an issue of Nassaeya’s unwillingness to divulge the identity of her son’s father, instead opting to be the doting uncle and role model whenever his busy schedule allowed. Galen, despite Alexander’s dubious parentage, loved his nephew as if he were his own son. Perhaps he knew of the prince’s father and made no issue of it or perhaps he simply did not care. Either way Galen Khanus was singular amidst the nobility of his family’s Empire, both on this issue and many others. Time and again he had proven himself a steadfast friend to Helena as she had transitioned to a life among the High Houses in these last twelve cycles.

“Will you be all right with Alexander for a few minutes?” asked Helena, her grip tightening on the still-sealed memo in her hands.

Galen gave her a wry look and bounced the prince up and down as he said, “This little monster?” This got even more laughter from Alexander and his face began to redden. “I think we’ll be okay if the babysitter leaves for a bit.”

Letting go of the prince’s feet, Helena gasped as Alexander fell, but Galen managed to snag the falling child and wheel him back around so that he held him right side up.

Helena sighed and shot Galen a fierce look. “Are you sure?”

“Of course.” said Galen boisterously as his voice took on a tone of mock seriousness and he stared at his nephew. “The boys will manage just fine without Miss Helena, won’t we?”

“Yeah Miss Helna!” said Alexander excitedly. “Be fine with Unca Gal’n!”

“That’s right.” said Galen, still nodding at Alexander. “Miss Helena can have all the time she needs.” Smiling he looked over at the Captain. “I think I’ve got this.”

“I won’t be far.” said Helena, taking a few hesitant steps away from the two Khanus men.

“Would you just go already!” said Galen with a laugh.

“Go, Helna go!” said Alexander, clapping enthusiastically.

Galen gave her a serious look. “You heard the prince.”

Helena smiled at the pair and finally turned to leave the modest nursery. It wasn’t normally where Alexander played but Nassaeya did not like having her son too far away so she’d converted this sitting room just off the main throne room. Unlike the other private meeting chambers normally used by the members of the Senate Major, this one contained many plush animals and radiantly colored toys.

Normally it would not have just been Helena watching over the prince. The lack of nannies and caregivers was just the latest oddity in a series of oddities over the previous two turns.

Nassaeya had dismissed most of the servants and household staff just a turn ago and within the next turnspan Helena was expected to screen a whole new batch. Before that, the Empress had doubled her own personal security retinue, putting the entire Thronegaurd on high alert. But when Helena had asked why, the only response she had been given had been a cool gaze and a reminder of her duty to House Khanus.

At this point Helena had been around Nassaeya Khanus long enough to know when the other woman was scared if nothing else.

Despite her icy exterior, the Empress had been rattled by something two turns ago and now it seemed as though that event had driven a wedge of distrust between the monarch and her servants.

Helena was not sure exactly *what* had happened to the Empress, all she knew was that it meant more work for her and a sense of strange silence within the Imperial Palace.

Making her way through a few of the corridors that honeycombed around the outer perimeter of the throne room, Helena found an out of the way corner near another meeting room. The Senate was not currently in session but the Empress was holding court today, meeting with several representatives from across her rule as well as one or two of the Magus Imperia.

Closing her eyes for a moment, Helena used her aetherics to settle her own nerves as well as reaching out with that sense. She felt for Marcus.

Last she had heard he was still held up on Bannis Cray; something about a dispute in the system’s governorship under Imperial law. The man’s concern for those he had ostensibly conquered was both an endearing and annoying quality. He would not claim a world for the Khanus Empire and then just leave it to sort out what that meant. No, Marcus Crassus had to show them the Imperial ideal. He was a damn paragon. It was part of the reason she loved him.

Despite everything he had been through and everything he had done in his long years of service he still represented the best of what the Empire could be. To Helena that was far more impressive than anything the Followers might say about Slivers of Divinity or the return of Primus Khanus.

She could not currently feel him but that did not mean he might not be back. For a normal person the range of her aetheric senses were impressive but even the most low rated wizard would have been able to manage much more.

Helena let out her breath slowly, releasing her focus to glance back down at the memo in her hand. She was trying to distract herself, she knew.

Moving with careful precision, marred somewhat by a slight tremble that ran across her hand, Helena opened the memo.

*To: Throneguard Captain Helena Istara*

*From: Lieutenant Hadrian Renic*

*Captain Istara, it is with deepest regret that I must inform you of Diana Istara’s sedition from the Khanus Empire. On 24-05-4759 Major Diana Istara of Nam’sil went AWOL and has not been heard from since. Evidence suggests that Major Istara violated the terms of her service with the Imperial Legion, making her way off world without debrief or permission. If you have any further information on the whereabouts of Major Diana Istara or any possible clue that may lead to her capture please forward them to this callset – OIIcallset{978602}. Your cooperation in this is appreciated Captain.*

*Lieutenant Hadrian Renic*

*Office of Imperial Intelligence*

*Imperia*

Helena read the short note several times, trying to wring some further details from the sparse amount of words. Only one detail seemed relevant though.

Her sister was now a traitor and a fugitive.

Staring down at the memo, Helena willed it to tell her more. Why? When? How? All of these questions and more raced through her head and none of them had any answer.

She had not even spoken to Diana in cycles, their last conversation having been just before Helena had made Captain. She tried to remember what her sister had been doing at the time. Had she even asked? Diana had certainly still been a part of the Legion but now that Helena gave it some thought she had not known her sister’s actual job for over a decade.

The last time they had talked, nearly three cycles ago now, Diana had been distant and aloof. It had seemed to Helena as though she’d had something on her mind but was unable to put the proper words to it, or perhaps her sister was unable to muster any emotions passed that cold mask that she constantly wore. She had let slip that whatever she was doing was classified, though that had been through demure changes in subject and not any direct statement. Helena had been in the Legion long enough to read between the lines though.

Unfortunately, as had always happened since The Shattering, their conversation had inevitably turned towards the reasons why Helena stayed in the service. She would never say so overtly but it seemed to be a topic that Diana always steered them toward. Especially following the sack of Minos, Helena’s sister seemed intent on pushing her away from the Legion and back towards whatever life they may have had before their homeworld had been razed. As if that were even possible at this point.

Diana could not seem to grasp that what their lives had been before the tauro assault on their world did not truly exist anymore. Both of them had been shaped and transformed by their time in the Legion and the war. There was no going back.

It did not help that Diana definitely did not approve of Helena’s relationship with Marcus. There were very few that did, it seemed. Friends and colleges alike agreed with her sister.

On a superficial level their dislike made sense. Marcus Crassus was a Magus, one of the Thirteen. He was a near immortal demigod who had been alive ten times longer than Helena. His place within Imperial society was the next best thing to divine and that had been before the Followers had begun trumpeting their *Primus Reborn* nonsense. In the wake of The Shattering there had even been radical splinter groups within the Followers that called for him to take the throne. It was a notion that even Marcus outwardly found patently ridiculous, though Helena had seen how that talk had also terrified him.

Because that was what the naysayers could not see. Somehow Helena could see beyond the Magus and through to the man. Some turns it seemed like she was the only person who saw Marcus for who he truly was. He put up a brave face, standing tall and proud after that last day on Minos, but Helena had sensed his pain then and she continued to sense it now.

The Empire did not want to hear about their Magus who was hurt and tired. They did not want to know about his confusion or the nights when he could not sleep, about the names he muttered when he did finally find some rest. They wanted him proud and tall. They wanted Primus Reborn.

He could be that man for moments at a time but Helena saw the strain it put on him and it pained her to watch. She could be there for him though; she could share the weight that he shouldered. So long as Helena had her way Marcus would not have to struggle alone.

Diana had not been able grasp that. She only saw the Magus, seemingly taking advantage of one of his subordinates. That’s how many saw it, Helena guessed. Just as they could only see the Magus in Marcus, they did not seem to see the woman under the Throneguard Captain.

No one realized just how weak Helena felt. How hollow everything seemed. Like Marcus she put on a brave face and just like him it appeared as though that was all anyone saw.

Any vengeance the two could have had against the tauro had long since been fulfilled with the collapse of their Dominion. Helena’s family and homeworld. The former empress, Alessia. If their spirits could find peace within the aether surly they had already done so but for those left behind the galaxy was still a cold, empty place.

Helena and Marcus had found each other despite that. Two halves of a whole. Their aetherics singing in a unified symphony that helped quiet the voices of the dead. Together they could push on and give the Khanus Empire the Magus and the Captain that it wanted.

Diana, with her cold emotionless exterior, did not understand. Maybe she couldn’t understand anymore. Something in her had been broken far more profoundly than within Helena.

They had not parted on the best of terms.

Helena tried to remember the last thing she had said to her sister. All she knew was that it had not been kind.

Still holding the memo numbly in her hand, Helena made her way back to Alexander’s playroom. She extended her aetheric sense again, hoping to feel Marcus’ familiar thrum. She missed him now more than she had mere moments before.

Suddenly Helena heard a sound that made every thought of Marcus or Diana flee from her mind. A screaming child.

Breaking into an aetherically charged run that sent her flying down the hallway, Helena drew the two swords strapped to her left hip. Their reinforced aethite blades crackled with violet energy that leapt between the two weapons in a jittering arc before her. Thoughts of assassins and Nassaeya’s unspoken fears flooded her mind as she practically exploded through the door into the playroom, the entrance’s lock annihilated rather than waiting for it to cycle and unlock at Helena’s touch.

Within, the Throneguard Captain found a scene that immediately made her lower her swords though the furious expression on her face did not change.

Galen looked up from where he held Alexander, the Duke’s expression one of terrified helplessness in the face of his nephew’s wailing. The Prince had a shallow cut down along his cheek that bled profusely. With a quick intake of breath, Helena also saw the long, ceremonial knife that Galen normally wore at his belt on the floor nearby.

“Helena, I, I’m sorry I…” stammered Galen, panic in his voice.

“What did you do?” said Helena, her voice harsh but quiet as she snapped her swords back into the two parallel sheaths at her waist.

She strode over to the two Khanus men, Alexander still screaming at the top of his lungs while Galen now held him awkwardly at arms length. Helena knelt and collected the boy, the Prince throwing his arms around her neck and burying his bloodied face on her shoulder as he continued to cry.

“I, I was just trying to show him a trick with the knife and…” said Galen awkwardly, genuine pain in his words and face.

Helena let out a strained sigh as she held Alexander with both arms; he was beginning to get heavy at just over three cycles of age. Of course Galen would never have hurt his nephew on purpose but the Duke had a foolish streak sometimes that could extend beyond a brash word or two.

“Ma- Ma- Ma-” said Alexander through screaming breaths into Helena’s robes.

Helena wasn’t sure if the moisture now soaking through to her shoulder was blood or tears but she quickly turned to stride out of the room’s broken door.

“Where are you going?” asked Galen with a strained voice.

“To take the Prince to see his mother.” said Helena with a sharp look at the Duke.

Galen stopped in his tracks, never exiting the room as he said, “Oh.”

Helena felt him before she entered the throne room through the Empress’ private door but Alexander’s wails prompted her to keep moving at speed. That’s what she told herself anyway.

Would she have entered so quickly had she sensed anyone else in court with Nassaeya? Did it really matter?

Perhaps. Perhaps not.

Either way, Helena moved at a brisk pace into the low area surrounded by the bleachers that might normally seat the Senate Major. The paladins of her Throneguard, more than would normally have been present, watched her apprehensively as she appeared but relaxed when they saw that it was their Captain.

She only paused for a moment as she came out from behind the throne, locking eyes with Marcus for the barest of seconds. His dark blue pupils flashed with surprise and then something akin to awe, the slight curvature of a smile quirking his lips.

He wore his dress uniform, its dark grays giving him the look of some bold statue of a bygone age. This was the Magus that stood before the Empress, tall and proud, though she could still see the tired lines that creased the face that seemed not much older than Helena’s own. Just over his shoulder Marcus’ spymaster pixie hovered on dragonfly wings but the Throneguard Captain only had eyes for the man.

Helena did not allow herself to get lost in that gaze, to give herself over to their already mingling aetherics.

“I’m sorry Your Highness.” said Helena, forcing herself to look away and towards the Empress. “The Lord Duke was attempting to show Alexander a trick with his dagger and-”

“And my fool of a brother let a child of barely more than three cycles play with a hardened aethite blade.” finished Nassaeya with more than a little exasperation in her voice. It did much to hide the fear that Helena had sensed earlier.

The Empress stood, sweeping towards Helena with a grace that she could never hope to match, and took her son carefully. Helena could feel the aetheric interplay between mother and child, Nassaeya doing more to calm the Prince in mere seconds without a word or thought. They were connected in much the same way that Helena and Marcus were. Emotions and feelings expressed through aetherics directly into the mind and soul.

Bringing him back to the throne, Nassaeya healed the wound on her son’s face with a gentle touch. The Empress’ gift for externalized aetherics evident by the lack of chem or other focuses to work the healing.

Nassaeya kissed Alexander on the forehead, the prince’s eyes still soggy and wide.

“See?” said the Empress. “All better.”

Moving in front of the throne, Helena stood to attention at Marcus’ side. Her left hand strained to reach out and grasp at his digits. She needed to feel his skin on hers, to have that warmth that could push back the cold pain that still festered within her heart. In front of the Empress of the Khanus Empire she remained stolid, though the tingle of his closeness was an electric sensation that ran across her palms.

Helena took a deep breath as she struggled to focus on Nassaeya and Alexander, rather than the man standing next to her.

The Prince snuggled against his mother, his cheeks still wet with tears but his crying now reduced to a shuddering intake of breath. Nassaeya stared down at her son with a peaceful, if tired, expression. She smiled gently, fear and worry seemingly forgotten while she held her son in her arms.

That smile faded as she looked back up, glancing from Helena and then to Marcus before she said, “You are dismissed My Magus. I expect an initial report within the next three turns.”

Marcus bowed, his spymaster managing something similar while still hovering just above him. Helena tried to catch his eye as he took three steps backwards but the Magus did not look away from his Empress before he turned to leave the chamber.

Helena felt her whole body ache to turn and follow, it was a tension that she did not allow any purchase as she stood before Nassaeya.

For her part, the Empress’ gaze followed Marcus for a moment and then came back to settle on the Captain of her paladins. She studied Helena for a long moment, as if studying some puzzle from a distance before attempting to solve it.

“Do you love him?” Nassaeya finally asked quietly.

The question took Helena off guard and she felt the look of shock on her face before she had a chance to cover it up.

Looking down at the marbled floor briefly, Helena’s eyes rose again to meet those of the Empress.

“Yes.” said Helena, the total conviction of her thoughts and feelings behind that one word.

Nassaeya studied her for another long moment. Her cold eyes reminded Helena of Diana’s for a moment but that look softened slightly. The Empress did not smile but her eyes expressed something that Helena could not quite read. Gratitude? Approval?

“You are dismissed as well Captain.” said Nassaeya promptly.

Helena stared back at the Empress, fighting the urge to nervously bite at her lip. Instead she said, “Your Highness, the Prince?”

“I can manage my son for a time.” said Nassaeya with a brief smile. “Tell the seneschal to hold the rest of my appointments on your way out.”

Helena bowed. “Of course, Your Highness.”

Taking several steps backwards, Nassaeya met Helena’s eyes again before the Captain could turn to go.

“Keep him strong Captain Istara.” said the Empress, so quietly that Helena barely heard her.

Helena bowed again and swallowed as she said, “Yes.”

She turned to go, seeing Marcus already most of the way up the stairs leading out of the throne room. Helena’s eyes were locked on the retreating form of the Magus but her thoughts still lingered on the Empress for a moment.

Diana and many others may not have approved of her relationship with Marcus Crassus but it seemed as though there was at least one person on Imperia who did. One other who saw him as Helena did and at least guessed at the burdens they both carried.

Helena tried to bury any further thoughts of Diana, what good would it do to dwell on a woman who was now practically a stranger to her? Instead she focused forward, striding forward into the antechambers beyond the throne room after exchanging a quick word with the seneschal.

He waited just beyond, speaking with his spymaster in low tones.

“Can you please just go to Commander Farris?” he said to the pixie.

The tiny flying woman shot Helena a look before flying off down the hall, disappearing from sight after a second and leaving the two midrians alone.

Helena moved faster than she probably should have, coming up behind him just before he turned around. She did not speak and she did not give him time to either.

Helena Istara kissed Marcus Crassus with a hunger and need that surprised even her. She felt their aetheric auras mingle and blur together. The pains of the world faded quickly and all that was left was the two of them. Like this they could be strong. With one another they could be what the Khanus Empire wanted and needed them to be.

Later they would have to part. Later they might be separated by a gulf of worlds and systems. Later they would have to stand alone for a time.

Later was not now though. Now they were together and all was right with the Wake.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Greg decided that something must be wrong with his brain. It was really the only possible explanation for what he had just suggested. There was a twisted sort of logic to bringing Arkon-no-Sek back to the *Amal’hiam* but there was also so much risk as to completely outweigh any potential benefit. Ark was a khag, yes, but that did not guarantee he had the wherewithal or the resources needed to fix the ship. Given time and the correct tools, Greg was sure his former Hob could have the vessel up and running but the others were looking to this idea for a quick fix, not another long term solution.

There really was no other explanation other than insanity. Perhaps he had gone mad sometime in the last cycle and was only now coming to grips with it. After all, how did the madman know when he had turned the bend?

Despite this, Greg kept his mouth shut as Mel nodded grimly.

“Go get him.” said the pixie.

“Another mechanic?” asked the new midrian woman and Greg took his first proper look at her.

There was a steel to her that the ogre found somewhat disturbing. Something about the eyes perhaps. It was like watching the footage captured from dragon-chasers in their ultra-fortified observation platforms, seeing all that roiling plasma and unstable aether lashing out just on the other side of crystal panes. Even through those layers of hardened aethite, even distorted as the view might be, you knew that what lurked on the other side was a raw force of unbridled nature and given the slightest crack it would tear through in a ferocious, concentrated storm.

This was also the woman Marcus and Mel had been searching half the Wake for, the one with a possible connection to StRATa. Greg steeled himself as he studied her.

“A dwarf.” said Mel darkly. “We’ve… worked together before.”

The midrian, Mel had said her name was Diana, gave the pixie an oblique stare which she then turned on Greg.

“And he’ll be able to fix the ship?” asked the midrian.

Greg returned her stare with one of his own. Though it may not have been his ultimate vocation, he had been trained in the Law School of Gobwar. Keeping a blank face was not a new experience for the ogre.

“I believe so.” said Greg. It wasn’t a lie, not really

Mel took a step off of his shoulder and Greg had to fight the instinct to catch her as the pixie’s wings took her in a bobbing, swaying flight towards the *Amal’hiam.*

“Could someone grab Marcus? I would but…” she said, not bothering to look around as her words trailed off. Exhaustion seemed to be getting the better of his new Hob.

Exchanging a brief nod with Diana, Greg stooped and helped the significantly shorter woman drag the unconscious midrian back towards his ship.

Marcus groaned several times as they managed to secure him in the decently sized captain’s quarters. There was nothing intelligible to Greg’s ears but Diana seemed to grow stiff as they lay him out on the bed and he mumbled something.

Turning away, Greg exited the room and found Mel still near the main airlock, sitting on the back of the gunner chair, smoking a tiny cigarette. The smoke she exhaled swirled around her in strange shapes, moving at first like clouds on a windy day and then taking on the form of something like a serpent or worm.

Taking a long drag while still staring down at the floor, she let the smoke settle into a shapeless form of a bulbous storm cloud before speaking.

“Knowing Marcus, he’ll be out for a while.” said the pixie. “The dwarf needs to be onboard and we need to get gone before he wakes up.”

“Why?” asked Greg, pursing his lips. The smoke did not smell like any tobacco he had ever been around, it reminded him more of the smell one got just before rainclouds burst with their torrential payload.

“Easier that way.” Mel said. She did not look up until she had exhaled another puff of smoke, this one spinning like a pinwheel before coalescing into a single jagged line. “I don’t think Marcus has his head on straight right now. Things haven’t exactly gone as planned here.”

Greg nodded. “Ark… Arkon is in a similar predicament.”

Mel gave him a long, weary look. “Will he really help us?”

Glancing away for a moment, Greg looked back at his Hob with a small grin. “Depends on how I ask I suppose.”

The pixie tried to smile back at him but the expression did not last long.

“The Finders will be out there.” said Mel. “Queens’ only know why they aren’t blowing down our door right now.” She gave him a level stare. “Try not to kill any of them. They’re just trying to do their job.”

Greg gave her another curt nod and moved towards the airlock, finding a simple comfort in the ogre-sized door.

“And watch out for the big lykin.” added Mel as the interlocking teeth of the door opened like a pair of sideways jaws. “He’s bad news.”

“You have no idea.” said Diana’s voice from the stairwell above them. The midrian rounded the corner and stopped on the landing, her steely face betrayed by the slightest of tremors in her voice. “Kill that one if you get the chance.”

Greg looked to Mel and the pixie gave him a nod.

Turning again, Greg moved out of the *Amal’hiam* and heard the door snap closed behind him.

The evening air was still though the not too distant sound of insects broke the otherwise silent night. There were very few lights ablaze in Panimberg but everything was well lit by the pale faces of Bounty’s two moons.

Taking a deep breath, Greg moved over to his gear, still sitting on the other side of the berth. He grabbed his scattershot and two belts of khagrish ammunition for the downright prehistoric weapon. He could have gone for the miniature shard-ammo that could be loaded in the gun but he decided against it. The flecks of khagshot would sting like a thousand stirge bites but it require a fair amount of bad luck for it to actually kill anyone.

Then, striding passed the still smoking tran, Greg moved out into the night to find his former employer.

Mel watched the ogre leave and her eyes did not drop until the airlock cycled shut once again. Pinching her cigarette out, she let out a small gasp of pain as a piece of hot ash was snuffed out between her fingers.

“Now what?” asked Diana, coming down two more steps to stare at Mel.

The pixie felt numb as she looked up at the midrian. She really did look a lot like Helena. The resemblance was a bit terrifying actually. Not because it was like looking into the face of a dead person, strangely enough Mel was actually getting used to that sort of thing, it was the steel mask she wore. What Mel remembered of Marcus’ former paramour were not exactly fond thoughts but one thing she could recollect was that Helena always wore her emotions plainly. She had been just as bad, if not worse, than Marcus in that regard.

Diana was a strange reflection. She was to Helena what some of the other Magus had been to Marcus. Driven, completely focused, unable or unwilling to look beyond what was in front of them.

Mel did not really understand what made them so different, but she could recognize that there was a difference.

“Now we wait.” said Mel.

Diana did not respond at first, she just stared with that reptile’s glare. Then she nodded and asked, “Is there anything to eat?”

Mel snorted and said, “There’s a galley near the back, just before engineering. Basic stuff is in the cabinets. Careful if you heat anything up, the burner is a bit finicky.”

Turning and heading back up the stairs, Diana disappeared, leaving Mel alone on the back of the gunner’s chair.

No one else had ever actually used the chair apart from Mel and though they had bought shard based ammunition in their first spending spree a cycle ago, the *Amal’hiam’s* guns had never been fired.

Mel could not exactly fly the ship by herself, nor was she big enough to work the gun’s targeting system, and Marcus could not be in both places at once. Over the last cycle it had meant more than one stand off with slavers in which they had prayed extra hard that the lowlife’s never called their bluff.

Those thoughts were an ambient white noise in Mel’s mind as she sagged, hands on the polymesh to either side of her thighs. It was a struggle not to just fall backwards. She blinked hard several times and took two deep breaths.

Then she waited.

Though she did not have to wait long.

Marcus did not remember his dream but as he woke up he could feel a vague sense of dread that hung about his mind. It was not some spike of immediate fear that sometimes followed him out of unconsciousness; from dreams of the Void or twisted recollections of The Shattering. It was a deeper and far vaguer feeling.

The darkness he had woken up to in his room on the *Amal’hiam* certainly didn’t help.

The last thing he remembered was crashing into the berth with Diana, so finding himself sprawled out on his moderately comfortable bed was a bit of a shock. For half a moment he was tempted to pull a blanket over himself and drift back off to sleep but he begrudgingly forced his legs over the edge of the bed. With a heavy groan he pushed himself up, stumbling a little but finding his balance with the help of the wall mounted dresser.

He took a moment to just stand and listen, hoping to hear the slight groan and pops of a silent ship in high float above a world. They were familiar sounds that always eased Marcus but they were absent now.

Instead there was a moment of silence and then he heard the shouting from somewhere below him. There was a woman’s voice, Mel or Diana maybe, and then another voice he did not recognize.

He was barely out the door of his quarters before there was a rattling clang from somewhere else in the ship. It was a resounding sound, like a slamming door or a bulkhead suddenly sealing.

Hastening his pace, Marcus rounded the first landing on the stairs and managed to leap down the last three steps beyond to reach the entrance to the bridge. There was no one behind the navigator’s or pilot’s seats and, as he turned, he heard more shouting from somewhere down the hall leading towards the cargo hold and other parts aft of his position.

As he entered the hold Marcus found an ogre organizing the armory.

The man, standing over three meters tall and appropriately sized for everything on the ship, was humming mildly to himself as he moved a ridiculous looking miniature shard-launcher onto a rack inside the caged off area.

“Um, excuse me?” said Marcus loudly. His hand strayed towards his hip and it was only then that he realized that someone had stripped him out of his gun belt. He could actually see it in the cage, hanging up on the hook where he normally kept it.

“Oh, pardon me.” said the ogre, dipping slightly so that he could peer through the dense weave of polysteel that separated him from Marcus. “Apologies, one moment.”

The ogre racked the cartoonish weapon and ducked his head to one side, glancing out through the armory door. It was not until his face cleared the wire mesh that Marcus recognized him. It was Greg, the same ogre he had last seen working for the dwarf that was trying to steal his ship.

He was not armed as he came out into the cargo hold proper but he was still an ogre, even the ones not trained to fight were still some of the most dangerous sapients in the galaxy.

Giving Marcus a weak smile, Greg said, “This ship is something else. You’ve no idea how nice it is, not having to duck through doorways for a change.”

An awkward silence filled the space between them and Marcus stared the ogre down. The former Magus glanced passed the ogre at his gun. Even though Greg wasn’t actively trying to get in his way, the ogre’s sheer size was enough to hinder any direct movement.

Marcus shifted his weight backwards with half a step and crossed his arms as he asked, “What are you doing here?”

“Ah, yes, this is a bit awkward isn’t it?” Greg said, placing a broad hand on the back of his head.

A buzzing sound drew both of their attention as Mel came flying into the hold.

“Marcus.” said the pixie excitedly. “You’re awake!”

Mel glanced between his friend and the ogre and then down towards the hatch leading back towards the mess and engineering.

“Mel? What’s going on? How long was I out for?”

Biting her lip, Mel ran a hand through her hair and scratched at the back of her neck. “Okay.” she said. “You’re going to be mad.”

Marcus took a deep breath and listened to the steady stream of cursing coming further into his ship. The voice was unfortunately familiar.

The former Magus was not nearly awake enough to deal with everything at once, so he started with the basics.

“How long was I out for?” Marcus repeated.

Mel exchanged a look with Greg and she said, “About half an hour?”

“And why is he on my ship?” he asked, pointing at Greg.

“He works for us now.” said Mel.

“Begging your pardon.” interrupted the ogre. “But in point of fact, my Contract is held by you and you alone Miss Mel.”

Mel shot him a look and said, “Fine. Whatever. He works for me.”

Marcus closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Okay.” he said. “And the dwarf is on board?”

“Yes.” said Mel with a bit of a growl. “He is.”

“Why?” asked Marcus.

“To fix the ship.” answered Mel.

“I thought you had a guy you found.” said Marcus, his brow furrowing.

“I *did*.” said Mel, her voice speeding up as she began explaining. “He should be here any minute now. But the Finders are sniffing around and we didn’t know how long it would be and Ark had just run away and so I sent Greg after him and…”

Marcus held up a hand and Mel’s words petered out.

“Where’s Diana?” he asked.

Greg gave the hatch across from them another of those half-bemused, half-pained smiles. “She’s supervising.” he said.

Marcus took another deep breath and blinked a few times before walking casually over to the armory cage. Slipping his gun belt off its hook he wrapped it back around his waist. When the familiar weight of his revolver settled near his thigh he felt a tension drain out of his shoulders.

Under the racks to his right there was a case of whiskey that glared up at him. Marcus pointedly ignored it as he moved and grabbed enough ammunition to fill three speed-loaders.

As he loaded the three aluminum clips, he said, “The Finders haven’t found us yet?”

“I don’t think so.” said Mel.

“But we can’t be certain on that front.” finished Greg. “I didn’t see any of them while I was collecting Arkon, but that does not mean I was not observed.” His face lost its half-grin and became somber. “I was not precisely stealthy when I confronted Red’s Dogs again.”

“Who?” asked Marcus, coming back out into the cargo hold.

“Those other mercs.” said Mel.

“And where are they now?” asked Marcus.

There was another clanging rattle that shook the ship and, looking up, Marcus saw that the upper airlock had been broken and was now clanging open and shut. The shockwave wasn’t enough to shake anything loose but it was enough to let Marcus recognize it as a small explosion.

“They’re outside.” said Mel weakly. “Greg says Ark might still owe them money.”

“Ah…” said Marcus. “Good.”

Chapter Thirty

Marcus did not run, he did not have enough energy to run. The events of the last turn had drained him physically even if he had found a certain resolve in accepting that Helena was gone. He moved with quick strides towards the bridge of the *Amal’hiam*, Mel on his shoulder.

Once he cleared the cargo hold he took the last few steps across the landing and into the ship’s control center. It wasn’t a large room, perhaps only large enough to fit four or five people comfortably, but the viewscreen of opaque crystalline aethite gave them a clear one hundred and eighty degree view of what stood in front of the ship.

He could not see what was directly beneath the *Amal’hiam* or anything that was behind his field of view, at least not until Mel pushed herself off his shoulder and sailed over to the nav console. With a few touches to the aetheric controls she pulled up live feeds from monitor chems around the outside of the ship. They still had a few blind spots but the images displayed just in front of the pixie gave them a pretty good idea of what was going on in the berth.

Eight midrians stood outside the *Amal’hiam* in a loose ring, each brandishing a weapon that was more than they would ever need for home defense. One of them, a burly man with a noxious looking cigar clamped under a thick mustache, was bouncing a grenade in his hand and a belt of the things lay draped across his shoulder.

“That’s their leader I think.” said Mel, indicating the cigar wielding man.

“His name is Red Bartlett.” said Greg from behind them.

Marcus turned slightly, eyeing the ogre as he stood just outside the bridge. He still wasn’t sure how he felt about the war-merc’s presence.

“What kind of name is that?” asked Mel, glaring at the man through the small holodisplay.

“More importantly,” said Marcus, watching the mercenary as he lobbed the grenade he had been holding over his head towards the *Amal’hiam*, “why is he trying to blow up my ship?”

From somewhere above them there was a *plink* sound as the small overcharged aethite and polysteel grenade hit the hull, followed by a relatively small explosion that made the ship rock slightly.

Keying in another command on the nav console, Mel pulled up the ship’s exterior loudspeaker.

“Hey!” shouted the pixie. “Knock it off!”

The mercenary responded, it looked as though he was yelling something back at them. Unfortunately there were no external receivers and on the screens it just looked like the man was moving his mouth in silence.

Marcus glanced at Mel, who said, “Something about a dwarf.”

The pixie had always had a knack for reading lips.

“They want Arkon.” said Greg.

“We knew that already.” said Marcus, crossing his arms as he stared down at the mercenaries on the ‘display.

They were the kind of freelancers he had been pretending to be for the last four cycles. Sapients from the edges of galactic society, loyal only to themselves and their next source of jules. Crews like the one that followed Red Bartlett were not so uncommon. They traveled about the Wake, taking jobs both reputable and otherwise. Most of the time, all that really mattered to them was their ability to maintain their own freedom.

Mel turned to look at Greg, impatient anger filling her voice. “I thought you scared these asshats off?” asked the pixie.

“That was before I stole their source of income out from under their noses.” said Greg with a serious look on his face. He gave Mel a courteous half-bow. “I’ll beg your pardon for not foreseeing this turn of events.”

Rolling her eyes, Mel said, “Would you quit it with the whole, *begging your pardon* thing?”

Greg gave her a grin. “Begging your pardon.”

Mel let out an aggravated sigh.

“Can you scare them off again?” snapped Marcus, locking eyes with Greg.

The ogre glanced over at Mel, who nodded, and then said, “Most likely.”

“Do it.” said Mel. “My guy should be here any time now and we need this place clear when he shows.”

Marcus frowned at her. “Why did you get the dwarf if he can’t actually fix us?”

“Well…” said Mel, wincing. “It’s not that he *can’t*…”

The stream of dwarvish cursing became far more understandable once Marcus saw what was going on in engineering.

Arkon-no-Sek was backed up against the drive-core, his pitted eyes bulging beneath his craggy brow. Diana stood just in front of the dwarf, brandishing a large autorifle that had been appropriated from the *Amal’hiam’s* armory, though it was held low and to her side. The Prospector looked as though he was just to one side of being wild with panic but the moment he saw Marcus his eyes narrowed.

“You!” shouted the dwarf. “Rust and ruin! This is all your fault you dirtblooded, hairless-rhini bastard!”

Striding casually forward, Marcus got right up in front of Ark. He looked the dwarf straight in the eyes and then reeled back and punched the shorter sapient in the temple. It sent him crumpling to the floor in a moaning heap. He wasn’t unconscious, Marcus had always found it surprising difficult to knock someone out with one punch like they did in the fictives, but the dwarf would be seeing stars for a little bit.

“Uh…” intoned Mel from where she hovered near the door.

Diana gave Marcus an unreadable look as she stepped away.

The former Magus let out a sigh as a moment of silence fell over the *Amal’hiam*. There was the distant sound of screaming mercenaries from outside but it was more background noise that barely registered in Marcus’ mind.

He just wanted to be off this world. Away from all the mercenaries and Finders. He wanted to go to some quiet place on the edge of the system and just let the *Amal’hiam* float for a while. The Dragon’s Wake wasn’t going anywhere and more than anything Marcus wanted to sleep for a week.

Mel looked like he felt. There were dark circles beneath her silvery eyes that gave her a pallid look. He half expected her to object to his treatment of Ark but she simply looked down at the dwarf and sighed.

“Is there anywhere we can lock him up?” asked Marcus.

Cocking an eyebrow, Mel said, “No? Our only cage is full of weapons. We could chuck him in one of the smaller officer’s quarters but they don’t lock from the outside.”

Marcus took a deep breath and took a moment to actually think.

Ark was too dangerous to throw back outside. He had apparently been working to steal the *Amal’hiam* for the entire last cycle since they’d last seen him on Saul’s Rock so Marcus did not doubt the dwarf would continue being a nuisance if left unchecked. On the other hand, keeping him on the ship presented its own problems. Being a dwarf, Ark probably knew more about the inner workings of the *Amal’hiam* than Marcus could ever hope to. It meant that Mel was, technically, correct in that he could help fix the ship but it also meant that he could do a terrible amount of damage without any of them realizing it.

“Let’s throw him in one of the ready-harnesses.” Marcus said finally, deciding to keep the dwarf close rather than lose track of him again. The harnesses in the *Amal’hiam’s* cargo hold were as good a place as any. “I know it’s sized for an ogre but I’m sure we can rig something to hold him in.”

He reached down and dragged Ark up, shocked at just how light the dwarf was. Other dwarves Marcus had encountered tended to be of a thick nature despite the fact that none of their race ever topped a meter and a half in height. Arkon-no-Sek was of slighter stock it seemed and Marcus was able to drag him bodily without much effort.

Mel and Diana followed him back into the cargo hold and stood by as Marcus threw the dwarf into one of the strap-laden half-chairs that had been built to hold the ogre commandos who had originally used this vessel as a blockade runner during the Deep War. Marcus and Mel had removed many of these harnesses in the cycle since they had come into possession of the *Amal’hiam* but more than a dozen of the contraptions remained.

When Ark was finally strapped in, his head still lolling as nonsense syllables tumbled from his mouth, his feet actually dangled from the floor and his arms were firmly secured at his sides. The dwarf was effectively tied to the bulkhead.

All while he was securing Ark, Marcus paused every few moments to listen to what was happening outside the ship. By the time he was done all of the gunfire outside had stopped and it had been several minutes since the last of the panicked shouting of mercenaries had subsided.

Turning to find Mel perched up on another of the harnesses, Marcus said, “We should go check on your new employee. It sounds like things have died down out there.”

Mel nodded and glided down to land on his shoulder.

At some point Diana had slipped away but Marcus saw her sitting on the bridge as he approached the stairs. She still had the autorifle close by but now it was leaning up against the nav console as she stood between it and the pilot’s chair, staring out into the berth.

She turned at the sound of Marcus’ feet clanging on the corrugated polysteel stairs.

“We need to get out there.” she said as she moved, sweeping up the gun in one smooth motion. It was one of the off-brand modified numbers they had collected from the various slavers and mercs Marcus had disarmed over the last cycle. The weapons were completely useless to a man with no aetherics but now the former Magus was glad he had horded the guns as he had.

He did not stop to ask why; he just moved straight down the stairs and hit the manual release for the airlock.

Outside an elderly midrian man shoved franticly at a large carrying case on an anti-grav dolly, moving towards the *Amal’hiam* with exaggerated starts and stops. Just passed him, a dead man lay sprawled out on the dirt of the berth, several ragged holes in his back still smoking from aether burns. Greg stood between the berth’s entrance and the old man as a wave of gunfire came flooding through the door that had been almost completely destroyed.

“Mr. Slevin!” shouted Mel, leaping into the air. “This way!”

The old man angled the dolly towards them but the ogre war-merc could only block so much with his bulk. Stray bolts of aether scorched the ground around his feet as he ran.

Marcus flung himself forward, moving to block more of the shots as well. This man was most likely carrying their only means of repairing the *Amal’hiam*.

Taking several shots across the chest and upper thighs and as the former Magus drew level with Greg the ogre gave him a nod.

“Red’s Dogs have cleared out.” bellowed the ogre over the gunfire. “But they were none too pleased when the elderly gentleman approached.”

Marcus nodded back and noted that Greg had not come out here with any weapons of his own. Whatever he had done to drive off the other mercenaries, he had done so unarmed. Though the term unarmed did not mean as much when one was talking about an ogre.

Growling, Marcus drew out his revolver and took several steps forward, getting into the berth’s entrance. He tried to get a sight on any of the midrians out in the darkened edge of Panimberg but all he was able to do was sight on the sources of the shots still pouring down at him.

He fired four rounds out into the shadows and felt a nasty sort of satisfaction when he heard someone out there scream. The feeling flickered and died when the scream did not end. It became high pitched and ragged before coming to an abrupt end. The onslaught against the former Magus ended as abruptly as the wailing cry.

Marcus paused, lowering his gun fractionally and squinted as he swept his eyes back and forth. He felt a presence loom up behind him and he glanced back to see Greg coming out from the berth, also scanning the night.

The ogre met his eyes and raised an eyebrow.

Marcus shrugged and jerked his head back towards the berth, taking a step that way as well.

Greg’s eyes cast back out into the darkness around them but he nodded and started to take cautious steps backwards.

Just before both of them had reached the berth’s interior another storm of gunfire erupted at the edge of Panimberg. Marcus braced himself for more incoming fire but he halted his retreat when none of the aether was directed at him or Greg.

Instead a wide stretch of the street in front of them was suddenly illuminated with panicked fire towards unseen targets and more of those horrible screams began to sound in the night.

Marcus watched as glowing blades of aethite whirled in the dark out there, carving into the remaining mercenaries with deadly efficiency. The gunfire stopped abruptly when someone shouted out an order to retreat.

“Get back to the *Amal’hiam*.” said Marcus in a harsh whisper.

They had come inside the ruined entrance to the berth and he now stared intensely out at the shadowed street. Greg stood on the other side of the door, his hands clenching and unclenching with slow deliberation. He too stared out at Panimberg proper, though he had to do so with a slightly crouched posture to see through the door.

“If it’s all the same to you sir,” said the ogre, “I don’t think I will.”

Marcus snorted and cracked open his revolver, breaking his vigil to eject his spent shells and reload the empty chambers.

“Marcus.” hissed Greg as the former Magus loaded the last round.

Looking up, Marcus saw the movement of the Finders before he could clearly make out their shapes. They were like shadows detaching themselves from the night and nearly a dozen of the black-clad figures emerged in front of the berth. Some were midrian shaped but more than half had the hunched, lanky frames of lykins and the one directly in front of them stood a head taller than all the rest.

Basheen Grimm’s hideous eyes glowed with a feral light and a deep, thunderous rumble sounded. It took a moment for Marcus to realize that it was the giant lykin growling.

“Your ship’s weapons,” said Greg as quietly as he could, “do they work?”

Marcus licked his lips and swallowed nervously, eventually saying, “We haven’t really tested them yet.”

“Now might be a good time.” said Greg.

Marcus nodded and broke for the *Amal’hiam*, only stopping once he was at the airlock, which was closed. He looked back and saw that Greg had not retreated any further.

As he slammed a fist against the outer doors of his ship, praying Mel or somebody was just inside to let them in, Marcus called back to the ogre. “Come on!”

Greg did not respond to Marcus, he just took a step to the side so that he was framed by the doorway out of the berth, still facing out. One of his hands was held wide so that it was hidden from the view of anyone outside and he waved Marcus off franticly. At the same time he made some sort of gesture with his other hand and began shouting out at the Finders.

“Your prey is under my protection!” bellowed the war-merc. “His life belongs to me! Hunters Right!”

There was a terrifying roar that echoed into the berth as a black blur shoved Greg backwards several meters before the ogre was able to plant his heels and stop. His elbow was thrown out so that it met the throat of the snapping lykin that was now tearing at his shoulders with clawed hands.

Taking a few hard steps forward, Greg shoved Basheen back, forcing the lykin away from the *Amal’hiam*. His hands gripped large hanks of the wolf-man’s fur and he used the handholds to leverage his foe backwards another two steps.

The lykin was shorter than the ogre, though they were probably about even in bulk and while Greg used that leverage to gain some early advantage, Basheen responded with a savagery that amplified things from a shoving match into an all out brawl.

As Marcus watched, dimly aware that the airlock was opening behind him, he realized that the lykin Finder was, at least physically, a match for a fully trained ogre war-merc. He stumbled backwards into his ship in horrified silence.

They needed to get the *Amal’hiam’s* guns working right now.

Chapter Thirty One

Greg was forced to collect his thoughts in the middle of a fight and it was slowing him down. He found himself on his heels as Basheen Grimm came at him like a dervish, all teeth and talons. The others had been correct; this lykin truly was some sort of monster.

The first surprise was that he had attacked alone. Lykin’s, in Greg’s experience, did not stray from their packs. Even if their packs did not necessarily consist of other lykins, the wolf-folk of Vargus had an innate cultural instinct towards group minded activity. When one of their kind moved alone it was a strange thing.

The second surprise was just how strong this lykin was. As an ogre, Greg was not used to any other sapient matching him where raw strength was concerned. Even an equivalently trained ur’sonn, the large bear-like people most of the galaxy called the ursa, were only just this side of outmatched by a denizen of Gobwar.

The most surprising thing of all though was just how ferociously Basheen had responded at Greg’s challenge to the Code of the Hunt.

The Code was similar to an ogre’s Contract in that it was something closer to religious doctrine than a series of laws or conducts. It was those things as well but the way many lykins treated the Code it was something like a tribal code of conduct combined with a list of justifications for murder. Under the old Minos Dominion the following of the Code had been largely supported by the tauro oligarchs in the Eastern Reach. Since its collapse though, many of the now independent systems where lykin’s were more common had begun rejecting the Code of the Hunt, calling it, at best, an anachronistic and xenophobic relic of a pre-spaceflight society.

Basheen Grimm clearly felt differently.

There was a moment after the lykin collided with Greg that he genuinely felt a surge of panic. Basheen Grimm’s strength was truly astounding. Nearly a decade out in the Wake had not prepared the war-merc for a non-ogre that could match him physically. It took him a moment to overcome that initial feeling and before his cycles of training began to assert itself.

In those brief seconds Basheen forced him backwards several meters and clawed at his shoulders.

Then Greg shifted his stance, using his height to leverage the lykin to one side and slap away two claw swipes that had been meant for his face.

Taking a swift step backwards, Basheen repositioned himself so that Greg was forced to turn to keep him in his sights. When the lykin lunged back at him it was with a speed that Greg thought he could match and then Basheen jerked to one side in a feint to the ogre’s exposed left side.

Greg attempted to swing a fist at the top of his foe’s skull but the lykin squirmed again scrambled to the side on all fours.

Many of the so called “savage races” could manage switching from two legged to four legged locomotion but lykins managed it with a quick efficiency, switching between the two on the fly. Greg was actually surprised that the huge black lykin he fought even bothered with shoes.

Taking a few sudden steps forward, Greg whipped a boot out to catch Basheen in the ribs. The lykin let out a snarling yelp but latched onto the ogre’s leg with both hands, jerking at the limb down and away.

Greg felt the popping in his joints as he was dragged to the ground. He managed to roll slightly, twisting his leg out of the lykin’s grasp and swinging another kick at his head. He thought the kick connected but Basheen was scrambling at him on all fours, clawing his way up Greg’s torso.

Yellow fangs lashed at his throat as Greg threw an arm around Basheen’s neck. He managed to get the lykin in a headlock and roll with the momentum of the maneuver. Once Basheen was beneath him, Greg leaned in, trying to cut off his windpipe. The lykin’s mad, red eyes bulged and his whole body flexed and strained.

His own eyes went wide as Greg felt his whole body rise as Basheen curled up in something that resembled a sit-up. Then with a flopping motion, Greg was sent slamming back down to the ground and his grip loosened on the lykin’s neck. The war-merc’s breath was knocked out of him but he retained the presence of mind to roll away before Basheen could come at him again.

Turning his roll into a somersault, Greg reversed his momentum by springing off the exterior wall of the berth and launching himself back at Basheen. By the time his fist connected with the wolf-man’s upper shoulder, Greg was upright and he followed the left hook up with a right jab at the lykin’s nose.

Basheen sprang backwards as he snapped ineffectually at the ogre’s fist. As they separated the two combatants paused for a moment to stare at each other. Looking into those crimson eyes, Greg had a bloody memory flash at him suddenly.

A cycle ago the ogre and the lykin had crossed paths in a gambling den on Saul’s Rock. Grimm had come looking to settle a score. The bloodbath that had followed was still one of the most terrifying and sickening displays of savagery Gregory Von Statun had ever seen.

The men and women in that place may not have been the most innocent of folk but they had not deserved the fate dealt to them by the Grimm pack.

Frowning, Greg tried to get a glance of the *Amal’hiam* out of the corner of his eye but he did not dare look away from Basheen.

Had Marcus made it back to the others? Were they already working to fix whatever was wrong with the ship? Most importantly, was he just trying to buy time for his new Hob to secure their escape or did he need to put Basheen Grimm down?

Because Greg was not entirely sure if he could accomplish the latter.

The lykin had already sustained multiple gunshot wounds, lacerations and aether burns *before* they had started their scrap. Despite all of that, he still fought like some kind of creature out of a primordial nightmare.

Greg considered all of this as the lykin rushed at him again. The ogre’s body was almost moving on automatic now, fighting techniques drilled into him by his Hobs at the War School emerging from his limbs without conscious thought.

He slapped the first few blows away but a few of those slashing claws raked across Greg’s shoulders and torso, opening long gashes. Between that and the aether bolts from before, his vest was a tattered mess.

The war-merc tried to retaliate with swift jabs of his own, and while a few landed, they did not seem to phase the monstrous lykin. Greg lashed out with a sweeping kick and managed to make Basheen back up.

They circled each other for half a moment, sparing no breath on idle banter that less focused fighters might have engaged in. Greg knew that he was breathing heavily but he was happy to see Basheen’s tongue lolling out in a rough pant.

Greg focused wholly on Basheen, marking every small movement the lykin made, trying to predict his movements. So when the bolt of aether struck him in the middle of the back, he was unprepared. He had totally forgotten about the other Finders outside of the berth.

It did not burn or even hurt all that much, the ogre’s body neutralized the incoming energy as it always did, but he could do nothing to stop physics. The force of the blast sent him stumbling forward, arms wheeling around as he tried to find his balance.

In front of him, Basheen let out a triumphant howl and charged. He crashed into Greg, claws first, tearing into the ogre’s chest again with the same awful ferocity. Greg went from stumbling forward to toppling back and with a terrific *thud* he fell to his back.

All reactions, conscious or otherwise, left the war-merc and Greg had to blink several times before he was able to find himself again. By then Basheen had his fingers centimeters into the meat of Greg’s stomach, tearing thick slabs of the ogre’s abdomen away and digging for the softer meats beneath.

Greg tried to throw a knee up into the lykin’s spine but Basheen did not seem to care even as bones somewhere in his hip crackled and broke.

Greg punched Basheen in the muzzle, clearly breaking the creature’s nose and splintering several teeth but all he really succeeded in doing was allow the lykin to bite at his hand.

Greg snapped his head forward, driving his wide brow into Basheen’s own, and it elicited a vicious grin from the war-merc’s enemy.

It was a very disturbing sensation when Greg finally felt a clawed hand reach in and get a grip on some of his intestines.

Nothing his former Hobs at the War School had ever taught him had prepared Greg for a monster such as Basheen Grimm. His enemy had skill to be sure but it was tempered by an animalistic ferocity that Greg could not match or counter. Maybe if he’d had a weapon, thought Greg as his mind began to drift slightly, perhaps if he had not been so foolhardy as to attempt fisticuffs against a creature with a natural advantage on that regard.

Blinking rapidly, Greg’s head lolled to one side at a sudden noise. He stared back at the *Amal’hiam* as its forward guns began to make a low thrumming sound that quickly became an electric whine. The barrels of the guns, one to either side of the primary airlock, swiveled and aimed down. Two pinpoints of light quickly became twin suns in Greg’s vision and then there was a *whump*.

Greg was not entirely sure what happened next. There was thunder and light. A cacophony that was a new pain all its own. Then there was pain and a pressure near his armpits. The sky seemed to revolve over his head and he tried to make sense of the muffled voices he heard.

“… help… can’t… heavy… someone…”

“Two. Three. Lift!”

“… don’t… light! I need…”

Water was forced down his throat and Greg coughed. He tried to say that he was fine. Give him a moment to heal and he would be right as rain. Greg wasn’t sure if any of those words actually reached his lips.

Marcus let out an almighty sigh as they dropped Greg inside the *Amal’hiam’s* cargo hold. A wide trail of blood was streaked across the floor where they had dragged him. Diana braced herself against one of the empty harnesses and seemed to be recovering from a bout of dizziness.

You did not realize just how heavy an ogre would be until you tried to drag one up a twisted flight of stairs. They had managed, but just barely. Marcus was ready to fall over and he felt as though something in his back was on the verge of giving out.

Their only saving grace was that he was fairly certain Basheen Grimm was dead. The huge black lykin had been buried beneath the collapsing berth wall when Diana had fired her second salvo at him. The only thing that had probably saved Greg was his race’s natural immunity to aether.

The guns on the *Amal’hiam* were not the most spectacular Marcus had ever seen, not much could ever outshine the weapons of the Khanus Empire’s supercarriers, but for its size his ship packed a good punch. He had known that the dwarvish armaments would fire its shard-based ammunition with devastating effect on a personal scale but he had not expected them to essentially atomize each round. The *Amal’hiam* fired each shot so quickly that by the time they reached their target they were essentially hurling bolts of aether-charged plasma.

The result was that while Basheen Grimm had been made a part of the landscape, Greg had only received superficial wounds from the resulting shrapnel.

Thankfully Marcus could already see those half-dozen cuts mending themselves. Any other sapient would be dead from these sorts of injuries if they did not receive immediate and insanely powerful aetheric healing. An ogre like Greg could not even benefit from such aid. Slowly but surely Greg’s body would knit itself back together in a matter of days, if not hours. It was a one of the many specialized adaptations evolution had forcibly swapped out for his people in exchange for their aetherics.

Over the shipboard comm, Mel’s voice sounded. “Void and Tower. They’re digging him out. They’re digging Grimm out. I don’t know if he’s alive but he’s whole.”

“Blood of Primus.” swore Diana as she straightened. “There’s no way he is still alive is there?”

Marcus remained silent, staring down at Greg’s unconscious form. If the huge, black lykin had been able to do this to the ogre war-merc, he wasn’t sure what it was capable of.

Shaking his head, Marcus cast a quick glance at the still-unconscious dwarf strapped to the bulkhead and then made his way aft, towards engineering. Diana followed close behind. He spared her a glance as well but, as always, she was unreadable.

Next to the drivecore the old antiques dealer that had hastily introduced himself as Dann Slevin stood with the damaged absorption panel next to him on the floor. It was a bit strange that the former Magus thought of him as *old* considering he was probably older than the man by at least two centuries. Only the last four cycles of age showed anyone looking at Marcus that he was anywhere beyond his mid-thirties. Midrians in most civilized portions of the Dragon’s Wake had a life expectancy of one hundred and fifty cycles, so assuming he was actually mortal again, Marcus supposed he would not begin to look as old as he felt until he was nearly four hundred.

It was a sobering thought.

As Marcus entered from the mess, the older looking midrian was opening a large rectangular case that sat on the gently hovering dolly he had brought with him. There was a strange look on his face that was a combination of concentration and sadness.

“I’m sorry about your man out there.” said Marcus, remembering the porter that had died while they had been under fire.

Slevin stared down at whatever was in the case with that same look as he said, “He wasn’t *my* man. Only porter I could find this time of night, don’t you know?” He looked up at Marcus with a forlorn expression. “I appreciate it all the same though. Could you give me a hand with this?”

Coming close, Marcus could see that the case held an exact replica of the absorption panel that was on the ground, minus the crack in its surface. Together, the two midrians gingerly picked up the piece of dwarvish tech. Marcus had never taken the time to note just how dense the panels were – this one was easily half as thick as his forearm. The interior was also something he had rarely seen. The panel was lined with a strangely dimpled surface, with bulbous cone shapes that would face towards the exposed aethium core of the ship, converting raw aether radiation into power for the whole vessel.

“Now,” Slevin said, “gently place the panel on that groove, there.”

Marcus helped the dealer put the panel into place and then leveraged it upwards so that it rested parallel to the others. In their current position the panels had a few centimeters of space between each other and they were all suspended slightly farther outside the aethium core’s housing than they would be normally. A molded ring into which they had just placed the new panel hovered just outside of the housing, waiting to contract and reposition the absorption panels again.

There was a strange sound that reminded Marcus of something between a vacuum seal and a magnetic lock as the panel locked itself into place. The machinery of this dwarvish ship surprised the former Magus. If you considered just how little the rest of the galaxy knew about how they operated, the actual mechanics of it all was deceptively simple. Or, at the very least, swapping out the parts was.

As if reading his mind, or perhaps just trying to fill the silence between them, Slevin said, “Ah, good. You see how easy that was? Shocking isn’t it? That’s what most folk don’t know is how modular khagrish tech is. A popular theory is that their pre-Deep War vessels had much in common with the elvish designs of the time. Though, obviously, that changed radically during the Foundation Cycles.”

Marcus nodded with half a congenial smile. The old man had a look in his eye that Marcus recognized all too well from his time in the Legion. Slevin was being swept up in events that were much larger than himself. He wasn’t quite sure what was going on but he was of a mind that it was something important. Marcus wasn’t so sure about that, but it was the same sort of look he had received thousands of times after The Shattering, when the Followers had begun to call him Primus Reborn.

There had been a moment, just after Dann Slevin had come aboard, where he had turned and looked at the midrian that had started arguing with the pixie in the middle of the cargo hold. The look on the antiques dealer’s face had first been one of shock and awe.

He had not said anything at the time but as he ambled over to the drive-core’s operations console, he cast another glance at Marcus. What had begun as amazement or perhaps disbelief had become a sparkling look of wonder. Resting a hand on the aetheric contacts, he began to manipulate the absorption panels back into place.

Slevin was not even looking at the drive-core when he spoke. “You’re him. The Magus. It’s just like she said, isn’t it?”

Marcus sighed and shook his head, glancing over at Diana who still stood just outside the room, autorifle in hand. She shrugged and jerked her head back over her shoulder, indicating the only other female onboard.

Whatever Mel had told this man, it hardly mattered at this point. The Finders had seen him, had gotten more than a few good looks at his face. At least one of them had an aethite eye and if that had not captured a clear image of him, he was safe in assuming any number of other surveillance equipment the operatives possessed had done so at some point during their chase. If one among their rank hadn’t put together who he was yet, then the Finder corps had become far more inept in the cycles since Marcus had last worked with them.

One old midrian knowing his identity would not make any difference once the Empire was on his trail.

“Yes.” Marcus said, offering Slevin his hand. “Marcus Crassus, at your service.”

There was a reverence in other midrian’s face as he gingerly took Marcus’ hand. It wasn’t quite the same zealous awe that the Followers had given him but it certainly took a similar shape. “Dann Slevin.” said the man, reintroducing himself. “And it is entirely my honor to make your acquaintance, my lord.”

Marcus scowled slightly, releasing the older looking man’s hand. “I’m no one’s lord Mr. Slevin, not anymore. And Marcus will do just fine, if it’s all the same to you.”

There was a hiss from behind Slevin as the absorption panels sealed themselves around the aethium core.

Looking back around, Slevin grinned, pleased with himself. “That should do it.” he said. “*Should* being the operative word there. You must understand, I’ve never actually fixed a khagrish vessel before.”

Marcus was about to thank the man when Mel’s voice cut through on the comm again.

“You may want to get up here Marcus.”

Exchanging a look with Slevin and Diana in turn, Marcus turned and moved back towards the foredecks. Diana followed just behind him but Slevin remained behind.

“I’m going to double check things here.” said the older looking midrian from behind them. “Call back before you try and start any of the primary systems.”

“Will do.” said Marcus over his shoulder.

Making their way forward, Marcus and Diana crossed the cargo hold again, pausing briefly to check on Greg.

The ogre was already breathing regularly and his stomach wounds looked as though they were already closing. It was a miraculous thing to see and something which Marcus wished he possessed considering he seemed to already share many other qualities with Greg.

Thankfully, Ark was also still unconscious. Marcus had no idea what he was going to do with the dwarf but he could worry about it once the current crisis had ended.

Coming up onto the bridge, Marcus surveyed the wreckage of the berth beyond. Besides the collapsed wall and a new view of the Panimberg skyline, there was nothing else to see in the night outside the *Amal’hiam*.

“What’s going on?” asked Marcus as he entered.

“Two things.” said Mel from her perch on the nav console. Several windows were open in the holodisplay, showing what looked like local feeds of some kind. “One, the Finders are gone.”

“What?” exclaimed Diana as she moved closer to the viewscreen as if that would make the vacant scene out there any more clear. “Where did they go?”

Mel shrugged. “No idea. They got the lykin’s body out of the rubble and bugged out.” said the pixie, then added sardonically. “I tried finding their comm frequency but apparently Spec-Ops likes to keep their chatter a secret.”

“Mel.” chided Marcus. “What was the other thing?”

Rolling her eyes, Mel gestured back at the feeds open behind her. “I *did* find the local security comm though. It’s actually a public feed, believe it or not.”

Marcus scanned the feeds, seeing that all of the audio was muted at the moment. “Why did you mute it?”

“It’s a little, uh, loud at the moment. Everyone is sort of shouting at everyone else. A bunch of civis jumped on as well, it’s not helping matters.”

It was then that Marcus finally looked at Mel, taking in her pale features and the strained expression that they held.

“Mel.” said Marcus, his own tension growing by the moment. “What’s going on?”

Turning her gaze upwards, Mel’s face became a weak snarl that was twisted with worry and fear. She seemed to be looking through the polysteel above them and at some unseen doom that lurked in the sky.

“The Khanus Empire is here.” said Mel.

Chapter Thirty Two

4 Standard Imperial Cycles Previous

The walking scrapheap lunged at Helena with a wicked looking axe made from torn polysteel that may have once been a piece of a ship’s hull. The weapon was embedded with several roughly cut chems of ruby-aethite that made its blade crackle with bloody-looking energy.

Helena dodged the swing, throwing herself sideways in the tight corridor so that the pirate overextended and the momentum of his attack carried him forward. His bulky and worn armor, rusted in places and looking to Helena like the reanimated corpse of the Raptor armor she had once known so well, sent the man stumbling in front of her.

Timing her strike perfectly, Helena drove the shorter of her two swords down into the crease just beneath the enemy’s helmet. If the seals there had been well maintained they might have at least slowed down her blow but they were not and she drove her blade down with almost no resistance. From within the ragged armor her foe let out a gurgling death rattle as his spine and throat were severed by Throneguard Captain’s sword.

The thing that slammed to the floor in front of Helena was just so much meat trapped in a barely functional coffin of polysteel.

Breathing hard, Helena pulled her shortsword from the neck of her attacker, longsword still held up defensively as she stared down the hall towards the dignitaries’ quarters.

She still was not entirely sure what was happening. She had only just barreled out of her own quarters a few moments ago when the emergency klaxons aboard the ship had started going off.

They were clearly under attack and as Helena paused for a moment to inspect the body of her foe she confirmed her suspicions about their attackers. The makeshift weapon and the slapdash armor, all of its pieces clearly scavenged from different suits, were clue enough. The true giveaway was the insignia plastered over several different plates along its shoulders, helmet and chest.

Pirates.

Out along the Bulge Runs, that no-man’s-land that separated the Khanus Empire from the Republic of Freeholds, clans of these marauders stalked the warp lanes between the two larger galactic powers and the smaller Outer Kingdoms with which they frequently traded. Warping through the Void held its fair share of dangers but most of these were mitigated by the use of establish trade lanes and warp points throughout the galaxy. Smaller ships, unable to cross huge interstellar distances like vessels using larger drive-cores, could easily fall victim to pirates waiting to ambush them while they sat stranded and waiting to recharge between jaunts into the Void.

All of these pirate groups, generally consisting of small flotillas of four or five ships, advertised their actions with different graffiti and glyphs that changed from clan to clan. No self respecting legionnaire who spent any time out in space did so without learning to identify these marks. They all differed somewhat but they all held similar motifs of savagery and visual cues towards the Stedgods.

These particular pirates seemed to share an affinity with Frijas, a goddess of war and maternal savagery, though her aspect was warped and vaguely bear-like.

Helena only paused briefly to consider the implications of that symbolism though, without coming to any immediate conclusions she was forced to wonder about the more immediate question. How were they even under attack to begin with?

The ship she was on, the diplomatic cruiser *Lady’s Grace*, was on its way back from a journey to the Freeholds but it was a large enough vessel to have completely skipped over any territory threatened by pirate activity. Even if they had needed to rewarp directly in the middle of the Bulge Runs, their escort of a dozen frigates and two battleships should have been more than enough to ward of any Voidborn savages stupid enough to attack a ship flying the colors of the Khanus royal family.

The Lord Father Zeno Khanus, former Arch-Praetor and maestro of the strategies that had eventually won The Shattering, was aboard the *Lady’s Grace* along with Prince Alexander and at least two dozen other diplomats from throughout the Empire. Their trip to the Freeholds had been one of negligible importance and from what Helena could gather it had mostly been an excuse for Zeno to spend more time with his grandson and give the Prince his first, albeit brief, taste of interstellar travel. They had not even been gone half a turnspan.

Hearing screams from somewhere down the hall, Helena decided to sort out exactly what had happened later. For now she just needed to put a stop to it.

She moved quickly into the main atrium of the *Lady’s Grace*, a relatively huge common area that dominated the center of ship. Consisting mostly of a wide open area flanked by long tables and low pavilions slightly obscured from view by low trellises that held creeping bloomvines and other flowering plants. To either side of the hall were two pairs of long, gently curving stairs that led up to a mirrored set of high balconies that hung over the sides of the room and provided more private seating areas. It was a large enough chamber that it could host functions consisting of hundreds, if not thousands, of diplomats.

Not two turns previous it had done just that, hosting representatives from many of the Freeholds that had once been members of the Khanus Empire after the midrian’s initial schism from the Dominion.

Now the room was in complete disarray. The honor guard that had been stationed aboard the ship fought a desperate battle against the pirate forces that had somehow forced their way onto the *Lady’s Grace*. A small cluster of the guard still held the entrance to the diplomats’ living quarters but the majority struggled in ones and twos across the wide chamber, the pitched battle uncoordinated and messy.

Streaking forward, Helena only wore a pair of weathered combat fatigues, her dress uniform undershirt and boots. She hadn’t had time to don any proper armor or even bring along her sword-belt, choosing instead to simply grab her blades and charge out into the hallway. She had been quartered up near the bridge and it was a small favor indeed that the pirates, baring the one she had killed, hadn’t made it that far yet. If they took full command of the *Lady’s Grace* they could selectively vent sections of the ship until everyone who could resist them was dead.

Coming up behind a hulking lian wearing more piecemeal armor, Helena dismantled the creature with a few well placed slashes to the reverse jointed knees and one to the base of his spine. It let out a roar and fell, revealing the two guards that had been struggling to overwhelm it.

They stared at Helena with wonder as the Captain of the Throneguard gave her swords a quick flourish to whip away what little blood had stained their blades.

“With me.” said Helena firmly. She was not technically in charge of these men but they nodded and followed her lead regardless.

What followed was a brief but bloody struggle, Helena quickly taking command of the Imperials about her and moving about with brutal efficiency to stamp out the pirates. While she moved, guards died.

All of the men and women assigned to the duty of guarding diplomats and dignitaries had some military experience, it was expected of any citizen of the Empire, but it seemed to Helena that few of these men and women had seen true conflict. They fought well but many of them were outmatched by the savagery and bloodlust of the pirates.

At one point during the fight Helena found herself on one of the upper levels of the hall, slashing and dancing backwards as she faced a spry lykin pirate using a cruelly hooked spear. While they fought Helena was able to catch a glimpse of what was happening outside the ship through long crystalline viewscreens that lined this higher area. Of their military escort there was no sign and instead Helena saw two ragged gunships pulled up alongside the *Lady’s Grace* while two more floated out in flanking positions. A pale blue and white world that Helena did not recognize hung in the near distance.

Her attention momentarily distracted, the lykin managed to get that hook dug into Helena’s side, tearing at her torso with a snarling laugh. Instead of trying to fight free of the spear though, Helena let herself be pulled straight into the pirate, turning his attack into her own double-bladed lunge. She did not tear the spear away from her side until she had removed both of her swords from the thing’s head.

When the assembly hall was finally quiet and all of the pirates were dead Helena was left with only eight other guards alive. They clumped together near the far hallway from where Helena had entered, surveying the carnage.

“Did any of them make it aft?” asked Helena raggedly, holding her arm to the wound she had received in her side.

“I don’t think so Sir.” said a guard, holding her own longsword loosely in one hand. As the other woman spoke, Helena only then noticed that she was an elf, willowy and long of limb.

“Are you Isahntri?” asked Helena.

The woman bowed in the affirmative. “Captain Tellium, at your service Sir. Unclaned though, I’ve got no connection to the ambassador.”

“Mmm.” said Helena, understanding. “Wizard.”

“Of the Ninth Izald Sir, but yes.” said Tellium, clearly unashamed of the fact that she ranked so low in the classifications of wizardly power.

“Captain Isahntri,” said Helena, turning towards the hallway leading aft. “Hold this corridor. I saw at least four gunships out in close float. That can’t be all of them. More will come this way and soon. Has anyone heard from the bridge?”

There was a general murmur of negative responses and the shaking of heads.

“I think the intership comm’s been knocked out.” said one guard, a ragged looking midrian who wore light blue armor and an eyepatch.

“That’s not good.” said Captain Isahntri, her soft features sharpening as her brow furrowed.

Helena nodded in agreement. “I’m headed aft. If there are any others stationed that way, I’ll send them here.” She looked from one haggard face to the next, making eye contact with each of the remaining guards. “Those civilians are our top priority. The royal heir is back there as well as the Lord Father. Those two are making it out of here alive at all costs.”

They all shared a determined nod at her words, each gripping weapons and standing a bit straighter. These were not mercenaries or sellswords, these men and women were paladins of the Khanus Empire diplomatic corp, bloodsworn bodyguards who knew the price they might have to pay in order to protect their charges. Even if they weren’t the elite band of warmages Helena may have wanted in that moment, they were still willing to lay down their lives for this cause.

As was she.

The emergency klaxon cut off suddenly, as did the primary power to the entire ship, leaving Helena to move forward with her longsword raised as the dark red emergency lights kicked on.

Fear caused Helena’s nerves to pulse with electric awareness as she stalked deeper into the *Lady’s Grace*. If the power had been cut then the pirates had most likely found a way onto the lower decks of the ship and into engineering. Even if they couldn’t take the bridge or the nav center, the two most secure positions on the ship, if they had control of the drive-core they could do an obscene amount of damage without engaging in a direct fight.

For now, Helena tried not to focus on that, instead paying special attention to the path before her. The bodies of several pirates and guards along the hallway told the story of what had happened before she had arrived. These raiders had made it onto the ship with startling speed and it was only the tenacity of the guard that had driven them away from the civilians in the rear of the ship and back into the main hall. It did not look as though the pirates had made it far enough to threaten any of the civilians but it was difficult to say for sure.

Quickening her pace, Helena found her way into the diplomats’ quarters. It was a block of rooms arrayed over three levels that all circled a wide open courtyard. The floor of the courtyard was one level down from where Helena stood and the ceiling was one level up. Each level, she knew, connected to hallways that led towards other sections of the ship where the pirates may have gained access.

Zeno and Alexander shared a spacious room on the next level up.

Helena made her way to a stairwell, figuring that if main power had been cut then her chances of finding a functioning lift were slim. Along the way she saw terrified faces peaking out at her from cracked doors. One of them, a short, portly ambassador from Minnerheim, shook his head at Helena as she approached the entrance to the stairs.

“They’re up there.” he hissed before closing his door softly.

Helena heard the ambassador’s door locking as she glanced upwards and tightened her grip on her swords. The gash in her side had healed somewhat thanks to her own aetherics but Helena still felt winded and sore from the previous fight.

It hardly mattered.

She knew her duty.

Moving as quickly and as silently as possible, Helena did not hear the shuffling footsteps of armored pirates until she was rounding small landing that split the stairs. She took a deep breath, closing her eyes for a brief moment.

Her mind moved back to that night two turnspans ago. She thought of Marcus and the night they had spent together before he had been forced back out to the Imperial edge yet again. He had been gone before she had even woken up and Helena regretted not being able to see him off. Her last memory of him was his comforting warmth next to hers as they both fell into the drowsy haze of sleep. No matter what she faced in the next few minutes, that memory gave her strength.

She was not going to die out here in the middle of nowhere to a bunch of savages. She would make it out of this, Lord Zeno and Prince Alexander in tow, and see Marcus again. This was not a question or a prayer in her mind, it was a solidified fact.

Grinning with mad determination, Helena opened her eyes and moved out onto the upper floor of the living quarters.

Two pirates in those worthless sets of patchwork armor cried out as she appeared between them. One of their cries was cut short as Helena’s longsword took his throat just under the helmet.

The other tried to raise his huge sword, its size was clearly more of an affectation than a strategic advantage in these close quarters. Helena did not give him time to maneuver and brought her shortsword in close, forcing the man back up against the railing, pinning his sword between it and his back, before slashing forward with her longsword. She scored a long hit across the pirate’s shoulder that caused the man to yelp before she moved in close and repositioned her shortsword straight into his side. With an aetherically enhanced kick Helena shoved the man backwards over the railing, bleeding out but still alive and flailing as he fell nearly fifty meters before striking the floor two levels down with a sickening crack.

Wheeling, Helena saw the massive frame of an ursa near a door less than a half-dozen meters away. The door to the Lord Father and Prince’s chambers.

The hulking bear-man wore bits of armor, strapped awkwardly over seemingly random areas about its body and did not carry any weapons. Behind it, three more pirates battered at the door with heavy maces while a fourth, slightly scrawnier man seemed to be fiddling with the doors locks.

Helena took a deep breath and focused on that raw, empty pain that surged within her.

Her parents and brother dead. Her world burned. Diana abandoning her. Marcus half a galaxy away. The cries of a three cycle old boy inside the room.

Sharp spikes of violet aether shot along her swords, the power within those crystalline blades rebounding and flowing back through her body. Her power burnt the floor beneath her and scorched the air around her.

“Surrender and you will have a quick death.” said Helena, even her voice bearing the crackling echo of the aether she now wielded.

Two of the pirates stopped their hammering, giving Helena nervous glances but a rough snarl from the ursa sent them back to action.

“Little lass don’t scare Garoo.” rumbled the ursa, turning Helena with a toothy smile. “Garoo kill little lass.”

“Have it your way.” said Helena, crouching for a moment before leaping forward towards the pirates.

Her first step sent her nearly half the distance, each stride empowered by the torrents of aether that now coursed through her. Her second step sent her up in a wide arc that brought her straight towards the ursa’s face, blades held forward and seeking his muzzle.

With a speed that belayed its size, the ursa swatted at Helena, its clawed hand missing her as she got within its reach too quickly, but its thick furry arm taking her in the chest. Her breath was forced out of her lungs with an explosion of pain and Helena fell to the side, landing just to the left of her enemy.

Lifting a huge foot, the ursa stomped down where Helena’s head should have been but found her upraised shortsword instead. With an aether-enhanced heaving motion, Helena sent her shorter blade up through the pirate’s foot and forced his leg upwards, its knee meeting its chest before she was done. The creature flailed backwards, hopping on one foot as Helena leveraged its impaled limb up farther. Its long arms clawed at her shoulders and biceps, scoring long tears through her shirt and into her flesh. With a pained roar, she sent the creature falling away towards its companions by the door, though her shortsword was torn from her hand, still embedded in the ursa’s booted foot.

Still screaming in fury, Helena focused everything she could muster through her longsword, pouring aether through the blade’s compounded crystal matrices to form a spell that had it had never been meant to channel.

A tremendous blast of raw, violet aether erupted from her sword, warping and melting the blade in the process.

The wave of energy consumed the pirates, throwing them all backwards and down the walkway towards where this level curved around. It wasn’t enough to vaporize them outright but it burned flesh and melted armor, causing them to scream in agony as they were hurled away.

Gasping for breath, Helena dropped the ruin of her sword. Each intake of air was an agony. She was sure that at least one of her ribs was broken and the screaming pain from her shoulders made her think that she might have torn a ligament or two in bodily lifting the ursa. The aether had given her strength, but not necessarily made her body any more durable in the short term. Given time and rest she would heal relatively quickly but at the moment she had neither of those things.

Helena hobbled towards the door and pounded on it weakly. Besides the distant agonized moans of the pirates at the end of the walkway, it was the only sound, echoing across this level with sullen *thumps*.

“Lord Father.” said Helena breathlessly as she almost collapsed against the door. “Please, we have to get you out of here.”

Eventually the door did open and Helena practically fell onto the former Arch-Praetor.

Zeno Regula Pollious Khanus was a tall, angular man with clean-cut features and an athletic frame despite his years. His gray hair was shot through with lines of black that spoke to the raven haired youth he had been but the lines on his face told the world precisely how much the father of the current Empress had been through in his lifetime. His eyes were a pale brown, almost amber like those of a lian, and they held a terrible fury as he came through the door to catch Helena, his own blocky shortsword at the ready.

As he caught her, easing her to the floor just inside the door while he scanned the walkway outside, the Lord Father said, “Easy Captain, I’ve got you.”

“Lord Zeno, Sir.” said Helena, struggling to maintain a sitting position. “I need to get you and the Prince away.”

The Lord Father gave her a worried look. “I don’t know if you’re in any condition to take us anywhere Captain. Do you know the situation elsewhere in the ship?”

“No Sir,” said Helena, shaking her head. She began breathing deep, summoning up her aether again to lend strength to her weary limbs. “But there are personal trans two levels down in the hanger and there is a planet nearby. It won’t be long before the Empire realizes we’ve gone missing.”

“Missing?” intoned Zeno, letting Helena lean on him as she wobbled back to her feet.

“I didn’t see any sign of our escort outside. Tough to say for sure My Lord, but I think we may have lost them mid-warp.”

Zeno considered that, his black and gray striped brows furrowing into a sharp V. Finally he nodded, turning his sword around so that its hilt was pointed towards Helena and said, “I’ll follow your lead Captain.”

Swallowing and taking another deep breath, Helena gripped the Lord Father’s sword and looked deeper into the room. “Sir, where is the Prince?”

Releasing the shortsword to the Throneguard Captain, Zeno paced quickly back into his chambers, moving to a closed door and disappearing for a moment before coming back out with Prince Alexander held close against his chest. The boy was doing surprisingly well, all things considered. He looked terrified and clung tightly to his grandfather but otherwise seemed all right. The miniscule silver scar that now adorned his cheek still made Helena wince slightly, despite their current circumstances.

Helena straightened her back and refocused her aetherics through this new sword, finding its blade far denser in its structure than she was used to. The aethite of this blade had been worked and reworked, folded in on itself dozens of times to create something stronger and more efficient than should be possible. Orc-made, to be sure, though Helena had never heard of the consummately pacifist people ever making a weapon. The aether contained by the weapon let her move more easily, regaining the confident stride of the Throneguard Captain that the Khanus men needed right now.

They moved quickly down through the levels of the diplomat’s quarters, Helena taking the lead while Zeno followed close behind with Alexander in his arms. When they reached the bottom she led them back towards amidships, beneath the main hall where she had fought earlier, to the hanger where she hoped there were still a few of the personal trans in the hanger bay.

The red gleam of the emergency lighting gave an evil cast to the dark hallways that lined the underbelly of the *Lady’s Grace*. These had corrugated polysteel flooring that looked down onto the piping, wiring and aether conduits that ran the length of the ship. The polite members of the diplomatic corps were never meant to tread these halls.

As they continued forward the entire ship suddenly rocked, sending the trio listing to the side to brace themselves on whatever they could get hold of. Zeno managed to put one hand on an exposed pipe while still clutching Alexander with the other but Helena did not fare as well. Her aether infused strength failed for half a step as her concentration wavered and everything went white for a moment.

Blinking rapidly, she found herself on the floor, breathing heavily again and attempting to force down the pain she felt through her focus on the sword in her hand.

“Captain Istara?”

Zeno’s voice.

Helena looked up, her thoughts muzzy but growing sharper again as she pushed everything away with her aetherics.

“What happened?” asked Helena, getting upright with the help of a bank of pressure valves next to her on the wall.

“They’ve begun bombarding us.” said Zeno, staring upwards as the *Lady’s Grace* shook again.

The rhythmic thumping that pounded throughout the ship rang in time with the shaking and the sounds of artillery were all too familiar to Helena.

Then a howling gale tore though the hallway. It whipped at Helena’s hair and cloths and she tightened her grip on the valve she held while Zeno shielded Alexander. All three attempted to shout over the wind.

Just as quickly as it had come, the wind subsided.

Helena’s ears popped and she blinked as she worked her jaw in quick, yawning breaths.

“They hit the hanger.” said Zeno angrily, coming upright from the staggered position he had fallen into.

Helena nodded, staring at the floor with worried intensity. That wind had been caused by a chunk of the ship’s air being forcibly sucked out by the vacuum of space just up ahead. Thankfully the backup power was still activate or the emergency pressure hatches might not have closed.

Up ahead, a bank of concentrated red lights gave Helena an idea.

“Come on.” said the Throneguard Captain, moving forward with only a slight wobble.

The juncture just ahead of them proved to be a cross section that led to the other side of the ship in one direction but into a small room in the other. The chamber held four other doors, each with a blue light glowing solidly beside them.

Escape pods.

Following close behind, Zeno nodded and moved ahead of Helena, opening up one of the sealed pods and checking its interior. It was a cramped vessel, little more than a thruster propelled tube of polysteel that could jettison away from the *Lady’s Grace* and then send out a rescue beacon. There were only two harnesses in each pod.

Zeno moved with quick, easy assurance, helping Alexander into one of the pod’s harnesses before backing out and coming over to help Helena as well.

Shaking her head, Helena said, “No, My Lord. Go with the Prince, I’ll take one of the others.”

Zeno was about to respond but just then the ship shook again and this time Helena could feel the thunderous vibrations of the pirate’s assault rattle through the soles of her boots. She also heard the shouts and screams now echoing up through hallway from where they had come.

“Green Hells!” cursed Zeno, taking a few steps out to glance down the hall. “More of them.”

Looking from the source of the noise and then back to Helena, the Lord Father wore a look of intense concentration. He took one deep breath, swallowing as his jaw became set.

Before Helena’s sluggish muscles had time to react, Nassaeya’s father grabbed her by the elbow and dragged her bodily into the escape pod next to Alexander. She tried to scramble up and out, shouting incoherently as Zeno took a step backwards, slamming his hand onto the button that resealed the pod’s door.

Helena managed to drag herself to the door’s single window that looked back out into the ship. Lord Zeno Khanus’ face stared back at her.

“Protect him.” he said, squaring his shoulders and staring at her with an expression of pained determination. “I’ll follow if I can.”

Helena shouted again, slamming her hand into the door but her voice was drowned out by the unlatching of the pod’s release mechanism and its thrusters bursting to life. The last image she saw from within the *Lady’s Grace* was that of the Lord Father turning to face a pair of ramshackle pirates as they entered the escape pod bay.

It was only then that Helena realized that he had taken his sword back.

“Helna?” said a small voice from behind her.

Her breath shaky and her body failing, Helena barely managed to slide herself back towards Alexander, settling next to the Prince.

“It’s okay My Prince.” said Helena weakly. Her damned eyelids kept trying to close but she forced them open as she looked at Alexander’s soft face. His wide eyes, so dark and blue, reminded her of Marcus.

“Everything is going to be okay.” she said, looking away to gaze out the small window in the pod.

Out in the black Helena could see the disappearing shape of the *Lady’s Grace* silhouetted against the blue and white of a planet. They were headed in the wrong direction.

Helena shook her head as her eyelids began to droop again. She felt drained and weak but she put an arm around the Prince and gave him a firm hug with the last of her strength.

“Someone will come for us.” said Helena, her voice barely a whisper. In the silence of space though, she was perfectly audible. “We just need to hold on.”

Then there was darkness.

Then there was a choice.

Then came the Pain.

Chapter Thirty Three

Mel watched Marcus closely. She had known him for over three hundred cycles but she had no idea how he would react to news like this. Everything was so strange now. The Khanus Empire’s approach was no reason for celebration or even relief. All it meant was that every single person on the *Amal’hiam* was one step closer to capture and death.

His face was not warped by fear or even concern, Mel wasn’t quite sure what to call the emotion she saw there. Looking up through the *Amal’hiam’s* forward viewscreen, he had that faraway look that she had seen too many times in the last four cycles. Mel had always thought those looks where when her friend was staring at some moment in the past, lost in the ruin of his own memory. This look though, it was tempered with a resolve she had not seen in a much longer time. He had a glint in his eye. A steel that had not been there before.

Marcus Crassus was bruised and beaten. Cut up and weak. But there was a determination in his stare that reminded Mel of the man she had known before The Shattering.

It was not all there, it was just a sliver of the presence he had once commanded, but it was enough.

“We need to go.” Marcus said.

He moved quickly, a little stiff from the day’s events, but with resolve in his posture. His hands moved over the manual controls near the pilot’s chair and he looked over at the system lights, making sure everything was blue.

Everything looked good, though Mel supposed that it *would* right up until it wasn’t.

“Get on the comm.” said Marcus. “Double check everything is blue with your man.”

Mel nodded and put a hand to the aetheric contact.

“Mr. Slevin, is everything good back there?” the pixie asked.

There was a muffled sound from the comm and then Slevin’s voice came through. “What? Yes? Hello?”

“Is everything okay?” asked Mel slowly.

“Where did you find this guy?” asked Marcus quietly.

Mel shrugged. “The metanet.”

“Yes.” said Slevin. “Everything seems fine here. Though I must remind you that repairing khagrish tech is not exactly my area of expertise.”

“Noted.” said Mel, giving a nod to Marcus.

“Ask me about Stedgod lore.” said Slevin absently as Marcus slid into the pilot’s chair. “Or the Sidhe House structure.”

Mel cut the comm as the old midrian continued to ramble.

“Okay.” said Marcus with a breath. “Let’s try this one more time.”

Marcus pressed the manual startup button.

Nothing happened.

“Blood of Primus.” swore Marcus, slumping slightly in his chair.

“By the Tower!” cried Mel. “You can’t be serious!”

She was still exhausted and her shoulders screamed at her for it but Mel threw herself into the air. She flew out of the bridge just passed Diana. The midrian woman stared on, implacable, though Mel noticed that her grip on the autorifle had tightened significantly.

Flying back through the ship, Mel swept passed Greg’s supine form. The ogre struggled to rise as she flew overhead and he shouted something after her but Mel did not stop until she had reached engineering.

Slevin stood near the drive-core, running a hand across the absorption panel he had replaced. He looked up as Mel approached.

“What’s the matter my dear?” he asked.

“The ship still won’t start.” said Mel, her tone somewhere between a frustrated whine and a near scream.

“I don’t understand.” said the old midrian, casting about and throwing up his hands. “Everything seems to be properly in place.” He gave Mel a pitying look. “As I said though, this is not exactly my area of expertise. I am sorry.”

Mel landed on one of the consoles that regulated the rear anti-grav chems. She let out a ragged sigh, her shoulders on fire, but she remained standing and paced a bit.

Fear. Anger. Exhaustion.

The last of those feelings seemed to be overwhelming any other emotion her brain might have otherwise been processing. There was adrenaline in her system now, which helped a bit, but it did little to ease the apprehension she felt.

Mel honestly had no idea what would happen if the Khanus Empire caught up with them.

Marcus had been one of the Thirteen and a Magus did not abandon his post without consequences. Though, to be fair, Mel had never actually heard of one of the Empire’s pet demigods walking away from their position outside of a body bag.

Diana… Well, Mel could only guess at her fate. If her hunch about Diana’s past was correct, that she had been some sort of spook for Spec-Ops, then she might be in just as much trouble as Marcus. The Legion suffered turncoats like the open vacuum suffered things that breathed oxygen.

She could only guess at her own fate. The reasons behind the Sidhe turning on her were still a mystery to Mel, though letting someone as powerful as Marcus escape his Imperial masters probably had something to do with it. She would most likely be handed over to the Court of Air with little ceremony, doomed to die at the hands of her own countrymen.

If he were discovered, Ark would also be one dead dwarf. Technically, thanks to some long standing pangalactic treaties, it was still illegal to be a member of his race outside of their reservation world.

Slevin would most likely have all of his assesets seized by the encroaching Empire, at least until he could prove how all of his dwarvish accuisitions had been obtained. Only after he had wound his way through the laberynth of Imperial bureaucracy could he ever have a chance at a normal life again.

Of all the passengers currently aboard the *Amal’hiam*, only Greg would most likely walk away from a capture by the Empire. An ogre’s Contract made it so he was not, legally speaking, culpable for the actions of his employer. He would most likely receive about as much punishment as Marcus’ revolver.

She sucked in a long breath through her nose, gnawing on her bottom lip, and then exhaled through her mouth in a deep sigh.

“Mr. Slevin.” she said wearily. “I think you had better get out of here. Those men that chased you in here, they were working for the Khanus Empire, who just warped into the system a few minutes ago. It won’t be long before they’re planetside.”

Slevin’s eyes were wide as Mel spoke and got wider as she finished.

“They’re annexing Bounty?” he asked breathily.

“It looks that way.” Mel said. “And those guys, they were Finders. So the Empire will know exactly where we are.” She paused for a beat, snorting a little derisive sigh. “And *who* we are, most likely.”

“Oh.” said Slevin, the thin old man seeming to shrink in on himself. “I see.”

“Come on.” said Mel, taking to the air once again. “You need to get while the getting is good.”

Slevin nodded and followed after Mel, leaving his dolly behind.

They made their way back towards the front of the ship in silence. When they reached the cargo hold, Mel found that Greg had dragged himself into a sitting position up against one of the bulkheads. He still did not look good, his chestnut skin had a pale cast to it, like a dying tree. He was not actively leaking anymore though, which had to be a good sign.

“Miss Mel.” he said weakly, his breathing labored. “If you would be so kind as to inform me on our current situation, I seem to have been taken out of things for a few moments.

Mel could not help but chuckle at that. Any other sapient she had ever known would be dead right now if they had suffered the same wounds as Greg. The ogre somehow still managed his overly polite demeanor, even after a psychotic wolf-man had done its best to disembowel him.

“I’ll be right back,” said Mel, “try not to move around much more.”

“I appreciate the concern but I’m…” Greg groaned as he tried to reposition himself. “I’m doing all right.” He blinked rapidly for a moment and took a deep breath, as if overcome by a sudden spell of dizziness. Staring down at the polysteel beneath him, he added, “But I’ll take your advice, all the same.”

“Good man.” said Mel, still moving forward towards the stairs.

As they approached the landing that connected to the bridge she could see Marcus and Diana speaking in low tones. Her Sidhe enhanced hearing only caught the lasts scraps of the conversation.

“…of time before they take the systems comms.” said Marcus, his arms folded in front of him while he still sat in the pilot’s chair, having swiveled it to face backwards.

Diana nodded. “An hour, at most, if the Finders have already pulled operations.”

They both looked up as the pixie and older midrian appeared.

Marcus gave her an imploring look and all Mel could do was shake her head in response. Diana’s face seemed to dip into something approaching a scowl as Marcus lost much of his rigid posture and slouched forward.

“Do we even know what’s wrong?” asked Diana.

“If it’s not the absorption panel, I have no idea.” said Mel. She gave one last look at Dann Slevin but the antiques dealer just gave her a pained look.

“As I said…”

“Yeah, yeah.” Mel said. “Not your field.”

Slevin looked around at all of them in turn. The ban-sidhe pixie. The Magus without aetherics. The spy turned traitor.

“What will you all do?” he asked, a look of genuine worry marring that infections smile he had worn around Mel.

Marcus just shook his head.

“We’ll figure something out.” said Mel. “Come on Mr. Slevin. We need to get you out of here.”

As Mel led the man away, Marcus looked up and stared after them. What *were* they going to do?

Despite having been flying across the Wake in her for the better part of a cycle, Marcus knew next to nothing about the *Amal’hiam’s* inner workings. Khagrish tech allowed someone like him, stripped of his aetherics, to actually pilot a ship but beyond its basic functions it was mostly a mystery to the former Magus and the rest of the galaxy at large. The way in which their technology absorbed and could harness raw aether radiation was still one of the dwarves best kept secrets.

As he lost sight of Mel, Marcus’ head snapped to the side as he suddenly remembered that he did not need to know any of those secrets. They already had someone on board who did.

Standing and looking to Diana, he said, “Come on. We need to get that dwarf to cooperate.”

Helena’s sister did not say anything but there was a merciless look in her eyes. The storm over the sea did not care about those still trapped beneath its onslaught.

The two midrians made their way to the cargo hold once again and Marcus noted Greg’s new position. He seemed as though he was unconscious yet again but it did not look as though he had trailed any more blood on his way to the bulkhead.

Meanwhile Ark was still suspended in one of the ogre-sized harnesses, feet dangling almost a meter off the floor. At first Marcus thought that the dwarf was still unconscious but as they got closer his eyes snapped open and he looked at them down his long nose.

“What do you want with me?” said Ark with a blunt tone. “Nov-Khag-rin does not pay kidnappers.”

“We’re not kidnapping you.” said Marcus, licking his lips. He shot a look over his shoulder towards where he had last seen Mel. “Truth be told I was not exactly consulted about grabbing you.”

“What a comfort.” said Ark with a sneer.

“Look.” said Marcus wearily. “Can we just talk like rational sapients?”

“I currently have little choice in that matter.” growled the prospector. “But between my position and your firearms, I’d say we are engaging in a suitably metaphorical dialogue between midrians and a khag.”

“For the love of Primus.” said Marcus, reaching forward and undoing the straps that held Ark in place. As he worked at the impromptu restraints, he said, “Listen. The Empire is here, okay? They just arrived in the system. If we don’t leave now we are all going to be on the wrong end of the Legion when it makes planetfall.”

Marcus paused before removing the last of the harness that held Ark. Taking a step back and looking the khag in the face, he said, “Can you please not try to kill us this time?”

Ark gave him a beady eyed look, giving Greg a quick glance before meeting his eyes again. “My own race warrants my death within the Empire.” said the khag. “Why do you fear them as well?”

“I don’t…” started Marcus. “I’m not afraid.”

He wasn’t even sure if that was true. *Did* he fear the Khanus Empire now?

Ark’s look became a smug one. “This galaxy has only shown my kind two things in the last five thousand cycles midrian, hate and fear. I know them both well at this point.”

“It’s a long story.” said Marcus demurely, now struggling with more thoughts on how he felt about the Empire now.

“Are you familiar with the Magus Imperia, dwarf?” said Diana from behind him.

Marcus spun and looked at her. It was true he no longer felt that keeping his identity a secret was a priority but it did not mean he wanted it exposed to someone like Arkon-no-Sek.

“Of course.” said the khag.

Before he could say anything to stop her, Diana said, “This is Magus Imperia Marcus Crassus Khanus of Verge. Before he left the service of the Khanus Empire he was the one they called Primus Reborn.”

Marcus cringed and threw a hand over his face. Not sure if he should be angry or not, but simply feeling tired. Turning back to face Ark, he could see the gears spinning in the khag’s eyes.

“A Magus.” said Ark with a hint of awe in his voice that quickly turned to tone of realization. “A rogue Magus. Of course. That’s how you survived that ordeal on Saul’s Rock, that’s what Stoat wanted from you. Your power or your protection perhaps.”

Marcus licked his lips, tasting some of the stubble that had begun to form there. When he had still been a Magus his body had been kept in a state of near-immortality, almost unchanging thanks to the massive amounts of aethium that had been grafted onto his bones and infused into his muscles and organs. It had taken five cycles for his hair to start growing again.

“Pretty much.” said Marcus. It wasn’t exactly true but the less Ark actually knew the better. As it was the khag had put that together rather too quickly for Marcus’ taste.

“Get me down from here.” said Ark suddenly, struggling to free his arms.

Marcus stared at him for a moment and the khag rolled his eyes. “Fine. I promise not to try and kill you. Is that better?”

Nodding once, Marcus undid the last of the straps but wasn’t quite quick enough to stop Ark from falling straight to the floor.

Despite the sudden drop, Ark righted himself quickly and cast around the cargo hold. “What did you do with my bandolier?” he asked, not actually addressing either midrian but speaking to himself as he looked towards the armory. “Ah.”

Pushing passed Marcus, the khag moved over to the caged area and found where the others had thrown his bandolier of devices on one of the work benches. Throwing it over his head, Ark came back over to them.

“Follow if you must.” said the Prospector as he moved passed them. “I’m going to engineering.”

“How do you know where that is?” asked Marcus after him.

Turning, Ark gave him a condescending sneer. When he spoke it was in the tone of a teacher having to explain something to one of their slower students. “This ship is an Usulv Linebreaker, fifth generation. It shares many design features with the more widely used Torag models and its drive-core is located near the rear as to not damage troop compliments in the event of catastrophic thrust-chem damage. Did you know *any* of this?”

Marcus gave the khag a blank stare.

“Of course you didn’t.” said Ark as he turned away and began moving again.

Trading glances with Diana, Marcus said, “Can you get back up to the bridge and meet Mel. We need to be ready to get out of here.”

Diana only nodded as the former Magus started after Ark. A few quick strides brought him next to the khagrish man and Marcus swallowed uneasily as he kept pace with him.

As they walked back down towards the rear of the *Amal’hiam* in uncomfortable silence, Marcus noted the way Ark’s eyes were constantly moving. Even at their quick clip, the khag’s eyes seemed to be moving quickly across every detail about the ship, stopping briefly to note some detail or another.

“Wasted…” muttered Ark as they crossed the mess.

“What?” asked Marcus.

“Wasted.” said Ark more clearly. “This vessel. She is wasted on the likes of you.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?” asked Marcus sourly.

Ark shot him a withering glance as they crossed into the hallway that led into engineering.

“Midrian, you have no idea what my people lost after the Deep War, do you?” Ark said. “No idea the lengths your kind and the rest of the galaxy went to in the name of *‘disarming’* the khag?”

“The khag,” said Marcus with a growl, “tried to conquer the entire Dragon’s Wake.”

Ark finally stopped moving when they reached engineering. As he stood in front of the drive-core, admiring the chems and aether conduits, he said, “And for that we deserved genocide? For that we earned the Crystal Plague?” He turned to face Marcus. “How is your Empire any better than the Khag-rauc-Deh? Just because my people were the first to attempt to establish order in this galaxy they deserved being stripped of everything they had forged and left to rebuild from nothing? Left to rot and be forgotten in the ruin you made of our civilization.”

“You’re talking about something that happened five thousand cycles ago.” Marcus said with exasperation. “The Khanus Empire did not even exist back then.”

“The Old Dominion. The Empire. It makes no difference. Here I am,” said Ark, throwing his arms wide. “digging through the garbage of this galaxy to try and find some scrap of what once was. Most of the Wake does not even remember why they call us *dwarves* and yet they would all just as soon kill me since I have strayed from the reservation. Even one thousand cycles later your Empire upheld the old treaty. Even five thousand cycles later they all still hate us without really considering why.”

Marcus stood silently as Ark’s shoulder’s heaved with his anger. The khag had a wild look in his eyes as he ranted. There was anger, to be sure, but there was also pain in that expression. Pain from something big and unstoppable, titanic events in the past that welled up like a glacier, slow but always pushing forward. They were not things that Ark had any control over and yet they dominated his life. *Frustration* did not do the feeling justice.

It was a sentiment Marcus understood all too well.

“I am sorry.” said the former Magus softly. “I didn’t really think about it like that.”

Ark snorted and shook his head. “Of course you didn’t. They never do.” He let out a long sigh and then pointed straight up. “That is your problem.”

Marcus blinked suddenly and glanced up at the aether conduits that ran from the drive-core and out towards the rest of the ship.

“The conduits?” he asked.

“You must have had a false start.” said Ark, taking a few steps over to a control panel near the core. “The aether conduits tripped closed to stop a feedback surge. If they hadn’t the bridge would have exploded.”

Marcus continued to stare up at the thin, insolated strands of woven gold and aethium. He licked his lips nervously, thinking about how many times they had tried to restart the *Amal’hiam* after they had failed to lift off.

Without sparing Marcus a second glance, the khag worked at the small holographic display shown by the control panel. The former Magus could not make any sense of what he was doing but there was a clicking sound from above them and a gentle hum began to sound from the drive-core.

“There.” said Ark, turning to look at Marcus. “Tell the fairy to try it now.”

Moving over to the comm for this section of the ship, Marcus hit the manual buttons that linked him to the foremost section.

“Mel, you up there?” asked Marcus.

There was a slight pop and then Mel’s voice came back. “Diana and I, yeah.”

“Is Slevin clear?”

“About as clear as he can get when the Empire is invading your world.” Mel said darkly.

“See if she’ll start.” said Marcus, silently praying to any deity that might care to listen. “I think Ark fixed the problem.”

The gentle hum of the drive-core suddenly became a solid thrumming sound as power coursed through the *Amal’hiam’s* systems. There was a whoop from the comm as Mel cheered.

“It worked!” exclaimed the pixie. “Get up here so we can leave.”

The smile on Marcus’ face felt odd as he turned to look at Ark.

“Do you want to come up?” he asked the khag.

Ark met his gaze with a stony expression that made Marcus’ smile falter slightly.

“If it’s all the same to you.” said Ark. “I’ll stay behind to make sure you haven’t done any more damage to this ship.”

Marcus turned to go but stopped as he was near the door. Glancing wearily back at the khagrish prospector, Marcus was about to speak when Ark said, “We’ll discuss what happens next after we have gotten clear of your Imperial friends. It would be insane to hamper our escape at this point.”

The khag was not looking at Marcus as he spoke. His eyes were fixed on the drive-core again with a hungry expression.

Controls attentive. Landing struts retracted. All lights were blue.

Marcus took a deep breath as he felt the chems that ran along the underside of the *Amal’hiam* fighting with Bounty’s gravity.

Then they were rising. In a slow spiral they ascended into the night sky above Panimberg.

“Not going to lie.” Mel said from her perch on the nav console. “I kind of didn’t think this was going to work.”

“We’re not out of the world yet.” said Diana just in front of the pixie, sitting in the navigator’s seat.

Marcus’ mouth tightened as he brought them up and over the hill of the city that looked out over the endlessly flat fields beyond. He silently agreed with both women.

They gained altitude more and more swiftly as Marcus set their exit vector and began using the aft thrusters. Shooting forward they were quickly treated to a softly glowing horizon line that bloomed with profuse reds and shining gold.

Then the sun died and Marcus almost lost control of the *Amal’hiam* as he jerked the steering column in a panicked turn.

Now to their left, all three of them stared in wide eyed horror at the thing hovering above the curve of the planet. Jutting up over the plains, its massive outline blotted out the dawn and casting a continued darkness on Bounty, the Imperial super-carrier appeared as some kind of interstellar monolith.

“So quick.” said Diana breathlessly. “They didn’t even-”

The whirring of the aethite sphere to her right cut Diana off. The primary holodisplay for the bridge spun to life of its own accord.

Mel scrambled down from her perch, sliding down the console rather than flying, and wildly gestured at its interface.

“Someone is hacking our comm.” she said, hands moving ‘net feeds faster than Marcus could track while still watching where they were flying. “Scratch that. They’re in all the comms. It’s a planetary override.”

Marcus sucked in a shaking breath as he angled the *Amal’hiam* in the opposite direction of the super-carrier, still making for orbit. He knew what was coming next. The only thing he was uncertain of was which of his former peers would show up on the holodisplay, announcing to all of Bounty that they were now under the control of the Khanus Empire.

As expected a figure quickly materialized above the spinning orb of aethite, projected by crisscrossing lines of light that colored and shaded the image. Dressed in the formal black and silver of a Legion Navy admiral, four knots standing up on each shoulder, the woman who stared at them made Marcus’ blood run cold.

Her blonde hair was shorter than he remembered but her violet eyes, the color usually reserved for wizards, looked out at him with an intensity that had never changed.

“People of Bounty,” said the living nightmare that had appeared before Marcus, “I am Magus Imperia Helena Istara Khanus of Nam’sil. I come on behalf of Her Royal Highness, Empress Nassaeya Sohlus Pollius Khanus, to extend to you an offer of incorporation into her Empire.”

Chapter Thirty Four

Helena continued to speak, her words rebounding into a twisted echo of the speech Marcus had given so many times.

“With this offer comes the responsibility of citizenship, the wealth of the Khanus Empire and the protection of its Legions.”

Every fate Marcus had imagined for Helena over the last four cycles, every face twisted in pain or beaten into submission, collapsed into the singular image that was displayed before him. Things were happening around him. The others were talking. Shouting. Someone pulled the helm from his hands. Marcus did not care. He only had eyes for the projection of the woman he had finally admitted was dead.

“I know that this is not a decision to be taken lightly, nor should it be. I wish to extend the hospitality of the Empress to any delegation from your world so that we may better discuss this matter.”

Huge, rough hands lifted Marcus bodily out of the pilot’s chair and shoved him aside unceremoniously. He staggered slightly, catching himself on the central holodisplay and staring up at the unwavering stare of the woman he loved.

“I await your response.” she finished, and the projection vanished just as quickly as it had appeared.

Marcus suddenly realized that he had not taken a single breath while Helena had been speaking and he gasped, stumbling backwards. He stared in slack jawed horror at where she had been.

He felt like he was choking as he struggled find words, any words. Nothing would come. Desperate, strangled noises came from his mouth but he was finding it difficult to breathe now. Everything was spinning.

The world did not feel real anymore.

Helena.

Magus.

The two concepts were mutually exclusive in Marcus’ mind but at the same time their collision made a terrible sort of sense. It was poetry written in blood. A glorious vision of what should never be.

What little was in Marcus’ stomach did not want to be there anymore.

Mel did not know what to do. She struggled to organize the list of emergencies that had suddenly appeared. Thankfully Greg had already taken care of the most immediate problem; they were not going to die in a fiery spaceship crash.

When the Magus had appeared on their comm – Mel still did not quite believe what she had just seen – both Marcus and Diana had reacted poorly. She had gone into some kind of wide-eyed rictus, her back straight and body unmoving. While the former Magus had apparently had some kind of small convulsion, doubling over even as he steered the *Amal’hiam*.

If Greg had not appeared just then, still cradling his recovering stomach wound but upright, Marcus would have plowed them all into the agworld below.

As it was, the ogre was now at the ship’s helm with a painful expression on his face. Diana still sat transfixed and staring at nothing. Marcus was near the entrance to the bridge, puking his guts out.

Mel hovered above it all, on the verge of panic and trying desperately to ignore the smell of mostly-digested protein.

“Miss Mel.” said Greg from the pilot’s seat, “Do we have a destination in mind?”

Glancing down at the ogre, Mel saw that he was keeping the *Amal’hiam* level and steering her out into the night side of the planet. She also noted that her new war-merc was only gripping the helm with one hand, the other was pressed against the awful wound that had reopened in his stomach.

Mel kept one eye on Marcus as she flew down to land on the console just in front of Greg. She peered at the mountain that was his torso and tried to evaluate his state. All she could see was his dark skin stained by even darker blood.

“Are you okay?” she asked lamely.

The ogre managed a small smile, never taking his eyes off the viewscreen in front of him. “I’ve suffered worse. Though not by much, if I’m to tell true.” He jerked his head sideways slightly. “What just happened?”

Mel looked between Marcus and Diana, the latter still staring at nothing in horrified silence while the former was breathing heavily in the entrance to the bridge.

“We just saw a ghost.” said Mel, her own words betraying her disbelief.

“That was an Imperial Magus.” said Greg plainly. “I heard the beginning of the transmission before that brief jaunt downward.”

Shaking her head, Mel stared down at the floor with wide eyes. There was just no way. Helena could not be a Magus. It made absolutely no sense. The woman Marcus loved had died protecting the Imperial Heir, Alexander Khanus. Hadn’t she?

Earlier Mel had been certain that they had been accidentally trailing Diana for these last few cycles. Obviously, they had found *her* and not Helena. But had Marcus been right anyway? Helena Istara had survived, and not only survived but had been transformed into a demigod in service to the Khanus Empire?

The Imperial supercarrier blocking the coming of dawn certainly made a strong argument for that theory. As did the broadcast they had all just witnessed.

“There’s just no way…” said Mel aloud, as if her words could stop the doubts now plaguing her.

Greg gave her a very brief glance and only spoke once his gaze returned upward. “Do we have a destination Miss Mel?” he asked diplomatically.

“Get us out of here.” said Mel quickly. “We need to warp before they can blockade the whole planet.”

From the other side of the bridge, Marcus murmured something through bile-stained lips.

“What?” asked Mel, even her enhanced hearing hadn’t been able to pick up what he said.

“Turn around.” said Marcus in a low moan.

“What?” spat Mel again, now with bile of her own catching in her throat.

Marcus stumbled a few steps forward and took a deep breath before looking up. He wiped away some pervious contents of his stomach with the back of his hand and swallowed weakly. The smile he revealed made Mel flinch. The tears in his eyes did not help.

Marcus Crassus, her friend, looked like a man that had just been given a stay of execution. A starving man given his first scrap of bread. A blind man given sight. A pious man hearing the voice of the gods.

“She’s alive.” said Marcus through that smile. “Mel, she’s *alive*!”

Only one emotion blazed within Mel’s chest, singular and bright.

Rage.

“Are you insane?!” the pixie screamed, throwing her hands into the air. Her shoulders screamed as well as she threw herself into the space between Marcus and the pilot’s seat. What little adrenaline that was keeping Mel going was quickly turning sour but she had at least enough energy for this.

Buzzing straight at Marcus’ face, Mel forced the much larger midrian to take an awkward step backwards.

“Enough!” shouted Mel, zipping back and forth just in front of her friend and forcing him to move backwards into the hallway. “E-fucking-nough! I’ve had it with this beaten puppy-dog bullshit! What? You think you can just crawl back to her?! Back to what *you* were? What *we* were?! There’s no going back Marcus. I’m a Ban’Sidhe and at best you’re a deserter, at worst a traitor. Do you think they’ll just take us back with open arms?”

Marcus was now entirely in the landing outside the bridge that led down to the primary airlock and up to the crew’s quarters. His face was full of startled shock at the pixie’s ferocity and it seemed like he wasn’t quite able to muster any kind of response. Mel could feel her body quickly failing, her wings giving out in little sputtering gasps of motion. She descended and finally fell to the corrugated polysteel floor. Her entire body felt weak as she struggled to find a place to balance on a floor full of holes that could still easily swallow one of her legs.

“They’ll kill us.” said Mel, giving up and falling to her knees, the metal beneath her biting into her calves. She was breathing heavy but she still managed to speak loud enough to be heard by the former Magus. “It doesn’t matter that Helena’s alive. For everything you’ve done, they will still kill you.”

Her whole body felt numb and Mel might have just collapsed there if not for the trembling of the floor as someone approached from the bridge. Glancing back wearily, Mel saw Diana as the midrian woman knelt down. She held out a hand and Mel gratefully crawled into her palm. There was some indignity to being carried but Mel was too tired to care.

“She’s right.” said Diana. “If you take us back there, they will kill us.”

When she spoke it wasn’t in that clipped, emotionless way she had before. Her voice was still calm and reserved but the steel mask of control was gone. Despite her words there was music in Diana Istara’s voice.

“Helena…” breathed Marcus, his eyes moving passed the two women towards the helm.

“Is dead.” said Diana, heartbreak filling those two words with more pain than Mel thought possible. “That *thing* is not her. It may look like her and sound like her but you know better than most what Viktus Null does to his students.”

That name made Marcus freeze, the agitated little motions he was making stopping abruptly. Even Mel went rigid and turned to look at the elder Istara sister. Very few people outside of House Khanus knew the name of the oldest of the Thirteen.

The Teacher. The Maker. The man that had supposedly been alive when Primus Khanus himself had become the first Magus over four thousand cycles ago. The *thing* that could make even a Magus stop in fear.

Mel had only seen him three times and never outside the context of the centennial anniversary of the Khanus Empire, which saw the rare gathering of all thirteen Magus Imperia. On one of these occasions she had witnessed Ninder of Forl, a chattering psychopath that had butchered much of his own homeworld *before* being forced into the yoke of Magushood, fall into terrified silence by virtue of a single look from Viktus Null.

Marcus sucked in a breath through his nose and swallowed audibly.

Mel’s response was similar but she could feel herself shudder as a chill ran down her spine.

“How do you know *that* name?” asked Marcus roughly through a face that seemed to have as many warring emotions as Mel usually had.

Diana shook her head and said, “Not now. Once we’re clear…” Her voice trailed off for half a breath. “We’ll see.”

“Begging all your pardons.” said Greg loud enough so that he could be heard without turning his head. “I don’t wish to intrude, this seems like a private matter, but we may have a small situation developing where our current course is concerned.”

Diana turned; the hand that Mel still sat on was outstretched to give the pixie a clear view back into the bridge. Through the viewscreen Mel could see the inky black of space speckled with brilliant starlight beginning to dissolve through the blue skies of Bounty. The sight was a beautiful one, somewhat tarnished by the two large vessels sweeping up in front of them.

They were not even on the same magnitude as the metropolis sized supercarrier but the frigates easily dwarfed the *Amal’hiam*. Both Imperial ships had *guns* larger than the ancient blockade runner.

“I believe they are hailing us.” continued Greg, sparing a glance over at the nav console.

“Get me over there.” said Mel to Diana.

The midrian woman brought the pixie back over to the nav console though Mel found she did not have the strength to stand back up once Diana had placed her down.

“I’ve got it.” Diana said softly, reaching out to manipulate the holographic controls of the nav.

At Diana’s touch an image of a man appeared where Helena had been displayed just a few moments before.

The holo was that of a man dressed in the silver and black of a Legion naval officer, his hands held behind his back and a solemn look on his face. “Vessel *Amal’hiam*. Be advised that you are attempting to leave a sanctioned Imperial blockade. If you continue on your current trajectory we will be forced to open fire. Please return planetside until further notice.”

Mel glanced back towards Marcus, the former Magus still standing just outside the bridge, and then up at Diana.

“Miss Mel?” intoned Greg. “What should we do?”

Mel’s everything hurt. Her entire body was drained of strength and ached with numb exhaustion. Her brain stung just as badly and she was having trouble stringing one thought into the next. All she knew was that they needed to leave.

“Warp.” said Mel flatly, staring up at Diana. “Find someplace, it doesn’t matter where, just lock in coordinates and go.”

From out of the corner of her eye Mel could see Greg giving her a worried look. Diana too was looking down at her with muted concern.

Outside the *Amal’hiam*, the frigates were growing closer by the moment.

“The aether conduits are still warming up.” said Diana, glancing at a readout on the nav. “They’ll be on us before we can spin up.”

Mel wasn’t sure if she wanted to start crying or pass out, she was somewhere in between. “Then buy us time. Talk to them or something.”

Diana and Greg exchanged glances but both of them adopted a look of surprise when Marcus approached.

He stepped into the small squared-off area of the bridge that would let the comm broadcast his image to any receiving holodisplay. “Patch me through to them.” said the former Magus. “Let me talk while you spin up the warp.”

Mel swallowed a lump in her throat as she looked Marcus up and down.

His back was straight. His eyes stared ahead. His breath was steady.

“Can you do it?” Mel asked.

The question had been for Diana, who immediately began working on the comm, but Marcus gave a slight nod as well.

“The emergency frequencies won’t have changed.” said Diana, almost to herself. “Ready when you are.”

Mel mirrored Marcus’ nod up at Diana and then the aethite sphere of the *Amal’hiam’s* holodisplay began spinning and taking in the image of the former Magus.

Marcus took a deep breath and then spoke.

“Legionnaires of the Khanus Empire, my name is Marcus Crassus. Please, listen to me. I am on the ship now breaking high float and I am leaving this world, one way or another. I have no quarrels with you or your mission.” Marcus licked his lips and let out a sigh, glancing to one side. “I just want to leave.” Looking back to stare into the holodisplay’s imager, a resolve and steel entered Marcus’ voice. “If there are any among you that would stop the man they called Primus Reborn, then please, open fire but if not, stand down.”

Mel stared at Marcus with a mixture of fascination and horror. This was the first time she had ever heard him refer to himself by the moniker given to him by the Followers of Primus. Even Diana gave out a soft gasp at the words.

Beyond their viewscreen the Imperial frigates drifted closer but none of their weapon systems, now clearly visible, seemed to be online.

“We’re ready to warp on your mark.” said Greg softly.

Marcus glanced over to the ogre and then back towards the holodisplay. They were still broadcasting.

“Tell your Empress that I send my… regards.” said Marcus with a tone of pain in his voice. “And to the Magus among you,” The confidence he had held while speaking was beginning to whither as he continued. “Tell her that I am sorry.”

Mel looked away from her friend and up at Diana, who’s hand hovered near the nav. Warp coordinates were already locked in. A mining colony four warps away.

“Cut it.” said Mel to Diana and then she spoke towards Greg. “Get us out of here.”

Diana did not move and Mel glanced back at the frozen woman. She was still staring, wide-eyed, at Marcus. Brow furrowing, Mel struggled to see the problem until her eyes settled over the comm display just in front of them. The frequency they had been broadcasting over was familiar to Mel and it only took her a moment to realize what Diana had done.

She hadn’t used some ship to ship emergency channel. She had used a fleet-wide signal. Marcus had just been broadcast to every Imperial vessel in the system.

Then everything began happening at once.

The holodisplay crystal spun up as someone cut into their transmission with an overriding broadcast. Helena Istara’s image appeared before them again.

Mel tried to leap at the comm, to shut it down, crying out wordlessly.

Marcus’ stern façade broke and his mouth opened silently as Helena appeared.

Diana still stared in a terrified rictus.

Greg activated the *Amal’hiam’s* warp systems and the stars outside the viewscreen began to fade into the emerald nightmare of the Void.

Just before their comm went down, cut off by their three minute transition from one point in space to another, Helena managed to transmit three words to every vessel that had received Marcus’ broadcast.

“Destroy that ship.”

Chapter Thirty Five

Greg released his white-knuckled grip on the helm, feeling the pain in his gut as he relaxed. He winced slightly as pressed the button to block out the Void beyond the viewscreen. As the front of the *Amal’hiam* settled into the same color as the surrounding polysteel bulkhead, the ogre addressed everyone else.

“It’ll be about two hours until we’re done with our warp sequence. I think I’ll-” Greg’s words died as he took in the others. Despite his near-disemboweling earlier all of the other sapients on the bridge looked worse off than his midsection felt.

They were all transfixed like the grotesques around the Grand Chapel on Gobwor. Each of their faces held concentrated looks of varying emotions. Marcus with broken desperation. Diana in white-faced terror. Miss Mel stricken by some strange combination of sadness and relief.

Looking between the two midrians and the pixie, Greg was not sure what to do. Something important had just happened that was clear enough, something to do with the Magus that had been broadcasting across the system. How had she introduced herself? Helena Istara? The name did not mean anything to Greg.

Though, to be fair, a younger Greg had perhaps not spent as much time as he aught learning the ins and outs of higher midrian society. Istara might have been a name of some importance within the Empire and he would not have known. It was actually a glaring gap in his education, one that had hardly mattered after his transfer to the War School.

It hardly mattered now either. They were away. Relatively safe in the twisted emerald space of the Void. In three minutes the *Amal’hiam* would enter normal space again, recharge its warp drive and then begin the process all over again. She wasn’t a big ship and her maximum distance for a single warp was not far but in just over two hours they would make it nearly a quarter of the way across the galactic disc.

Greg suddenly felt very tired as he continued to watch the others. His normally inquisitive nature might have led him to question Miss Mel or perhaps Marcus but at that particular moment all he wanted to do was find a nice quiet place to lie down for a week or two.

His gut still sang out with red hot pain every time he shifted his weight. He could feel the viscera and surrounding muscle tissue shifting back into its regular configuration but it would be a while yet before he would be leaping up onto anymore spaceships.

The first thing to do, decided Greg, would be to stand up. Even that was a dubious course of action at the moment. He felt as though his posterior might as well be glued to the pilot’s chair.

Overcoming the weight of his exhaustion, Greg tipped himself upwards and forwards, wobbling for a dangerous moment as he came to his feet. There was a moment of dizzy light-headedness wherein his only thought was how thankful he was for being in a place where he did not have to duck through every door or stoop in every room.

“If you’ll please excuse me. I think I’ll just go have a bit of a lie down somewhere.” was what Greg tried to say. But thanks to a strange sensation in which he felt as though he was speaking through wads of cotton stuffed into his mouth, the ogre was not entirely sure if that was what he actually said.

“Bluh?” intoned Greg, the dizzy feeling suddenly becoming shaper and faster.

He blinked several times.

Then he fell.

Marcus moved quickly despite his still-lurching emotions, barely managing to catch the ogre as he toppled sideways. The former Magus’ knees nearly buckled once Greg’s full weight settled on to him but after grasping awkwardly around the mercenary’s barrel of a chest he managed to lower him down onto the floor.

He stayed there for a moment, kneeling over Greg’s fallen form, trying to come to terms with what had just happened. Not the ogre’s unconsciousness, the source of that was apparent enough once Marcus saw the sucking wound that had reopened on Greg’s stomach. He was not overly concerned for the ogre, their natural healing abilities made these types of wounds into serious annoyances rather than mortal threats. No, what Marcus struggled with was what he had just said and the response he had received.

Despite having just heaved up the meager contents of his stomach only a few minutes ago Marcus felt that tightening, clenching strain as his body made his emotional sickness a physical one. The queasy feeling started in his chest but quickly moved up his throat and down into his guts. He wiped a hand across his face, smearing the cold sweat across his brow and down his cheeks. His breath was shaky and felt as though he could start crying at any moment.

On top of everything he felt the pins and needles of a migraine begin to prickle the insides of his temples.

What had he just said? He had called himself Primus Reborn. Is that what he had done?

Marcus might have been angry with himself under different circumstances. Furious with what he had said. In the moment it had seemed right, the words had come out of some dark recess in his brain where the Magus still presided. Now though? Now Marcus Crassus was too revolted with the idea of what he had just done to muster any amount of anger.

Primus Reborn.

It was a moniker given the Magus he had once been. To the creature that had destroyed millions of lives in the name of revenge. The brand seared onto a slave who had no choice but to accept his place in the dogmatic beliefs of those who followed. It was the hope of those Followers that wished to see the return of their godking in the form of Marcus Crassus.

For the genocide he had committed and the vengeance he had reaped they had thought Primus Khanus had come again.

Primus Khanus. The first Magus. The first Emperor. The first defiant voice to rise against the theocracy of the Minos Dominion. The ruler of the Khanus Empire for nearly one thousand cycles. Even after his supposed death the ruling members of House Khanus claimed to only keep the throne in stewardship until the return of Primus.

They had likened Marcus to *him*.

The former Magus could still remember the fervor in the eyes of those legionaries that thought such things. Even while he had been the near-immortal demigod, Marcus had been frightened by those eyes. It was that eager, zealous light that spoke of a willingness to follow the Magus to whatever end. Even if it meant betraying the Empire for which they fought and died for.

Marcus had not wanted that kind of devotion then and he certainly did not want it now.

Was it such a wonder that Helena had responded in the way that she had? He had effectively named himself a new vessel of the divine, the new conduit of the Stedgods, Primus Reborn. There was nothing in the whole of the Dragon’s Wake that he wanted less than that.

Well, perhaps there was one thing…

Clenching his fists, Marcus stood up and looked around the bridge.

Mel sat on the nav console, so exhausted that she barely had the energy to stay upright on her own and so she leaned, sagged really, against a small jutting piece of the display projector. Her eyes fluttered several times as though she was struggling to remain awake.

Diana still sat in the navigator’s chair and still stared at the comm where Helena’s image had been projected. Despite a few scraps and bruises she looked relatively well. It was only the haunted look on her face told Marcus that whatever the woman was feeling it had broken through every last piece of emotional control she had once possessed.

She was safe though. That was important. Despite Marcus’ bungling he had got Helena’s sister clear of whatever fallout might have occurred had she remained on Bounty.

Staring at Diana, Marcus could almost see Helena in her face. It was off though. A few centimeters, here and there, just skewed enough to know that it was a different person. The resemblance was an echo, made dissimilar by the distance that it had bounced through a winding cavern of different experiences.

Helena’s appearance on the holodisplay of the comm had been similar. Minute changes making her appear unreal, almost a different person. Which she was, according to Diana and Mel. Magus Imperia Helena Istara Khanus of Nam’sil was not the woman he had clung to after The Shattering in the same way that Marcus was no longer the gung-ho legionnaire that had been turned into a demigod over three hundred cycles ago. That man had died as soon as he had been changed by Viktus Null’s dark science but it had taken him nearly three centuries to realize it.

Marcus took a deep breath as he glanced at his companions one after another. They were all tired and nearly broken. Some physically, some emotionally. They needed time to rest and recover.

His gaze finally resting on the nav console, Marcus noted their warp trajectory and the time it would take them to reach their destination. Almost two hours. It wasn’t long but it would have to be enough.

Hunkering down, Marcus leveraged himself under Greg to get a grip in either of his armpits and began to drag the ogre out of the crowded bridge and back towards the cargo hold. He must have weighed twice as much as the former Magus and it was slow going but Marcus trudged backwards with a slow determination.

Two hours wasn’t much time but it was all the others were going to get. Once the *Amal’hiam* finished this warp sequence Marcus had every intention of starting a new one. He was going to put things right. Once and for all. It did not matter what Mel or Diana said. Marcus had every intention of ignoring their arguments and doing the right thing for once in his long and terrible life.

They were going to head straight to Imperia and Marcus Crassus was going to put an end to all of this insanity.

Arkon-no-Sek watched the absorption panels of the drivecore spin gently. They rotated around the now exposed aethium core of the ship in a manner that they hadn’t before. Ark was sure that was why the previous two panels had cracked, a lack of diversified aetheric strain. Perhaps the core of the ship, a piece of tech dating back to the Deep War, possessed some flaw that produced a more steady stream of aether towards that particular spot. It was impossible to tell until he could open it up and inspect the core itself. A task which was also impossible unless he sealed himself in the engineering chamber and used a protective body suit, which he did not have, lest he succumb to near immediate aether poisoning.

It said much of the midrian and the pixie’s mechanical inclination that neither of them had realized, after a cycle of continuous travel, that the drivecore was not some stationary lump of metal to be turned on and off again.

Khagrish warpcores lived and breathed in the same way other sapients used living navigators to control the movements of their ships. They danced and sang in time with Void in order to warp. They died like anything else if left to stagnate.

Half of Ark was furious at the state of the ship, the *Amal’hiam* they called it, though the other half was still in a reverie that he was finally here. Here on this ship. A fifth generation Usulv Linebreaker. A vessel from the peak of Khagrish supremacy in the Dragon’s Wake. His people’s history and legacy flowed through every line of the ship’s interior. Their ingenuity and genius rested in every chem and aether conduit.

This ship belonged to the Khag, not to some banished walking bioweapon or vagabond feyling. It belonged to Arkon-no-Sek.

Ark drew in a long, steady breath through his nose, appreciating how clean the air smelled back here as opposed to the more lived-in portions of the ship. He tugged at his beard thoughtfully as the motion of the drivecore began to slow. Even with his stunted aetherics Ark could feel their escape from the Void into normal space, the first step of their warp sequence complete.

Tapping a few holographic buttons on the diagnostic panel to the right of the drivecore, Ark could plainly see their chartered rout across a sizable portion of the galaxy. He could not affect any change in their course from back here, not yet, but he had two hours until they finished the sequence.

Two hours was plenty of time.

Time to plan. Time to tinker. Time to find a way to dispose of everyone else aboard before he returned to Nov-Khag-Rin and was greeted by his people as a hero.

“Arise, My Magus.”

The Magus Helena Istara Khanus of Nam’sil rose, sheathing her knife-like Focus and looking directly at the slightly transparent image of Empress Nassaeya Sohlus Pollious Khanus which was being projected into her quarters by the overhead lights.

She fought the nervous urge to crack her knuckles in front of the ruler of the Khanus Empire and instead clenched her fists, feeling the sweat making her palms slick. The rampant anger and confusion still flooded her body, making her joints ache and stomach clench. It was a buzzing tingle of adrenaline that raced up and down her arms making them feel numb and painful at the same time. Her confused emotions were reflected in a slight dimming of the lights in her room, causing the image of the Empress to flicker slightly as two powers struggled to control the flows of aether.

From the other side of the Western Reach the astral wizard that was currently projecting the Empress reasserted his control over the aetheric energies around Helena. Nassaeya’s image sharpened again.

The eyes of the Empress narrowed slightly as she gave Helena an imperious stare. It was a look that spoke volumes.

Word of what had happened less than an hour ago must have already reached Imperia.

Though how could it not? Marcus Crassus had apparently just come back from the dead.

“How go the incorporation efforts, My Magus?” asked the Empress coolly.

Helena reeled slightly, taken off guard by the lack of accusation. Nassaeya knew. She had to know. There was no other reason for the Khanus matriarch to contact her Magus so quickly and informally, using her astral wizard to project herself through aetheric devices that were never meant to do such things.

Before she remained silent too long and before her brain could move passed the tangle of emotions that still raged inside, the last few cycles training kicked in.

“Your Highness.” responded Helena. “The agworld of Bounty is under your Legion’s direct control. I will be meeting with the world’s informal leadership within the hour discuss the terms of their incorporation into your Empire.”

“Their leadership?” intoned the Empress with an arched eyebrow.

“Corporate heads for the most part.” said Helena promptly, while she frantically tried to work out what game the Empress was playing at. “One or two land barons of minor significance. We do not expect any true resistance to Your Highness’ generous proposal to join her holdings.”

Nassaeya Khanus glanced behind Helena, staring at something the Magus could not see in whatever room she was within on Imperia. Her face, a stern and disapproving mask before, started to become a true frown as her eyes slid back towards the other woman.

“You say the Legion controls Bounty?” inquired the Empress.

Helena could feel the tension of those words, even across the lightyears that separated the Magus and her master.

She could not control it any longer. Despite the cycles of rigid and often painful teachings at the hands of the oldest of the Thirteen, Helena balked and stammered, “One ship did… It escaped Your Highness but it can’t- It couldn’t be-” She stared defiantly at the Empress as the raging storm of emotions broke against the cold tutelage of Viktus Null. The rage building in her chest made her words sharper than she meant them to be. “Marcus Crassus is dead Your Highness. I don’t know what that thing was but it was not…” She swallowed as the words caught briefly in her throat. “It can not be him.”

If Helena had not been staring directly at the Empress’ face she would have missed the brief flash of sadness that softened Nassaeya’s features. It was quickly swallowed by the fiery steel she was known for though and when she spoke again it was in a regal voice that seemed to cut through any aetheric distortion that may have existed before.

“The message broadcast amongst your fleet has already found its way onto the metanet, My Magus. Our allies within the Court of Air are attempting to curb its progress but by turnspan’s end I fully expect this treasonous communication to have been seen in every corner of the Dragon’s Wake.” The Empress took a deep breath and closed her eyes momentarily. “For good or for ill every sapient with access to the ‘net will know what has happened on Bounty.” Staring back at Helena, she continued. “You are being recalled My Magus.”  
 Helena swallowed again and began biting at her lower lip without realizing it. “Recalled, Your Highness?”

The Empress nodded. “I’m sending Magus Imperia Zella Mafey to relieve you of command and continue with the business of incorporating Bounty. You will return to Imperia and await new orders.”

Helena looked down at the polysteel floor as she bowed low. “Of course, Your Highness.”

Nassaeya was giving the Magus an even stare as she rose again. The two women stared at each other for a long moment before the Empress finally spoke.

“Your deployment may have been premature My Magus and for this, I apologize.”

Helena tried to adopt a reassuring smile when she said, “There is no need for an apology, Your Highness. The failings of this operation rest squarely on my shoulders.”

“Indeed.” said Nassaeya, either unmoved by Helena’s words and expression or uncaring. “Which is why it has been recommended that you should be removed from active duty, at least for the time being.”

Helena’s fists clenched so tight that her knuckles cracked of their own accord. “Your Highness.” she said in a strained voice. “Whoever, or whatever, is impersonating Marcus- Magus Imperia Marcus Crassus, is still out there.”

“And the perpetrators will be dealt with.” said the Empress with a note of finality. “But it has also been recommended that you may not be the best suited for dealing with this matter.”

“If I may ask,” said Helena through clenched teeth, “who has done all of this recommending?”

“Magus Imperia Viktus Null.” said Nassaeya, slightly quieter than before. “He awaits your return to Imperia.”

The rage that had been building within Helena suddenly dissipated. Where once was furious outrage that some creature would dare use Marcus’ face in such a manner now was only cold terror.

It seemed as though Viktus Null still had more to teach her.

Epilogue

3 Standard Imperial Cycles Previous

There was nothing but the Pain. It itched and burned, racing over the flesh. Beneath it. Through it. It jabbed needled fingers into the bones and the marrow caught fire. It found its way into the blood, worming through veins that it had no right to be in.

It was a conflagration through every corner of the body, a pyre of sensation that would not stop now that the accelerant had been added.

The mind wanted to escape into blissful unconsciousness but even that was blocked off by the Pain. It dug between the wrinkles of the brain and touched every synapse with sparking jolts of aether.

It was a supernova, ever-expanding fire in the darkness of space. It was a twisting and stretching, an ache never let up and touched every scrap of the body at once. It was life that begged for death.

Somewhere within the Pain there was a woman. Or perhaps she had once been a woman, it was unclear now. Before the Pain she’d had a name. Helena Istara.

There was another name floating somewhere in the Pain. It was etched across the mind and it lingered upon the body. There may have been feelings attached to the name before but the Pain had burned them away. Marcus Crassus.

Those two names danced within the Pain, weaving in and out of meaning. Sometimes they were just sounds and letters that made words without reason or thought. The names were important, that much was clear even when they stopped making sense for periods of time.

They were strands of a double helix, torn apart and remade. Over and over. Spliced and changed to fight a war that neither side could win.

They were vestiges of the Steds. The last scraps of Midgard fluttering on the astral winds. Remade through artifice where blood had failed so many millennia ago.

They leapt through the Void and found no peace in death, emerald or gray. Broken and twisted. Forever rotating around one another.

Remade.

Renewed.

Reborn.

They were two. Two of Thirteen. Thirteen was an important number. There was no reason for it and yet that number also lingered above the Pain. It was a symbol. It did not mean anything. There was no purpose to it as far as anyone could see. Only *he* saw. *Him*.

That was one thing the Pain could not consume. One memory that the woman could not unsee even through the boiling fire of the Pain. Of *him.*

What flesh could be seen was pulled tight across an unnaturally long frame. A face was hidden in the deep cowl of long purple robes. The clothing might have been regal once. It may have flowed down a less gaunt creature like a dark violet waterfall. On this man though… It was not quite right to call the being a man. It was all too much or too little. Too much length in the arms or perhaps the legs and too little meat to support such a tall frame. Too much talking and too little breathing. Too much power. Far too much. Aether radiated off of him. Around him. From him.

Viktus Null.

That was a name that overrode the Pain. No. It was a part of it. Wielding it, taming it, forcing it through the body and the mind of the woman.

His hands were like gray creatures from some untouched oceanic trench. Constantly twitching, always in motion but steady and sure as polysteel clamps once they gripped something.

His voice was the creaking of bones and the snapping of high tension wires. A twanging, wheezing thing. If he did so at all, his breathing came at odd intervals as if he needed to remind his body when it needed oxygen.

His movement was graceful yet terrifying. He did not walk so much as drift. There was no rhythm to his step, simply a gliding motion towards wherever he wished to go. At times what his body did and where his head was turned seemed to be completely at odds with each other.

His gaze was the worst of all. Within the cowl there were only the faintest traces of a face. Thin flesh atop even thinner bones. But his eyes shone with a dark purple light, twin glowing bruises that shone with their own, unnatural light. Those eyes did not see the people under their inspection. Merely the pieces, the parts, the machinery of each living creature they observed.

Those eyes could see the logic behind the Thirteen. Saw and understood the why while also conceiving of the how. They had seen the woman. Taken her apart. Seen the pieces that could be of use and gave the faintest flash of approval.

Somewhere within the Pain the woman thought she heard words.

“Do not fight it. Trust it. Follow it. Reach out to take what is yours.”

Were the words a memory? Were they happening right now? Had they even happened yet?

There was nothing but the Pain.

The bones were molten iron. The muscles were torn, over and over. The skin tried to hold it all in but split and wept fire. Constantly. Without end.

“Grasp it!” the voice again, “Take your Focus. Bind the power!”

The eyes of the woman were open, the Pain would not allow them to close. Tears streaked down either side of the face to wet the eyes but she still could not see.

“Do not look with your eyes. They have failed you. See with your aetherics. Use the power that brought you to me.”

*A table, its surface glowing with aethite inlays, flared with undirected power.*

*The displays within a raptor warsuit, focused with a precision they had never been designed to achieve.*

*Power and training combined on the boiling warzone of Minos, carving a path towards an impossible objective.*

*Heightened senses touching the frayed edges of a demigod.*

*The power to protect and destroy.*

*The determination to reach out and grasp.*

The storm of aether within seeking release and finding a pinpoint of escape just above the woman’s chest.

Helena Istara found her way through the Pain, her mind slicing through it like the prow of a ship through rough seas. Leaping and at times submerged but always pressing forward.

There was nothing but instinct to drive her to lift one trembling hand upward. The cracked flesh of her palm, burnt and torn with rampant aetheric power, closed over a slender object. At first her grip was weak but once her skin found that cool, crystalline surface, it tightened.

It started at her fingertips. Slowly at first and then in a surging down her arm and into the rest of her body. A sensation of binding, of sealing, of complete and total control.

She closed her mouth, silencing the ragged scream that had not ended since the Pain had begun. How long had it been? Cycles? Decades?

Finally blinking, she found her clouded vision clearing into sparkling focus. She watched as the rents along her forearm healed followed by all the other horrible blisters that covered her skin.

In mere moments Helena was left naked, smeared in her own blood, but otherwise feeling better than she had ever felt in her entire life. She sat up with perfect ease and stared down at her flawless skin, finely toned muscles and unbroken bones. Opening and closing her left hand she felt a new strength in her limbs. Then she looked over to stare at the thing she clutched in her right hand. The slim piece of crystal she held was about half a meter in length, not much larger than a combat knife but shaped like a more ceremonial weapon. It was hard to tell where the things hilt ended and the blade began due to the fact that it was one seamless crystal but Helena’s hand seemed to grip it just right. It was as though the polished gem molded to her fingers even as she gripped it tighter.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

The voice made Helena finally look up and as she attempted to take in her surroundings she felt suddenly blinded and deafened all at once. It wasn’t her eyes or ears being assaulted though, it was her aetherics. Where once she had been only capable of feeling the slight changes in pressure just about her person Helena could now feel everything. She experienced every miniscule source of aether around her for meters and meters, perhaps even farther. At the edges of her awareness there were sensations she did not have words for. Even her own power, once such a familiar presence, burned out like a terrible pyre just beneath her eyes.

Clutching at her crystalline dagger like some kind of protective totem, Helena curled around it and closed her eyes. She tried to shut it all out, to calm her mind like how they had taught her in the Legion, but even with her eyes shut and ears covered nothing could block out the influx of sensation pouring into her mind. She held tight to the dagger, its warm presence the only thing anchoring her mind to sanity.

The dagger was real. It was a focused piece of reality in a world gone mad with sensation. Its contours appeared smooth at first but turned out to be polygonal upon the close inspection of Helena’s fingertips. The infinitesimally small angles and surfaces were only obvious once the blade of the weapon was digging into her palm. Despite the deathgrip though, the dagger’s edge did not cut at her flesh.

Helena poured all of her attention into the dagger, pulling at every strand of aetheric awareness she possessed and lashing them to the weapon in her hands. With a ponderous speed she aetherically blinded herself, cutting off her most acute sense to any outside stimuli, concentrating entirely on the aethite weapon. It felt like she was forcing herself not to breath.

Eventually though, using every scrap of mental focus the Legion had helped reinforce, Helena’s whole aetheric attention was on the dagger. Slowly but surely she was able to open her eyes and observe her surroundings with her other senses.

She sat in a long, tub-like contraption. She would have just called it a tub if not for the curving oval shaped bands of aethite that lined its sides just above her hips. There were also the strange tiny holes that dotted the bottom of the thing in which she sat, there were hundreds of them, perhaps thousands, scattered beneath her in the vague silhouette of a sapient body. Blood, presumably her own, smeared nearly every centimeter of the concave surface.

Just beyond where she sat she saw a simple, unadorned chamber. It wasn’t that much bigger than the tub she had been reclined in but there was very little light and the corners of the room were cast in deep, concealing shadows. There was only one obvious entrance just in front of her. Eventually looking up when she finally noticed the subtle hum that pervaded the otherwise silent room she saw the dozens of aether conduits dangling down from a darkened hole in the ceiling. They spread out like some strange, drooping spider web, eventually disappearing into the walls around her.

Helena took a long, shaking breath, trying to work out where she was and what, exactly, had happened to her.

She remembered the escape pod, Alexander clutching at her as she fought to stay conscious.

Alexander!

Was the prince alive? Had they escaped?

Helena struggled to remember but everything from her recent past was still clouded by thoughts of the Pain. And with thoughts of the Pain came the sudden memory of the voice and the realization that she was not alone. Someone had greeted her when the Pain had ended.

Looking around furtively, Helena leveraged herself out of the tub and found her feet on a cold stone floor. Naked but for a thin covering of blood, she held the dagger in a white-knuckled hand, still not daring to reach out with her aetherics but ready to spring at any sudden attacker.

“Impressive,” said a chilly voice that made Helena wheel around, “none of the others remained conscious after binding the infusion.”

There was nothing. No one.

On the balls of her feet, Helena edged backwards towards the door, dagger held up in a defensive, reversed blade grip.

Helena heard a rattling breath behind her and she spun again, slashing at thin air.

“Combat instincts intact. Good. Good.” said the voice. It came from all around her. “Coordination will need to be reworked, of course.”

Breathing heavily as her pulse quickened, Helena’s violet eyes searched every piece of the room she could see. Now that her eyes had adjusted to the gloom around her she could see that the shadows were not deep enough to conceal a person and other than the tangle of cables above her, there was no where to hide.

Glancing upwards wearily, Helena was tempted to reach out with her aetherics and probe the unseen portions of her surroundings. She slowly released her grip on her wrought iron aetheric control but she immediately felt the influx of blaring sensation and then slammed all of her attention back towards the crystal knife.

When she finally spoke Helena’s voice was a soft rasp that nonetheless filled the otherwise quiet room. “Who’s there?”

“You know me.” said the voice, a breath at her ear that made Helena flinch. “These phases have been long, but not so long as that.”

Helena’s gaze swept across the room once more, her eyes bulging with slight panic when she still could not find the source of the voice.

It was right though, she did remember. Despite the lingering sensation of the Pain creating a phantom ache in her bones, the more Helena thought the more she recalled.

She and Alexander had been left drifting in that escape pod, hurtling towards the black abyss of space, blood still seeping from the wounds on her arms and stomach. The prince’s warm presence by her side had kept Helena focused for a time, doing her best to maintain consciousness. Eventually she had succumbed to the loss of blood and her waning aetheric strength could only do so much.

The next thing she remembered had been lights. Her eyes, barely open, had been blinded by the white luminescence. Alexander had cried out and Helena had attempted to shield him but long grasping hands had taken them both from the pod. Someone had exclaimed when Helena had resisted their touch, weak though she was.

Then there had been darkness.

It was interrupted only once before the Pain began. A numb stabbing at her chest that filled her limbs with the brief fire of life.

That was when she had seen him. Viktus Null. Looming over her like some kind of horrific spider. One hand still at her chest he had leaned close to her, his darkened face still obscured even when he was less than a quarter of a meter from her.

“You have a choice.” the oldest of the Thirteen had said. “You may die, here, all your potential spoiled. Or you may live. Live to serve, live to protect, live to become the equal of the man you love.”

Now Helena was sure their exchange was real but at the time she had not been sure if the slender Magus had just been some evil dream creeping out to cross her waking eyes.

With shaking, dying breath she had said the only thing that made sense.

“I want… to… live.”

Then there had been the Pain.

Helena relaxed slightly and stared down at the crystalline knife in her hand, really considering the weapon for the first time.

How many times had she seen Marcus with his Focus? It was rarely far from his side. The relatively small piece of aethite represented the leftovers of the aethium that had been fused into the Magus’ cells. Channeling his aetherics through the Focus increased his power tenfold.

Now Helena held something very much like it. Hers was different though, slightly more curved and the coloration was a bit darker. A tinge of violet perhaps? But her hand gripped it with the same assured physicality, as if it were an extension of her body rather than simply a weapon. Swordsman and knife-fighters might train for a lifetime and never wield their tools of combat like a Magus wielded their Focus.

Helena’s whole body began to tremble.

She swallowed and bit at her lower lip, staring at the Focus.

Her breathing was heavy as she took several hard steps backwards until her back was pressed against the cold polysteel door behind her.

“Ah,” said the voice of Viktus Null in syrupy pleasure. “Revelation. Nothing is quite so sweet.”

Sliding to the floor in a squatting crouch, Helena put a hand to her face as her eyes remained locked on the aethite shard that now wavered slightly in her shaking hand. With little effort she could feel the connection, the thin humming that now sang through her bones and muscles at the same frequency as the knife she held. With that hum there was power. Deep and terrible power. It was as if a sinkhole had opened up beneath Helena’s aetherics, a bottomless, gaping maw filled with that sparkling energy that permeated everything in the Dragon’s Wake.

There was no running from it, no hiding from it. It was her. Inside of her, *of* her. Within and without.

She could barely understand it, barely even begin to quantify it but for some reason she had no issue with controlling it.

The Focus hummed in her hand.

At first she was terrified, scared of this new presence within that was now more a part of her than her aetherics had ever been, but the fear passed swiftly.

Taking a steadying breath, the shaking in Helena’s hands ceased. With another deep intake of air she stood, a brief smile crossing her face.

This was what she had wanted wasn’t it? Even if she had never admitted it to Marcus or even herself this had been the end goal. Perhaps her reasoning had been more personal and immediate when she had walked into that recruitment office on Nam’edlah but now she could see that everything she had done led to this moment.

“I… I’m…” Helena started, her raw throat still struggling to produce words.

“Yes.” said the sibilant hiss of Viktus Null. “Say it.”

“I am a Magus.” said Helena in a single breath.

A low cracking, wheezing sound filled the room and it took Helena a moment to realize that it was laughter.

Looking back up and around Helena still could not see the source of the ancient creature’s voice. The room was empty but for the crèche she had found herself in and the aether conduits coming down from the ceiling. There wasn’t even a comm visible, which might explain the disembodied voice.

“You survived.” said Null. “That was the first step. Now your true training can begin.”

Helena nodded, holding her Focus carefully at her side. “How long?” she asked.

“The training?” asked Null’s voice.

Helena, testing where the elder Magus’ perception of her ended, only nodded in response.

Responding to this silent cue, Viktus Null continued. “Some have required mere phases, others have remained under my tutelage for cycles at a time. It depends entirely upon your conviction.”

Despite her nakedness Helena stood tall and confident, chin lifted slightly up, violet eyes gleaming with determination.

“And when I’m done,” spoke Helena Istara, “I’ll see him again? I’ll be able to see Marcus again?”

A long silence filled the room, making Helena cast her gaze about once more as she wondered whether or not her new teacher had heard her. It stretched on for what felt like a minute. Then two.

Soon Helena began to grow angry with the silence and she could feel that familiar storm of power rising up within her. Now though that rising tide of aether raged with an intensity that no mere warmage could contain. Lines of bright purple energy crackled through the air around her and Helena could feel the bolts of aether lancing from her body to the ground.

Without meaning to she was summoning up more power than she had ever held in her life and it scorched the air around her. It blacked long streaks on the floor and caused the dangling aether conduits to light up as her aether penetrated their rubberized casing.

A dark suspicion began to rise in Helena’s mind and she was starting to lose her grip on her aetheric control. Desperate, she focused her newly expanded awareness to the aetheric hum that had connected her to Marcus for so long, that wavelength of energy that had always told her when he was near. Where once her perception had been limited it now felt as though she could reach out through the entirety of the Dragon’s Wake, searching for that chord of connection to the man she loved. Panic began to well up within Helena as she searched and searched and searched. Finding nothing. There was nothing. No answering song to her own power.

Finally the voice of Viktus Null returned, as dry and cool as ever. “That won’t be possible. *You* are now one of the Thirteen. Marcus Crassus is dead.”

Releasing every pretense of self control Helena screamed, unleashing the hurricane of aether that had built up in her chest alongside the lump in her throat.

Aether, raw and unrestrained, ignited the air around her creating a purple conflagration that spread and danced with its own wild life. Stone broke. Polysteel melted. The Aether conduits were overloaded to the point of exploding.

The blood that had stained Helena’s skin vaporized, briefly creating a fine red mist that hung around the youngest of the Thirteen.

Her scream echoed through the room and out into the labyrinthine corridors beyond. Her power shook the foundations of the complex. Her Pain did not split the skin or break the bone but she fell to her knees nonetheless.

Somewhere behind the violence of Helena’s aetheric display and her ragged scream the voice of Viktus Null was an afterthought that echoed in her ears.

“This one will make a fine weapon indeed.”