

PRIME VALKYRIE



STAR JUSTICE
6

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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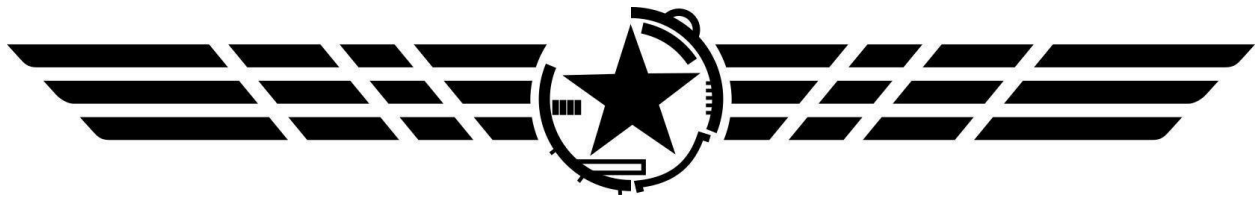
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STAR JUSTICE
6
PRIME
VALKYRIE

A Paranormal Space Opera Adventure

Michael-Scott Earle



Chapter 1

“Hurry, my lord,” Lux said urgently from the entryway to my bathroom.

“I just got in. I need to wash,” I replied as I held my hand under the soap dispenser in the shower.

“I will assist if you ne--”

“No. I can do it.” I hissed at her as I ran my soapy hands over my body. She’d watched me take off my suit but had said nothing besides telling me to hurry some dozen times.

“Make sure all your fear is washed away. King Vaish will not respect you if he smells it.”

“I’m working on it,” I growled as I lathered my armpits and chest.

“Work faster, my lord,” she said. “The next hour will decide your fate, the fate of the Prime Valkyrie, and the fate of your crew.”

“What do you mean? Why is it so--”

“You should be done by now, my lord.” I saw her reach for the door of my shower.

“Can you grab a fresh suit from my closet?” I asked as I lathered my crotch and upper legs.

“Yes,” she said as she turned away from my shower. She returned five seconds later, but I was working on my feet now.

“I’m almost--”

“Did you wash your hair?” she asked.

“No, I don’t--”

“Your fear will be there as well. Do it.”

“Why is this such a big deal? I didn’t need Madalena to do any of this. I would have saved you all without her submitting to me.” I put more soap on my hair and went to work lathering.

“You aren’t one of the Nordar. You do not understand,” she said simply.

“Then educate me,” I said as I scrubbed the shampoo out of my hair. It’s quite possible I’d never taken a quicker or more thorough shower in my entire life, and that was saying a lot considering I am a Marine.

“I will speak of it while we move to the armory. Are you done?”

“Yes--” I almost didn’t finish the word before she was opening the door to my shower. She carried one of my flight suits and pushed it out to me like a towel.

“Hey. Just give me some space. I need to turn on the dryers. It will take a few extra seconds.” I pushed the beautiful ebony-haired woman out of my shower and hit the button to recycle the water. It blew most of the water off me in a few moments, and I tried to ignore the warrior woman appraising my naked body.

“Hurry,” she said as she pushed the suit to me. I took it and then put it on in the shower while she watched.

“I’ll need to brush my--”

“Your breath smells fine. We must hurry.” Her hand closed around my arm, and she pulled me out of the bathroom. A bit of rage flared in my stomach, and I thought about resisting her, but I knew she was only trying to help me.

“Tell me more about--” I started to say, but she interrupted me by pushing my massive chrome revolver into my chest.

“Wear this. The Prime Valkyrie has already approved.”

“Fine, I’ll--”

“Put it on while we walk, my lord.” Lux was already pulling me out of my room, and I fumbled with the weapon harness while we walked.

“Tell me about Madalena’s father. King Tanal? Is that his name?” I asked as I pushed the elevator button for the bottom floor of Persephone. It felt a bit weird to leave a bunch of strangers on her bridge, but I didn’t have

much choice.

“You will address him as King Vaish. Or Prime Overlord Vaish, if you address him at all. Do not address him out of turn or he will kill you.” Lux had almost no emotion in her words, so I guessed she wasn’t joking.

“So, he’s going to be pissed that Madalena has submitted to me?” I was filling in the blanks a bit.

“Yes, my lord,” she answered as the doors to the elevator opened.

“Explain why.”

“We only submit to one, and we serve them in life and death. The Prime Valkyrie has submitted to no one. She is the strongest warrior of all the Vaish Overlord Clans, and her father has leveraged her prowess against the other clans. She is his spear, his hammer, and his shield. It is fortunate that she has given you the Vaish name.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Where is the armory?” she asked as we stepped from the elevator.

“This way,” I replied as we moved down the hallway. “Why does the name--”

“You are not Nordar. If you were, and from another Clan, she would serve you and that clan. Overlord Vaish would lose his most powerful warrior and favorite daughter. Since you aren’t Nordar, and she gave you the Vaish name, our king has two choices.”

“Which is?” I asked as we stepped into the armory.

“I will help you put on your armor. Where is it?” Lux demanded. “This is taking too long.”

“Over here,” I said as I fought against my frustration and pointed at the wall with my armored plates. “What are his two choices?”

“If he thinks you are weak, he will try to have you killed in the rites of passage. This is a loophole in our process. If you die during the rite, it will be as if the Prime Valkyrie did not submit to you. You will cease to exist in our people’s race.”

“Shit,” I sighed as I started to put my armor on.

“Yes,” Lux said with a nod. “He might feel you are too strong, and

won't submit to him, so he'll have you killed during the rites."

"Fuck," I growled. "That's the second option?"

"No. That is option one. He'll kill you in the rites. I feel confident that will be his plan." Lux was watching me put on my armor, and she began to attach the pieces of plate to my back.

"Okay, what is option two?"

"He must find a way for you to submit to him. Then he will control you, and his daughter through you."

"Can I just submit to him right away?" I asked, but the monster in my stomach didn't like the idea, and he filled my mind with a long threatening growl.

"Yes, but you mentioned you have friends who you wished to find. Is that true?" Lux asked as she finished attaching the last piece of armor to me.

"Yeah. They were taken by--"

"It doesn't matter. King Tanal Vaish cares not about your friends or your mission. He will use you and your ship to fight the other Nordar Blood Clans. Perhaps once we are all united, he will allow you to look for your friends, but I doubt that."

"Fuck me," I growled as I put my armored glove to my face. "So, I either die or forget about my friends? This isn't a--"

"Are these all of your weapons?" Lux asked as she pointed to the armory wall where our firearms hung.

"Yeah. I have a sniper rifle and a--"

"King Tanal Vaish respects face-to-face combat. He understands the importance of ranged warfare, but you should carry one of these." The obsidian-haired warrior woman pointed at my pair of shotguns.

"Will it even matter if he respects me?" I growled as I grabbed my trusty shotgun from the rack. It wasn't as versatile as the double magazine one Juliette had given me, but it was bulkier and could fit fifty shot drums of ammo.

"The Prime Valkyrie told you to take the largest weapon. I am following her commands, my lord." Lux fixed her cold eyes on my face, and

I tried to calm my anger.

“Alright, so how do I get through this alive and also save my friends?” I asked as I strapped on my ammo belt. My large pistols were holstered on the belt along with my long knife.

“You don’t, my lord.” She had guessed that I needed the drums for my shotgun, and she passed three full ones to me after I finished checking my belt for the rest of my ammo.

“There has to be a way,” I said as I loaded my shotgun.

“Perhaps the Prime Valkyrie will know. I am not concerned.” Lux gestured to the door, and we walked out.

“Why are you not concerned?” I asked, even though I guessed the answer.

“You saved us, but you are not one of us. You are weak. The Prime Valkyrie is five thousand times the warrior you are. I have submitted to her. If you die in the rites, we can continue with our mission. It is more important than the lives of your friends.”

Lux’s words made the beast roar, and I had to fight to keep him from taking over. I actually tripped a bit as I walked down the hallway toward the hold, and her hand shot out to grab onto me.

“You seem to be helping me now,” I growled as I yanked my arm away from her grip. She was really fucking strong.

“I have submitted to the Prime Valkyrie, my lord. If she told me to slit my own throat, I would do so without question. If she told me to kneel before you and pleasure you with my mouth for the next month, I would do so. If she told me to bear your children, I would--”

“I understand,” I growled as the dark-haired woman looked at me. For half a second, her emotions came through her eyes, and it was obvious she didn’t care for me.

“You understand nothing,” she said. “Goran gave his soul to protect her. He will not reach Valhalla now. Every single one of us would have done the same. We thank you for saving our lives, but she should not have submitted to you.”

“I agree. I didn’t ask for it. I didn’t want it. She didn’t need to.”

“She did. It is our way,” Lux said.

“Fuck, you assholes are so weird. I don’t give a shit about your honor, or any of this shit. I was trying to help you all out so I could continue looking for my friends. Now I’m involved in--”

“Do not speak so openly in front of King Vaish,” she cut me off. “He will destroy you before the rite of passage.”

“I can’t figure out if you are helping me or--”

“The Prime Valkyrie told me to help you, my lord,” she said, “but now you can ask her your questions.”

We had reached Persephone’s hold, and Lux pointed to the far end where the loading door was. Madalena stood there surrounded by eight other armored figures. Each of them was wearing skull covered power armor with gold etching on the bone structure. They also carried plasma rifles and wore longswords strapped to their armored hips.

“I have brought Adam, Prime Valkyrie,” Lux said after she escorted me over to the group. The figures in the power armor were all wearing helmets, and they stared at me with glowing blue eyes.

“Return to the armory and complete the task I assigned you,” Madalena said to Lux. The black-haired woman saluted the Prime Valkyrie, and then she nodded at me before leaving.

I watched Lux walk away for half a moment and fought against my anger. I didn’t want to like the woman, but I wasn’t anywhere close to understanding the culture I’d been thrown into. At least they had all been honest with me.

“That armor and your choice of weapons please me,” Madalena said, and I turned away from Lux so I could face the other woman.

“She gave me an overview,” I said. “Apparently, I’m going to die, or I need to submit to your father and forget about my friends.”

“Let us walk, my lord,” Madalena didn’t answer me, but she gestured to the bulky armored figures surrounding us. My anger caused the monster in my soul to roar, but our escorts turned to move, and we exited Persephone’s hold while I tried to keep him under control.

I couldn’t help but fear that I wouldn’t be returning.

“What is the plan?” I asked Madalena as we walked down the ramp and onto the floor of the massive battle fortress. I didn’t know if I could even trust the woman, but I didn’t have any other anchor here, and Lux had made my future apparent.

“We will speak of it later, my lord,” the warrior said as she turned her steel colored eyes to me. I didn’t know Madalena well enough to pick up the subtext of her words, but I understood that she might have not wanted to speak around our escorts. It made sense since she had called them her father’s enclave.

I busied myself by looking around the interior of the fortress. It was a massive hangar, and I quickly lost count of the ships moving through the air above us. They drifted toward parking spots or connected to docking stations on the inside of the hold with a robotic precision that my mind couldn’t really wrap itself around. The ships were all painted either red with black trim, or black with red trim, and the hundreds of vessels parked beside our walkway looked to be in perfect shape.

A legion of repair crews sprinted between the ships, led repair robots, or manned scaffolding structures around half-painted vessels. Everywhere I looked there was either a drifting star ship, running maintenance crew, a vessel lifting off, or a group of heavily armored marines preparing for battle. I thought the Jupiter Marines was a well-oiled combat machine, but we still had our lazy techs, disgruntled repair crews, and over-enthusiastic warriors. Madalena’s people moved around with an intensity I found strangely comforting.

These people were ready for anything.

We walked for at least five minutes and then reached a center hub tower that I guessed was the control nexus of the docking harbor. It was a spiraling shell shaped structure which almost touched the ceiling of the hold. It must have been a good two hundred meters high, and dozens of smaller craft touched down on landing pads that jutted from its sides or docked with tubes coming out of the building.

I thought we would have accessed an elevator at the base level and journeyed deeper into the ship, or taken a lift up to the top floor, but we instead climbed onto the back of a hovercraft parked beneath the spire. One of the armored escorts took the driving seat, and the rest of us strapped

ourselves into the passenger chairs.

As soon as we were secured, the driver said something in the unknown language, and the hovercraft sped away from the control nexus. It was hard to tell exactly how fast the vehicle was going, but it was much faster than what I could run.

It took us another ten minutes to reach the end of the fortress' interior harbor.

I thought about making a comment about the size, but Madalena sat across from me, and her intense stare convinced me that I shouldn't speak.

The hovercraft soon came to a stop near a massive set of double doors. There was a group of armored soldiers waiting there, and this group also wore the same highly decorated armor and longswords of our escorts. The new group took position around Madalena and me, and our group now numbered twenty-six.

We walked for another five minutes before reaching an access door for a maglev train. The tube was much larger than the one at Queen's Hat, and a punch of grief hit me in my stomach when we stepped into the tube. I missed Zea, Eve, Kasta, and Paula terribly.

"How much far--" I started to say, but Madalena's eyes narrowed at me dangerously. I didn't like being at her mercy, but I had enough sense to know I was way out of my element here, so I kept my mouth shut.

I found it odd that no one spoke to Madalena, or that she didn't address our escorts. It almost seemed as if there was a tension in the air, causing me to wonder if Lux's explanation of King Vaish had been less dire than reality. I didn't want to read too much into the situation, but it felt like I was being marched to a funeral.

Then again, these people never seemed to smile or laugh. Their lives appeared to be a march to a funeral.

We exited the tube, at which point our entourage split to take two hovercraft. We looked to be near the main living area of the battle fortress, and the road we took threaded us through massive metal buildings, surprisingly lush parks, and even a river. It seemed like a utopian city inside the fortress, but the sight put me even more on edge. The amount of power Madalena's father must have possessed was starting to make my head spin. I

didn't have any numbers to back up my estimate, but I imagined this single fortress had enough manpower, ships, and weapons to take on the entire Jupiter Navy. The thought wasn't very comforting, and I tried to twist my mind around the logistical ways that such an advanced society could have come into existence.

The hovercraft parked in front of a building that looked like a castle, and I couldn't help but let out a gasp of disbelief. Each facet of the structure glowed from the descending lights of the fortress interior. It looked like a cross between an ice palace, a glass citadel, and a rainbow figment of my imagination. Dozens of green ash trees stood sentinel watch over the walkways between the parking lot and the magnificent castle, and I noticed hundreds of men and women in dress uniform strolling through the palace grounds.

Our entourage exited the vehicles and then escorted Madalena and me through the front garden. As soon as we entered the grand hallways of the castle, I realized the building was made out of a highly polished gray metal. I doubted it was rhodium, but it could have been platinum or titanium or one of the many armored metal blends; with a hint of the more valuable stuff to give it polish. I almost asked Madalena, but she still had her cold eyes fixed on me, and I decided to hold my tongue for a bit longer.

The inside of the castle was surprising. It looked to be made of a dark gray brick. Long navy-blue rugs covered the floors, and wood archways met with automatic metal doors to form a strange hodgepodge of rustic styling. There were old suits of armor on display at every corner, Viking style shields hanging on the brick walls every meter, and groups of beautiful women balancing trays of food on their shoulders as they walked down the corridors.

One of our escorts spoke words in the unknown language, and we were gestured in through a doorway. This was obviously a waiting room with a burning fire crackling in a hearth on the far side of the chamber, long green couches, and tables. The tables were laid with cheese, fruit, salted meats, and decanters of wine chilled in buckets of ice. Wood, brick, and tapestries of glorious fight scenes decorated the walls, but my eyes focused on a massive looking monster standing still at the opposite end of the room. It looked as if it could have been a bear, but it reached some four meters high, had six arms, and a maw that looked like it belonged on a shark. Sharp spikes jutted out of the white fur at the creature's elbows, knees, and shins, and I wondered how

it met its fate.

“It is an Uiun-bair,” Madalena said, and I turned to see that we were both alone in the waiting room.

“Looks fucking scary,” I said as I turned back to the stuffed monster.

“It is more fearsome than it looks. I killed that one on my fourteenth birthday. He sliced open my stomach with the claws of his left paw before I drove my spear through his mouth.”

“Fuck, you killed that thing? With a spear? When you were fourteen?” My tone of voice must have been a bit disrespectful because the beautiful woman’s eyes narrowed.

“Yes,” she said sharply. “I will show you the scar when we are in bed later tonight.”

“No, that’s fine,” I replied quickly as I held up my palms to her. “If you say you killed that monster, with a spear, when you were fourteen, I will believe you. You are the Prime Valkyrie after all.” I smiled a little after I finished speaking, but the woman only nodded.

“Would you like a refreshment?” she asked as she gestured to the table. “We had spoken about eating together. I will serve you.”

“No, I’m fine,” I said, but then my eyes settled on the food, and my stomach let out a roar that was almost as loud as one which would have escaped from my shifted tiger-man mouth. “Yeah. I guess I could eat, and you’ll answer my questions. You don’t need to serve me, or whatever.”

I moved to the couch in front of the fire and sat down beside one of the food covered tables. Before I could reach for some cuts of what looked like salted salami, Madalena’s fingers caught my wrist, and she gently moved my hand away from the plate.

“I will serve you.” Her eyes narrowed, and the light from the fire seemed to give them unexpected life.

I hadn’t even seen her hand move to grab me.

“Fine,” I sighed. Then she released my wrist, and I sat back on the couch. “Lux said your father intends to kill me. Or he’ll want me to submit to him so he can still control you. If I submit to him, I’ll be expected to follow his wishes and not look for my friends.”

Madalena didn't reply. Instead, she busied herself carefully picking slices of meat, cutting fresh chunks of cheese, and pouring me a glass of dark red wine. As soon as she filled a plate, she sat next to me on the couch and handed me the glass.

"He will try one of those, yes," she finally said as she put a piece of cheese and meat together before raising it to my mouth.

"Uhh. What are you doing?" I asked as I pulled my face away from her hands. The side of her left leg was touching my right, and my left side touched the armrest of the couch. There wasn't much room for me to shift away from her without making it obvious.

"I am serving you, my lord."

"Look, you don't have--"

"It is part of the process of submission. I must feed you during our first meal together, and whenever you ask me."

"What about you?" I asked, but then I felt my anger flash through my chest. What the fuck did I care? Here I was, about to be murdered by this woman's father because I tried to help her, and I was concerned about when she would eat next. Zea was right, I really cared about women too much.

"I will eat after you," Madalena said.

"You take a bite after me, and you will answer my damn questions. Got it?" I opened my mouth to accept her fingers, and she set the meat and cheese on my tongue.

"Yes," she said after I started eating, and then she took a bite for herself. In any other situation, this would have been incredibly romantic, but I had too much shit to worry about.

"Did you enjoy that morsel?" she asked after she finished chewing her food.

"Yeah," I admitted. The meat and cheese were really damn good. "So, with your--"

"Drink some wine," she promoted, and the look on her face convinced me that I should just stop arguing with her if I wanted our conversation to progress.

"It's good," I said after I took a sip of the red wine.

“Of course, it is,” she replied as she took the glass from my hand. Then she drank from it and passed it back to me before she reached for another piece of sliced meat.

“But I’m sitting next to this fire with you, eating your food and drinking your wine while my friends are on a Magate Order starship. I need to finish this shit with your father, get back to Queen’s Hat, and then go find them.”

“I will help you,” she said with a nod. “I understand your urgency.”

“It doesn’t seem as if you do,” I replied as I took another sip of the wine. “Lux explained that--”

“Lux was correct,” Madalena cut me off, and then placed another morsel of food in my mouth. “My plan was thwarted by Goran. He’s paid the price for disobeying me, and I am considering our next course of action.”

“What was your original plan?” I asked.

“I have submitted to you. I planned to do what you required of me. First by going to Queen’s Hat and then finding your friends.” She took another bite of food and then took the wine from my hand.

“But now we have to deal with your father,” I said.

“I would need to deal with him, eventually. The situation however, is more difficult for you now,” she said after she took a long swallow of the wine. “He might have found mercy if I had given you a child by the time we returned. He would have still demanded you submit to him, but he has the power to waive the rites of passage and just adopt you into our clan.”

“Didn’t you already adopt me? Or do something like that by giving me your name?” I tried to not mentally trip over Madalena saying ‘given you a child.’

“Yes,” she said as she passed me back the wine, “but my father will deem it wasn’t appropriate since he did not approve. He is the only one in our Clan who has authority over me. The situation isn’t as simple as I am making it sound. There are nuances of our culture I don’t have time to explain to you.”

“It sounds plenty fucking complicated,” I said with a sigh.

“The Prime Valkyrie is the strongest warrior in all the Nordar clans. If

my father wasn't the King of Vaish, I could take his throne and rule our people. I would be able to leverage my power and unite the clans easily."

"Isn't that what you said you wanted to do?" I asked as I recalled the conversation we had while I was trying to rescue them.

"Yes. It is my father's goal as well." She nodded, but her face still lacked any emotion.

"So, I don't understand what the issue is--"

"He would have to either die in combat to me or step down," she explained.

"Ahhh," I sighed. "Now I'm getting it."

I had never met a king, but I knew plenty of history. Kings liked stepping down from their throne just about as much as they liked getting killed by their children.

"Yes." Madalena gave me another bite of food, and I wondered how much more I'd have to eat before she was satisfied that she had served me.

"And now I'm here," I said after I finished chewing. "It makes a complicated situation even more complicated."

"Yes," she said. "Drink more wine, my lord."

"Ha," I laughed dryly. "So, this is my last meal then?"

"No." She shook her head. "I can always challenge him to combat. He might fear that."

"Wait," I said as my stomach dropped. "You'd kill your father for me?"

Madalena stared into my eyes for a few moments, and a slow smile spread across her lips. It looked sincere, and the beautiful woman suddenly turned into a goddess. I was conscious of how close she was sitting to me, but I didn't have any room to wiggle away.

"I do not wish to kill my father," she said, and it almost sounded as if she sighed.

"So that mean's I'll die," I said. "I understand why Goran took us here instead of Queen's Hat. Fucking asshole."

"No. I do not wish for you to die, either," the warrior woman said

plainly.

“Seems like you will have to choose one or the other,” I replied as I tried to fight down my anger. Part of me was angry for helping them, but I also knew I would probably do it all over again if I had to. I wanted to help people who needed it. It was part of Eve’s mission, so it was now part of mine.

But didn’t Eve, Zea, Kasta, and Paula need my help?

“Our purpose is to die in battle. Only then, can we join Odin in Valhalla. The war between our clans is just the beginning of our battle. There are dark things in the universe, Adam, and they will be coming to feast on us.”

“I know about dark things,” I whispered.

“Oh?” She raised her eyebrow.

“Yeah, fuckers that live off the agony of others. They are superpowered vampire assholes.”

The smile faded from her lips, and her eyes opened.

“You have seen the Draugr?” I heard the amazement in her voice, which was a bit surprising since I normally couldn’t hear any emotion when she spoke.

“If you are talking about the pale skinned vampire fuckers sleeping in the stone tubes in their dark temples, yeah. We killed one on a planet named Uraniel, and we know there are more coming there in a few hundred days. There are millions of people on that planet, and we think they are all going to be killed when the dead fucker’s friends come.”

Madalena’s eyes grew larger after I spoke, and the cold steel color of her orbs seemed to catch fire. It almost looked as if she was angry, but her emotions were impossible to read.

“Odin...” her mouth moved, but I almost couldn’t understand the word, even with my advanced hearing. “It is as I thought.”

“What you thought?” I asked.

“Yes,” Madalena said as she stood from the couch. She walked over to the table and set my plate of food down, then she grabbed a full bottle of wine, ripped the cork out with her teeth, and then turned to face the fire. “My

crew swore to serve me, and I am responsible for them. Our lives are worth nothing if we do not reach Valhalla. Your voice sounded tired and hopeless. I imagined I was submitting to a tired old man on a junker ship. When I saw the Shadow Eagle, I wondered if Odin brought you to me.”

“What brought us together was actually a shit-talking police officer on Queen’s Hat,” I said. “Not a god.”

“No,” she said before she took a long swallow of wine from the bottle. “I have served him faithfully. You have a Shadow Eagle, you have killed one of the Draugr, you are a warrior, you are handsome, and you came to me exactly when I needed you.” She turned to face me, and the firelight caught her chestnut colored hair in a way that made it look like silk. “Odin’s work is clear. I was meant to submit to you. We were meant to be together. Now I need to consider what this augurs for my father, and my clan.”

“I didn’t want any of this, Madalena. I fucked up, and my friends were kidnapped. I need to find them. Then I need to gather together a crew, and maybe some other ships, so we can defend Uraniel. I didn’t need you to submit to me. I came looking for you because I had questions about your ship and what you were doing on Queen’s Hat. I didn’t come on a mission from your god.”

We stared at each other for a few moments, and then she slowly walked toward me.

“Did your questions have to do with fighting the Draugr?” she whispered.

“More about your ship. I don’t know much about Persephone, and I want to learn more. We also pulled a file from Queen’s Hat that we think you retrieved. It was a video of the planet Parnarta. There was another ship on that world, and the kid in the video was killed by--”

“It is the video I wanted. I was searching for another Shadow Eagle.” Madalena lowered herself onto her knees in front of me and set her hands on my armored legs.

The warrior woman’s touch reminded me that we were waiting to meet her father, and I turned my mind away from the video of Parnarta so I could focus on the obvious threat. I needed to get through this meeting alive.

“Let’s talk more about it later. How soon until we meet your father?” I

asked.

“It could be any moment,” she said. “I have thought of a plan which I believe will be your safest avenue. It will require that you follow my instructions, my lord.” The woman laid her head down on my left knee and then ran her fingers over the armor of my right leg. Her eyes closed for half a moment, and she let out a sigh.

My heart had been hammering into my chest ever since she turned away from the fire to look at me, and I closed my eyes to steady my nerves. She was obviously expecting way more from our relationship than I was going to be able to give her. I needed to tell her about Eve and Zea, but then I thought about the potential repercussions. My life was in the warrior woman’s hands now. Did I really want to tell her I was in love with two other women and that I had no intention of performing any sort of romantic duties she might want?

But if I didn’t tell her, it would be like I was lying to her, myself, Zea, and Eve. It didn’t feel right to me.

“Listen, Madalena, you don’t need to call me ‘my lord.’ I know you have submitted to me, and that you said we were joined, or bonded, or married, or whatever the fuck you said, but I am in love with two other women. I’ve said that I didn’t need you to submit to me. I don’t need you to be my wife. I could just use your help to find my friends.” It felt better to get the words out, but her cold eyes opened to stare at me.

“You can have as many women as you want,” she answered. “I am submitted to you.”

“I’m not--”

“But you will not want another after you and I lie together,” she interrupted me. “I am the Prime Valkyrie, and we are bonded through my submission. I will give you pleasure that you have never experienced before, and I will bear you strong children who will serve you in our war against the Draugr.”

“Uhh, fuck me,” I said as I rubbed my tired eyes with my armored glove. “What do I need to do to live through the meeting with your father?”

“I will try to get him to adopt you with you performing the rites of passage, if I cannot convince him, then I will argue for you to be tested after

we return from searching for your friends.”

“What are the rites? Do I have to fight him in combat or--” I stopped talking when the door on the far side of the waiting room opened.

Four tall women stepped into the room. They each wore decorative body armor that was a slimmer fit than the suits our other escorts wore. They did not have helmets, and they wore their long blonde hair in high ponytails. There were swords on their left hips, small shields on their backs, and what looked like plasma pistols holstered on the outside of their right thigh armor. The addition of the advanced plasma weapons made the swords and shields look a bit ridiculous, but all the guards I had seen so far carried ancient style melee weapons, so it could have been something to do with tradition.

Madalena said something as she lifted her head from my lap, and one of the other women answered her with a nod. I didn’t need to speak the language to know what they meant.

It was time to meet the king.

“What is the plan?” I whispered as I rose from the couch and grabbed my shotgun.

“I will speak to him. Once he knows that Odin has sent you, he will not wish to kill you.” Madalena’s words were soft, but I could feel the strength in her hand when she gripped my bicep.

“That sounds like wishful thinking,” I growled as we stepped toward the four guardswomen. The women looked as if they were genetically engineered to be perfect specimens, but their cold eyes followed my movements in a way that lead me to believe they were bred for combat.

“You will need to trust me, my lor-- Adam,” Madalena said. “Agree with what I say. I want you to live through this. It is Odin’s will.”

I almost made a snarky comment about how Odin could fuck off, but the words were something Zea would have said. Her memory and the realization that these people probably wouldn’t take kindly to me talking shit about their god made me swallow the words.

The four blonde guards spun on their heels and escorted Madalena and me out of the waiting room. We walked down more brick hallways before we reached a large set of wooden doors. They stood some four meters high, and a pair of heavily armored and helmeted warriors guarded them. The two

helmeted sentries let their plasma rifles drop on their slings as they each grabbed onto a door handle. When they pulled the doors open, I could see a half meter wide hunk of metal sandwiched between a thick wood veneer. I presumed that the metal was probably the same stuff they put in the hulls of starships, and it would probably be able to hold up under fire from hand held plasma weapons.

The four blonde women stepped inside the doors, and I had to catch my breath when I followed them. I expected a throne room of sorts or some kind of space fortress command bridge, but what I saw instead were trees.

A grove of birch and ash trees that grew out of a metal floor.

The roots of the trees dug into the ground as if it was actually made out of dirt, and their leaves blew as if there was a gentle breeze, even though I could not feel one. The trees looked and smelled real, but I saw no leaf on the ground, or speck of bark, or any proof that they were alive besides their scent.

The blonde women were escorting us down a narrow path through the grove, and I turned my head to give Madalena a questioning look. Her eyes met mine, but she just shook her head and then nodded to the back of the women leading us. I took it to mean she didn't want me to talk, so I held onto my question.

Then the grove cleared, and we stood before a wide metal dais. On top of the dais stood a tree made of rhodium colored bark. It was stripped of leaves, and its branches stretched out to the ceiling of the massive room as if it was saying a thousand prayers.

In front of the tree crouched a giant black metal throne decorated with sculptures and etchings of ravens. A man in an extensive suit of armor sat upon the throne, and his sharp features looked like a masculine version of Madalena. His hair was long, thick, and gray. His face was cleanly shaven, but dozens of scars decorated his cheeks, neck, and forehead. The man's armor was crafted like the same suit that Madalena's crew wore. It was etched with silvery designs of ravens, feathers, and skulls. He grasped a long spear in his left hand, and his right hand rested on the head of a massive wolf. The creature had to weigh a good hundred and fifty kilograms, and the beast fixed his yellow eyes on me with the same intensity the broad-shouldered man in the throne did.

Four other figures occupied the dais. They were women wearing armor

similar to the four who escorted Madalena and me, but these women had different hair color. One was a redhead with short hair, another had braided black hair, a third had a darker blonde mane that fell down almost to her feet, and the last one had brown hair styled similar to Madalena. This woman actually looked a bit like the woman who submitted to me, but I couldn't tell if she was Madalena's mother or sister. These people didn't seem to have any hint of age on their faces.

"My king," the Prime Valkyrie said as she nodded to her father.

I didn't know if I should nod, or bow, or kneel to the man. Madalena didn't give me any clue, so I just followed her example, and nodded to him.

King Tanal Vaish's cold eyes turned from me and regarded his daughter. They narrowed a bit as he said a few words in the language I didn't understand. His voice was deep, but it was hard to get a good feel for how big the man was given his thick armor and sitting position on the throne above me.

"Speak English, so Adam will understand," Madalena said, and her father's face seemed to harden even more.

"He is not one of us," the king said, and the wolf at his side actually growled at me a bit.

"I have submitted to him, and given him our name, as is my right as Prime Valkyrie," Madalena said. Her words were a perfect blend of strength and calm.

"I am still king, Daughter. Unless you wish to kill me and take my throne over this weakling."

"No. I do not wish to kill you and take your throne, Father. Adam saved my life and the lives of my crew. My fleet was attacked at--"

"I know about your recent failure, Daughter," the man spat. "You will want a new one, I suspect, but I find it hard to give you such a bounty when you submit to a man I know nothing about."

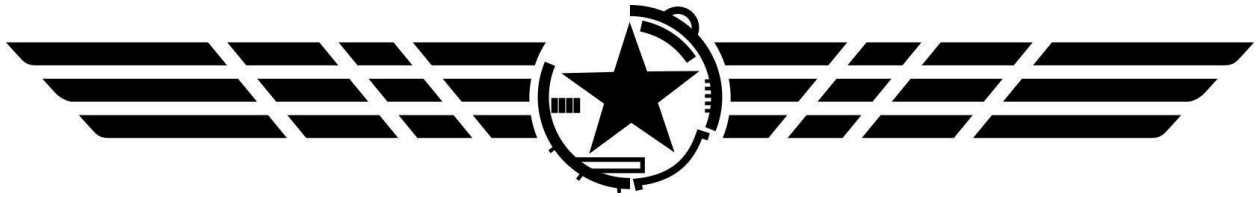
"He has killed one of the Draugr, and he was chosen by a Shadow Eagle." Madalena gestured to me with her left hand. "He was sent to me by Odin."

"You speak with Odin now, Daughter?" King Vaish sneered.

“I am Prime Valkyrie. If the All Father speaks to anyone, it will be me. I am pleased with my submission to Adam. Our unity will make our people stronger.”

“No,” the king said. “It will not. Maidens, kill this man.” He gestured to the blonde women who stood around Madalena and me, and they all pulled out their swords with a freakishly fast movement.

But I already had my finger on my shotgun trigger.



Chapter 2

The blonde warrior women came at me from all four of my corners. Madalena was standing to my right, and I half expected her to attack me as well, so I threw myself to the left as I pointed my shotgun at the women at my ten o'clock.

My weapon sang, and the woman's pretty face exploded with the force of my big ass slug. I twisted in the air so I could aim at the woman coming toward me from my seven o'clock. I was half a moment too late though, and her sword connected with my chest armor. I half expected the blade to pierce my flesh and rip my heart into pieces, but her blade skipped across my plates. The woman looked surprised for half a moment, but then my shotgun barked a second time. The slug hit her in the chest, and she flew through the air as if she was a rubber ball someone just drop kicked. Her flight trajectory made me think that my shot hadn't penetrated her armor, but a shotgun slug to the chest armor would still feel like getting punched by a maglev train, and I guessed she wouldn't be using her sword for at least another half minute.

I rolled on the metal ground and sprung to my feet as I twisted toward the other two women. I expected them to be within striking distance, but Madalena was standing above their prone bodies. She carried each of the women's swords in her hands, but I didn't see any blood on the ground. Had the Prime Valkyrie disarmed and knocked them unconscious in the time it took me to fire my shotgun twice?

"Enough!" Madalena shouted to her father. "I have submitted to Adam and do not wish to fight with my spear sisters. Call them off!"

King Vaish raised his hand from the wolf's head to point at me, and I felt the air part behind me. I tried to jump to the side, but the point of a sword erupted from one of the seams in my chestplate. It was the woman I'd just fucking shot. In the last few seconds, she'd somehow recovered from my slug

and stabbed me in the back. She must have found a small seam in the back armor to drive her point through.

The blade had pierced my heart and lung. My mouth filled with blood as agony ripped through my chest.

“Nooooo!” Madalena shouted as she stepped behind me. I saw her blades flash like a lightning strike, and the woman’s blonde head made a wet sound as it fell onto the metal ground beside me.

Then there was silence in the room. Except for the sound of my heart struggling to beat with a blade through it.

“It is for the best, Daughter.” King Vaish’s voice sounded far away from me. As if he was yelling at me from across the entire fortress. “He is not one of us. He is weak and not suited for you or our clan. Not even worth the trouble of a rite of passage.”

“Give him medical attention,” I heard Madalena say, and I felt her hand grab my arm. I was kneeling for some reason, and blood was pouring out of my mouth.

The beast screamed. He wanted to take control, he wanted to kill this man.

He wanted to kill everything.

“No, Daughter. He will die in moments. Let him go. Then I will give you another fleet and you can search for *Dance to the Dirge*. We will forget about your mistake and focus on our task at hand.”

The monster coiled in my stomach and tore against my willpower with his claws.

“He has killed a Draugr,” Madalena said. “He is an honorable man, who saved my life, and the lives of my crew. Odin will not be pleased with you.”

“I speak with Odin, you do not, Daughter. Stand away from the dying man so that Freki may feed.”

“No. You will not set your dog upon him,” Madalena growled.

“You would defy me?” The king’s voice matched her growl.

“I would have thought you would grant me--”

“I grant you nothing. You serve me until--”

“Fuck. You!” I interrupted King Vaish’s sentence. The pain in my chest now filled my body, and the beast in my stomach screamed to be unleashed.

I didn’t need him.

The women I loved were captured by slavers. My ship was in the hands of a bunch of assholes. I was stuck in this far solar system, and no closer to helping my friends than I was a few days ago. I had saved Madalena and her crew, only to be rewarded by a sword through the back. These people talked of honor and submitting, but their king was just a piece of shit only interested in controlling his daughter.

My own rage was enough. My vision narrowed so that it felt like I was staring down a long tunnel at King Vaish. I stood, and the agony in my chest swelled along with my insanity.

“Eh?” The man’s steel eyes opened a bit with surprise as I stood.

“Fuck. You.” I held out my shotgun in both hands and slammed it into my chest. The side of the weapon hammered on the tip of the sword protruding from my armor with enough force to spring it out of my back. I felt my chest, lungs, and throat filled with blood, and I spat a mouthful of crimson out on the metal floor.

Then I turned the barrel of my weapon toward the arrogant king and pulled the trigger.

My arms were shaking from the agony, and my vision was a bit fuzzy, but my first slug still caught him in the face. I expected his head to explode into a red mist, but his skull had turned to metal a fraction of an instant before my shot hit him. His head snapped back from the impact of the massive solid slug, but there was no blood.

I kept pulling the trigger.

Slugs slammed into his face, chest, arms, and stomach. They dented the black throne he sat on and tore away the raven decorations. The shots seemed to do no damage to the king’s armor, though, but the impact of my shots was keeping him pinned down on his throne.

My next drum was filled with armor piercing ammo.

The wolf at the man's side charged at me just as my drum ran out of ammo, but I clocked it on the side of the skull with my shotgun when it leapt for my throat. It spun away with a yelp of pain, and then I ejected the empty drum while I reached for the one holding armor piercing shells. They were the last ones I had for my shotgun, but I figured there would be no better time to use it than the present.

I may have been on death's door, and my tiger might have been screaming to take over, but I'd reloaded my shotgun tens of thousands of times. The weapon was ready to fire the armor piercing rounds before the four women standing beside the king's throne had begun to draw their own pistols.

"Wait!" Madalena shouted as she stood in front of me. Her arms were stretched out to her side, and the tip of my weapon pressed against her back.

"Get out of the way!" I growled as the tiger threatened to take over again.

I let my weapon lower as I reached for Madalena's shoulder, but then I heard laughter and paused when my hand touched her.

King Tanal Vaish was the one laughing.

"Ha!" He gasped as he brought his hand down on the armrest of his ruined throne. "Hold, women." The four guards at his side held their weapons out in a tense battle stance, but they didn't shoot at Madalena.

No one spoke while the king continued to laugh, and I felt a cold chill began to descend my body. It came from my chest, filled my stomach, and coiled around my legs. I might have shivered, but the anger in my mind and soul was still too hot.

The beast wanted to take control and kill this man. He wanted to bite his face off and fuck his women, but the human part of my soul wanted to kill this fucker more than the beast.

It wanted payback at a level that the monster in my soul couldn't understand.

I pushed against Madalena's shoulder, but the woman didn't move, so I pivoted around her. Then I raised my shotgun with the intent of filling the laughing asshole with hot armor piercing shells.

“I have changed my mind,” the armored figure on the throne said as I aimed my shotgun at his face again. I didn’t give two shits about his words though, I was already squeezing the trigger, and I prayed the expensive shotgun slugs would cut through his fancy armor like butter.

Madalena pushed her arm against my weapon, and my trio of shots sprayed over the top of the king’s head. The four women on the dais ducked slightly to avoid the slugs, but their aim didn’t waiver from me. The Prime Valkyrie made a quick movement with her hands, flicked her fingers across my armored wrist, and then spun the heavy shotgun out of my grip. Her movement was unbelievably fast, and I wasn’t able to get a fourth trigger pull completed.

“Take him to the healers,” the king said in between laughs. “I like him.”

“You will reconsid--”

“He will need to perform the rites of passage,” Madalena’s father interrupted her. “Tonight, so take him to the healers. It’s been a long time since someone got this close to killing me. If he lives through the rite, I will let you have him as your plaything.”

“Which rite of passage?” Madalena asked as she grabbed my right arm. I was in mid-reach for the revolver strapped to my chest, and their voices sounded as if they were under two meters of water.

“Odin,” he replied, and the four women on the dais turned to face him. They actually looked surprised, and my tunnel vision danced between each of them.

“No,” Madalena seethed.

“Daughter, you can argue with me, or you can take your man to the healer. I am fine with him dying on the floor of my throne room.”

“He’ll die when you hang him from Yggdra--”

“You are questioning my benevolence. He survived Astrid’s sword through his heart. Perhaps he will survive Odin’s rite. Now begone from my sight, Daughter.”

The beast roared again, and I felt my body chill. Then my vision focused, and my heart beat angrily against my ribs as warmth filled my chest.

I coughed up what felt like a liter of blood on the metal ground, but then my blood ran hot through my body.

It seemed like I had shifted, but I hadn't.

I knew my heart had healed, but I didn't know how it could have happened that quickly without shifting. My left lung still felt like it wasn't repaired and I coughed out another bucket of blood when Madalena pulled me away.

"You have angered me, Father," I heard her say, but her father only laughed as we walked through the trees. He was still laughing when we reached the doors.

"How are you still alive?" she asked me after she barked orders to the guards in the corridor outside the throne room.

I opened my mouth to reply, but I just coughed up blood again. The chill had retreated from my body, and the anger was starting to fade from my mind. How in the hell was I still alive? I should have died within a few seconds of the sword piercing my heart.

Someone spoke behind me, and three pairs of hands grabbed my body. I growled and tried to break free of their grip, but they pulled me back on a stretcher, and Madalena started to pry the pieces of my armor.

"Hold still, my lord," she growled at me when I tried to push someone's hands away.

"What is--" I tried to ask, but my words only produced another cough of blood. Then I sucked in air and gasped as oxygen raced through my once collapsed lung.

Madalena finished pulling off my chest armor pieces, and then she said something I couldn't understand to a woman who stepped around my stretcher. The new woman had short auburn hair, and she wore white robes with red trim. The ceiling started to shift, and I realized that I was being carried through the hallways of the glass and brick castle.

"His heart and lung were cut by a sword blade," Madalena said.

"How long ago?"

"A minute or two," Madalena replied.

"Are you certain?" the other woman asked with some confusion. "He is

conscious and breathing. His eyes look alert.”

“Yes. I saw it. His suit is covered with blood, and--”

“He is not bleeding.” The auburn-haired woman barked out an order, and the stretcher stopped suddenly.

“I’m fine,” I said as I tried to sit up.

“Do not move, my lord,” Madalena said as her hands pushed down on my shoulder. She was really strong, and I found it easier to lie back than to fight her.

“Don’t cut open my suit,” I said to the white robed woman as she bent over me with a knife.

“Hold still,” Madalena said as her grip tightened on my shoulder. “Alva must inspect the cut.”

“I don’t have a lot of-- ah fuck,” I sighed when the woman’s knife sliced open the tight fabric at my chest. We had a little over thirty boxes of flight suits on Persephone, but I seemed to be ruining one every day or two, and the suits were the only way I could attach the armor plates to my body.

I doubted Elaka Nota would let me swing by their base on Trappist - 1e and buy a few hundred more.

“Blood, but no wound,” the woman said as her fingers touched the skin over my heart.

“I saw the blade,” Madalena said as her eyes narrowed.

“I heal fast,” I said. “I don’t need medical care. I’ll be--”

“No,” she cut me off and turned to Alva. “Perform your diagnostics here.”

“We should take him to my medical chamber. Then I can--”

“Do it now.”

“Yes, Prime Valkyrie,” the other woman said hastily. She rested her palm on my chest, closed her eyes, and began to chant.

“Madalena, I am fine. I don’t need her to--”

Alva opened her eyes, and they glowed white like two cyan-neon light bulbs. Then her hand started to glow with the same color light, and I felt an

intense heat spread from her fingers. The sensation sank into my chest and seemed to pool around my heart and lungs.

Alva spoke in the unknown language, and Madalena replied with short words. Alva said something else as she shook her head, and the other woman frowned slightly. Then Madalena crossed her arms, and her cold eyes gazed into mine.

“Can you stand, my lord?” she asked without any sort of emotion.

“Yeah,” I said, but then I coughed, and a bit of blood dribbled out of my mouth. The two women looked at each other, and Alva’s alien glow faded from her eyes.

I pushed my arms against the side of the stretcher and swung my feet out toward the ground. My boot touched the floor, and I felt a bit of pain in my chest when I stood. It was just a slight pinch, but then I was fine.

Madalena and Alva exchanged a few more words, and then the Prime Valkyrie studied me carefully.

“I said I am fine,” I said as I looked at the two women. Two of the heavily armored guards had been pulling on the stretcher, but I couldn’t see their expressions past their power armor helmets. Not that it mattered, neither Alva nor Madalena’s face showed any emotion

“So, you are,” the warrior woman said. She glanced at my chest, then down to the bloody armor pieces she held in her hand before she looked into my eyes.

Alva said something in their language, and Madalena nodded at her.

“Come with me, my lord,” the Prime Valkyrie said.

I followed her away from the stretcher, but we only made it a few dozen meters down the corridor before a group of heavily armored warriors surrounded us.

“Do guards follow you around everywhere? Or is this for me?” I asked her as I looked at the surrounding group. These were suited like the guards who took us from Persephone, and I couldn’t see their faces beneath their helmets. Their armor was shaped a little differently around the chest area so I could tell half were women.

“Yes, and yes,” Madalena answered. “We will rest back in the room

with the Uiun-bair, then you will answer my questions.”

“And you will finish answering mine,” I said.

We walked for another few minutes and then came to the familiar room with the giant stuffed bear-shark-monster. Madalena gestured to the couch, and then she moved back to the table where the food was so that she could make us a new plate.

“We don’t have much time. As soon as my father finds out you are healed, he will expect you to begin the rite of passage.”

“You don’t seem happy with this outcome,” I said as she handed me a large glass of red wine.

“No. It is as I feared. He has decided to kill you.” She turned her back to me so she could place more food on the plates.

“He called it ‘Odin’s’ or--”

“Odin hung himself from Yggdrasil. His rite is reserved for those of other clans who wish to be accepted into ours, or for those who wish to challenge my father’s leadership.”

“So, wait, I have to hang from a tree? Like with a noose around my neck? That’s fucking--”

“How are you still alive?” She turned to me, and her eyes mirrored the fire in the hearth.

“I told you, I heal quickly.”

“No. Her sword split your heart and ruined your lung. You should have died a few moments later.”

We stared at each other for a few seconds, and I debated what I should tell her. Madalena’s face was so damn hard to read, but her actions so far had seemed to confirm that she was committed to helping me.

Even if everyone around us would rather I just die so she could return to her mission.

“You watched the video you got from Queen’s Hat? The one of the planet Parnarta?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“You saw the tiger-man in the chair? The one they brought back to

their tent?”

“Yes.” Her eyes narrowed a bit.

“A blonde man that they called President Yu showed up and killed Fredrick Gammon, and then he took the body of the tiger-man.”

“Yes. I recall the video.”

“I know the video is over a hundred years old, but that same fucker bought me as a slave and performed medical experiments on me. He did something to my DNA, and now I can change into one of those tiger-men. I heal damn fast. When I came to Epsilon Tauri - b, I had lost both of my hands. They were cut off when I tried to hold onto the bay door of the ship that kidnapped my friends. The Magate Order chased me away from the world where they were kidnapped. I couldn’t help you when you were on your space station because I had no hands to pilot my ship or perform necessary repairs.”

“You have hands now,” she said as she looked down at my arms.

“As I said, I heal fast. It was why I had to rest after I turned your air on.”

Madalena stared at me for a few moments, and then she shook her head. “I believe your words, but I want to see for myself.”

“You just saw me heal, so--”

She raised up her hand and reached for a button on her suit. I heard her say “Mikhael,” but I didn’t understand the rest of her words. The man replied to her, and then she took her hand away from her suit.

“Mikhael will pull the recordings from your ship so I can study them.”

“You just said we don’t have a lot of time.” I sighed and took a sip of my wine. My thoughts drifted to Zea, Eve, Kasta, and Paula again. Was there any way out of this rite? I didn’t like the idea of being hung from a tree. I doubted that I could heal from choking to death.

“You do not have much time, my lord. Eat this. Eat all of it. I need a few moments to think.” The beautiful woman passed me a plate stacked with meat and cheese, but I waved my hands.

“I’m not hungry--”

“Do as I say, my lord. The rite of passage is long and grueling. You will need all your strength.”

“Hmm,” I growled as I took the plate from her. “But you said I would get hung from a tree--”

“Yes, at the end,” she said as her eyes roamed my body. “But Odin has given you to me, and me to you. He has given you the ability to pass his trial. My father has made an error of judgement. He expects you to die during the process, or to die at the end when you hang from Yggdrasil, but you will live, and our people will see it as a sign from the All Father.”

“I’m not some sign from a god, Madalena. I’m just a Marine looking for his friends. If I die, they might end up as slaves for the rest of their lives. So, I need to win. Tell me what I have to do, or who I have to kill, to get through this alive.”

“Eat your food, my lord. You might not be able to eat for a few days. As you eat, I will tell you what you need to do.” She pushed the plate to me again, and I finally took it. Then I sat on the plush couch and grabbed some of the meat from the plate.

“Tell me,” I said around a mouthful.

“In most cases, the rite of passage is three parts, and it is completed by a small group of young warriors preparing to go into adulthood. I killed this uiun-bair during mine, and I helped my other companions kill their own.” The woman pointed to the stuffed monster poised at the side of the room.

“When you were fourteen? That’s fucking insane. How many were you with? Did everyone--”

“My experience is not important to your trial,” she interrupted me. “You will have to complete the rite alone. Before you begin, I will help you through a ritual shaving off your hair, and a bath in our salt springs. You will be given new clothes, and you must swear to abandon the old ways of your people during the cleansing ceremony.”

“Abandon the ways of my--”

“It is not like the submission ritual, where you and I were bonded together in life and the afterlife, it is just words to confirm that you want to join our people.”

A hundred questions came to my lips, but Madalena's expression told me she wasn't interested in hearing any of them. Her talk of us being bonded together concerned me. I had felt strange when our bloody hands touched, and I still couldn't shake the memory. It also felt odd standing near her. I'd been trying to ignore the sensation, but every time the woman laid her hand on my armor, the sensation seemed to fill my head. It wasn't a burning or passionate emotion. I just felt as if my nerves shouted whenever she was near.

"After you confirm, you will be delivered to Nordar - 13 - a. You will be dropped in Niflheim, on the north pole with some clothes, but no weapons. Then you will need to travel south till you reach Svartalfheim. It is a land of lush forests and dense caves." The woman moved over to the brick wall above the fireplace and ran her fingers over the brick there. A screen shimmered, and I saw an image of the Earth-looking planet I'd observed when we first entered her home system.

Madalena raised her finger to the top of the planet's north pole and then traced a line down to the center of the planet. A red series of dots followed her finger, and I felt my mouth go dry around the food.

"I need to get halfway across the planet?" I asked.

"Yes." She nodded.

"Without any equipment? Just clothes? No food, or supplies, or anything else?" I was trying to keep my anger in check.

"You will be given basic supplies, but this is only the middle part of the first trial. Once you reach Svartalfheim, you will need to continue onward to Helheim." The woman traced her finger downward until she was touching the snow area around the south pole. "This will be the most dangerous part of your journey. It is the land of the Hel, and she wishes to enslave all who enter her territory."

"This is insane. That must be at least ten thousand kilometers. It will take me months to reach there on foot. I don't have the time for this." The monster in my stomach was screaming, and I closed my eyes for a few moments.

Was there any way I could get out of this? My brain started to puzzle out a way back to Persephone, but I had no idea how to navigate through the

maze of this fortress, and there was no way Madalena's crew would let me take my ship out of here. I'd probably have to fight my way there, and a single shot from one of these people's plasma weapons would create a devastating wound.

"The trip is around eleven thousand kilometers," she answered. "A tracking beacon will help you determine where the checkpoints are. During each phase of your journey, you will need to defeat a threat."

"Like one of those?" I pointed at the uiun-bair. This bullshit just kept getting more insane.

"Yes, that would be appropriate, since you will be alone. There are other creatures and humans living on the planet who will suffice. After you kill one, the device connected to the beacon will let you know."

"Humans live on a planet with monsters like that running around?" I looked at the uiun-bair again. I didn't think it would be much of an issue to kill with any of my firearms, but I wouldn't have any weapons when they dropped me off on this planet.

"Yes, our people. We occupy all three of the planets in this system. I was born on that world."

"Fuck," I sighed, and then I looked down at my uneaten plate of food. I had no plan to get out of this, so I needed to start eating.

"Also, you do not need to walk. You merely need to reach the checkpoint in each part of the planet."

"Will I have money to buy passage or a vehicle?" I asked.

"No." She shook her head, and a half smile came to her lips. "You can take what you want."

"Oh, so people will help me finish the rites?" Relief flooded my stomach. If there were humans on this world, and they knew I was working on my rites, they would probably help me. This ordeal seemed like something every young adult went through, so the natives were probably used to giving a helping hand.

"Perhaps some will," she said, "but some will not. You are sent by Odin, if they will not help you, kill them and take what you need."

"Madalena, I don't go around killing people so I can take their stuff." I

sighed and rubbed my temples with my fingers. Then I remembered I needed to be eating, and I crammed more meat in my mouth.

“You can take it without killing them.” She shrugged. “They will have no objection to killing you to prevent that. Use all your talents to reach the checkpoints. Once you are in Helheim, the drop ship will take you to the next trial.”

“Which is?” I asked with a sigh.

“The second planet,” she said as she moved her hands over the screen to show the desert and tropical planet I saw when we first entered the system. The top hemisphere looked almost barren. It was just a long orange and yellow swirl. The bottom half looked like a lush jungle.

“You will be dropped off in Muspelheim. In this area.” She pointed to the top of the globe where there should have been ice caps. Instead, there looked to be a lava field and series of volcanos. “Ensure you acquire a method to carry water. This area is hot.”

“And it is surrounded by another ten thousand kilometers of desert,” I growled. “You said this is normally completed by a group of kids? How in the fuck do they do it?”

“The Nordar are strong,” she said, “and the Vaish Overlord Clan is the strongest.”

“Is this the same deal? I just have to get to checkpoints?”

“Somewhat,” she answered. “There are no checkpoints, but there is also no ship to take you to the next part of the rite. You will need to acquire a spaceship to get to the third planet.”

“When you say ‘acquire,’ do you mean steal?” I sighed.

“Or borrow, or pay for passage.” She turned back to the map on the screen and pointed at the desert landscape. “This is Jotunheim. It looks like a desert landscape from our display, but here--” she pinched her fingers over the image and it zoomed in. “It is actually a forest of massive trees. It is fall there and the trees have leaves of red, gold, yellow, and orange. You must be careful here, some of our strongest warriors come from Jotunheim. They are part of our clan but live in war-families. They will not hesitate to kill you.”

“Fuck, and you can’t give me weapons?” I asked.

“They will not have any plasma or laser technology. We keep such tools from our two core worlds. Access to such weapons makes them lazy. The men and women there do carry gunpowder weapons.”

“Okay,” I said, even though I wasn’t ‘okay’ in any sense of the word. I just wanted her to finish telling me what I had to do.

“The green area here is a thick jungle. It is called Alfheim. They often fight with the Jotunheim. You will be killed on sight unless you can convince them that you are performing your rite of passage.”

“You haven’t given me a gram of good news since you started telling me about this shit,” I growled. “Has anyone ever lived through one of these rites?”

“Of Odin? No, my lord.” She shook her head, and I felt my heart sink. “It is the hardest of our rites. Once someone made it to Midgard, but then he was able to slip from the tracker and lose himself in the cities.”

“Midgard? You haven’t told me of that one yet.”

“It is here,” she said as she moved her hand across the screen. The glowing metal planet spun into view.

“Is that world made of metal?”

“No. It was once green, somewhat like the first planet I showed you, but we build our technology here. Eighty billion people live here. You will need to follow the instructions on your device and make your way to--”

“Did you say eighty billion people?” I realized my mouth was open, but I didn’t care to close it.

“Yes. Once you reach the--”

“How do you fucking feed them all?” I asked as I studied the robot-looking world. “I don’t see a single square kilometer of farmland on that planet.”

“There are greenhouses with artificial lighting to grow crops. Meat is also exported from worlds a and b.” Madalena waved her finger over the screen and then pinched them together. Her movement zoomed in on a stream of freight ships exiting the surface of the second world.

“I guess it will be easy for me to sneak onto one of those ships.”

“The rite of passage is difficult,” she said without smiling. “But yes, that was how my fellows and I made it to Midgard.”

“Alright,” I said as I imagined the future difficulties. “I interrupted you earlier. Please continue.”

“Please eat, my lord,” she said as she pointed to my plate. I nodded and took another bite while she moved the screen back to the cyber-planet.

“Follow the tracker device to the first checkpoint. It will be one of our military recruitment stations. The commander there will assign you a mission. Once you complete it, you will pass to Vanaheim. It is in the upper tiers of the planet’s building structure. Another commander will give you your final task, and then you can return to me in Asgard.”

“Asgard?” I asked.

“It is our fleet’s name,” she said as she gestured around us. “The realm of space and void. We are closest to our gods here. Once you return to me, I will prepare you to hang from Yggdrasil. You will be there for nine Earth days. Afterward, you will be Nordar, and Vaish, and my father will be forced to accept you.”

“I’m going to hang from a fucking tree for nine days? You are joking.”

“No, my lord. I do not joke about such matters,” she answered.

“Nine days? Nine days?”

“You will not die,” she said plainly. “Odin has given you to me, and me to you. Our unity will bring together the Nordar clans. You will take my father’s throne and lead our people against the Draugr and their minions.”

“No, what will happen is that you fuckers will tie a noose around my neck, I’ll die, and my friends will never be freed from the Magate Order.”

“The Magate Order is not even a flea to the Vaish Clan, they are less than a speck of dust to the entire Nordar. The other four blood clans will kneel before a man who completes Odin’s rite of passage and is bound to the Prime Valkyrie.”

“I don’t need anyone to kneel to me,” I pleaded. “I just need to leave here and go find my friends. You didn’t need to submit to me. I’ll let you out of it, you can let me go back to my ship, and I’ll go back to Queen’s Hat myself. You can go back to your war, and after I find my friends, we can

come back and talk about these Draugr assholes. I know they are going to be coming to Uraniel in a few hundred days. I can even help you find your ship so we can fight together.”

“We are bound together, Adam,” she said. “We will die without each other. Your rite will be more difficult because I will not be near you.”

“What are you talking about?” I hadn’t eaten all of my food, but I set my plate on the couch so I could stand and face her.

“You feel our connection,” she stated.

“Uhhh. No,” I said.

“Yes, you do,” she replied. “I can feel you. I can also feel my crew. Once you attune your senses, you will feel them through me. You already feel my emotions.”

“You don’t have any emotions. Your face is impossible to read.”

“No. I have strong feelings for you, my husband. You are ignoring them.” She crossed her arms and shook her head. “I feel your annoyance, and your fear, and your desire to save your friends. I feel the animal inside of you. It wants to lay claim to me. I will satisfy both of you.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” I growled, “and I’m not interested in you satisfying me.” I was standing half a meter from her now, and I tried to ignore the small pangs of pleasure that came to my stomach when I stepped toward her.

“Imagine drinking a glass of water,” Madalena said as her steel gray-blue eyes stared into mine. “You aren’t thirsty now because we are so close. Your thirst will grow stronger when you are completing your rite of passage. When we meet again, you will want to do nothing but drink from me.”

“I didn’t ask for that.” I was trying to fight against my anger.

“I know you didn’t,” she admitted after a few moments.

“Then why did you do it?”

“Because I wanted it. I gave my word that I would submit to you.”

“We are going around in fucking circles. I told you I didn’t want it. You could have--”

“I wanted it. I wanted you,” she interrupted me. “I envisioned a

decrepit and tired old man. What stands before me is an avatar of Odin. You do not believe in my god, but I do, he brought you to me in my time of need. I wanted his blessing. You are angry with me now, but your anger will cool. I am the Prime Valkyrie. I will be your wife, your lover, your strength, and your soul. You will come to love me and need me. I don't care about the other women that you love, and you will not care either."

"I wasn't angry with you, but now I am. Fuck you, Madalena. You could have let me go, but you brought me here to die."

"You will not die. Odin is--"

"Fuck Odin!" I screamed at her. "Fuck you, fuck your people, fuck your god. I saved you and your crew because I help people. Now I have to hang because you decided you needed to marry me. It's bullshit."

"No, my lord. I am giving you--"

"You know what?" I interrupted her. "I have an idea. You say you are submitted to me. How about I order you to take me back to Persephone? Then I order you and your fucking friends off my ship. Then I go back to Queen's Hat and find my friends. I get to live, and you get to go back to whatever the fuck you were doing before I found you."

"No," she said, and her normally impassive face looked a bit surprised by my outburst. "I cannot let you leave now. I am sorry that I--"

"You can't let me leave now? What does that mean? I'm going to be on the fucking surface of your planet. You'll be leaving me then."

"I cannot let you leave our fortress until you have begun your rite of passage."

"In that case. Get the fuck out of this room," I said as I pointed to the door.

Madalena's eyebrows creased as she looked from my eyes to the door where I pointed. She didn't say anything, and I felt my stomach tumble.

"Get. The. Fuck. Away. From. Me." I repeated slowly.

"Yes, my lord," she said as she looked at the ground. "I will return to prepare you for--"

"I don't want to see you again," I spat. "You've killed me, and my friends. All I did was save your life."

She stared into my eyes again, and I felt a flurry of emotions hit me in the chest. Pride, fear, and sorrow. It came from her like the scent of strong perfume, but her face didn't betray any of those feelings.

"I am sorry, my lord. I will leave you. Send for me if you wish, and I will come eagerly." She paused after she spoke, maybe to see if I would change my mind, but I continued to point at the door.

Madalena pivoted on her feet and exited without saying another word.

I sat down on the couch, leaned my head back against the fabric, and let out a long sigh of relief. My outburst was stupid. Madalena was the only person in this place who wanted me to live through the rite of passage. Everyone else wanted me dead so she could continue with her mission. I shouldn't have told her to leave.

I leaned forward in my seat and turned to look at the door. She was standing right on the other side, waiting for me to change my mind. All I needed to do was call for her, and then she would come return to me. All would be forgiven, and I could spend a few more precious moments with her before I had to start this bullshit quest.

"Ma--" I opened my mouth to call her back, but then I closed my teeth with a snap. What the fuck was wrong with me? She did this. I told her she didn't need to submit to me, and she did it anyway because she wanted me. Eve, Zea, Paula, and Kasta were prisoners in some Magate Order cell, and Madalena's bullshit was going to end up with my death.

There was no way I would ever stop caring for Zea and Eve. There was no way I could forget about them because Madalena was now submitted to me.

"Fucking leave!" I grabbed my glass of wine and threw it at the door. It shattered into over a hundred pieces and sprayed the dark red liquid across the walls.

Madalena was still standing on the other side of the door, but she heard me scream, and walked away a few moments after the glass broke. I didn't know how I understood where she walked, but I did, and I sat back on the couch with my head in my hands.

"Fucking think, Adam," I whispered to myself, but the only idea I could come up involved getting out of this room, first. Then trying to figure

out how to get back to the massive harbor. Once there, I'd have to get on Persephone, force Madalena's crew off, and then start blasting off to Queen's Hat.

There were a lot of challenges with that plan, most importantly was the problem of not having a clue of how to return to the hangar. I was all sorts of lost in here, plus I knew there were guards outside of this room.

I pulled my face up out of my hands and stared into the fire for a few moments. I noticed the screen above the hearth was still on, and I saw the display of "Vanaheim" or whatever Madalena called the place. Movement caught my eyes, and I jumped up from the couch so that I could look at the image.

I slid my fingers over the screen and the map panned to my right. There was a small harbor there, and three ships were taking off. In the background, I saw dozens of other vessels lifting away from the spires of the city. My fingers moved over the image to zoom out some, and I counted a few hundred shuttles.

Were any of those ships going to the fleet orbiting the planets? Could I stow away or steal one? The fortresses' harbor was huge, but I had a general idea of where Persephone was parked. If I could find a ship on one of the planets; I wouldn't even need to finish the rite of passage. I could just fly into this hold, get on Persephone, and leave.

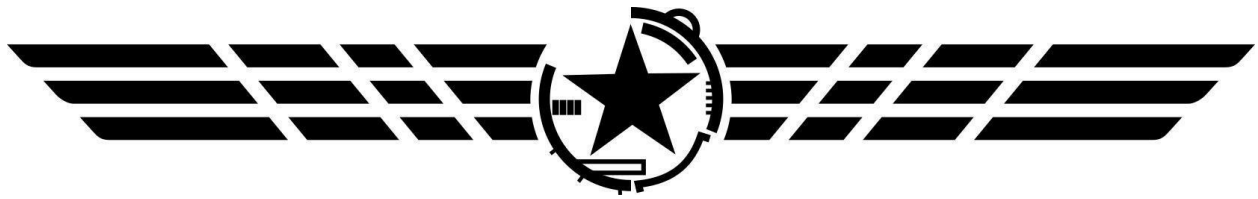
Of course, I would have to figure out how to get Madalena's crew off.

I almost laughed aloud as soon as I thought of the problem. They were all submitted to the Prime Valkyrie, she was submitted to me. Couldn't I just order them off my ship? They might ask Madalena, but I was sure I could pull rank on them. I needed to get them off long enough to start the engines, turn around, punch out of the harbor's force field gates, and then engage the warp drive.

I sat back down on the couch and spun the plan around in my head. The more I thought about it, the more I liked it. I could avoid all this bullshit if I just got the fuck outta here with Persephone. Sure, I wanted Madalena's help, especially since she knew where I could find the Magate Order, but I wasn't going to be able to help my friends by hanging from my neck for nine days.

I'd just end up deader than an imaginary Norse god.

That left me with my first problem: Surviving on these planets until I could stowaway or steal a ship, and I thought about the problem up until the door to the waiting room opened.



Chapter 3

“It is time, Adam,” the woman who opened my door said. I recognized her as one of the lightly armored warrior women who had shared the dais with King Vaish. She had long brown hair and features that reminded me of Madalena.

I stood up from the couch and walked toward the woman without speaking. Her eyes glanced up and down my armor before she focused on the uncovered spot on my chest.

“I am Laufey. Madalena asked me to assist with your cleansing process. Are you ready?” Her words were heavily accented, but I could understand her well enough.

“Does it matter if I’m ready?” I asked.

“No, it does not,” she answered as she gestured me to follow her.

I glanced at the stuffed uiun-bair one last time as I left. How in the hell Madalena had killed the thing with a spear? I realized I wanted to talk to her about it, but thinking of her just made me angry, and I pushed the thought out of my head.

“We will start by shaving your body,” Laufey explained as we walked.

“Why?” I asked.

“It signifies you are removing all of your past associations so you can join our people. Afterward, you will receive a massage before a salt bath.”

“Sounds like a spa treatment. Is this standard practice to give everyone that goes through a rite of passage this--”

“Only if they are performing a rite alone. They are intended for those who were not born Nordar, or were part of an enemy clan.”

“Each clan has a different rite of passage?” I asked, less because of

actual curiosity, and more because I knew I wasn't going to be doing a lot of talking to anyone in the next few weeks.

"Yes and no," she said. "They are similar enough but molded for the planets that each clan has available to them. This is our solar system, and we do not allow rival clans to use our worlds for their rites."

"So someone from the Jotnar clan can complete rites with their people, and then they would also have to complete this rite if they wanted to join your clan?"

"Yes," she said, "and we would have to do the same if one of our clan desired to join them."

"But no one lives through Odin's rite?"

"No," she said with a frown. "There are few who decide to change clans, most prefer death in battle or the life of a thrall."

"Thrall? What is that? It sounds like a slave."

"It is, but it isn't," Laufey said.

"Madalena said your people don't take slaves." I fought against the anger in my stomach.

"Thralls," Laufey said again. "They are rival clan members who are defeated in combat. They choose to serve."

"Instead of dying?"

"Yes," she said.

"Sounds like slavery to me," I replied.

"If you were taken prisoner in combat, would you rather rot in jail or have meaningful work?" The woman shrugged as she spoke, and the movement seemed a bit odd. Laufey appeared to express her emotions a bit more than the other Nordar men and women I had seen. She was practically a melodramatic actress when compared to Madalena.

"I'd want meaningful work," I said after I considered for a few moments. I didn't tell her that I would also try to escape.

"Exactly," she replied.

We didn't speak for a few more minutes, but I noticed the woman glancing at me every few moments.

“What?” I asked.

“Hmmm?” she raised an eyebrow.

“You keep looking at me,” I said.

“Perhaps I like the way you look.” She actually smirked, and I almost did a double take.

“You seem different from the rest of your people,” I said.

“So do you,” Laufey replied, and then she gestured to a door ahead of us. I followed her inside, and the guards escorting us stayed in the hallway.

The room we entered felt similar to the throne room. The ceiling was high above me and painted a dark blue. There were more trees here, and their roots seemed to grow out of the ground of the fortress. They smelled real, but not a single leaf decorated the floor. A four-meter high pile of boulders was off to my left, and a stream of water cascaded down the face of the rocks. The spray ended in a pool of cyan colored water. Steam rose from the bath, and I saw two blonde women were dipping their feet into the water.

The women both wore simple white dresses that flowed down to their knees, and they turned to face us when we approached.

“Greetings, Laufey,” one of them call out as she waved to us.

“Greetings, Nilda,” my escort said. Then Laufey turned to me and gestured to the edge of the pool.

“Would you like Madalena to attend to you?”

“No. I don’t need a massage or a soak in your pool, either.” The water did look inviting, but I preferred to get going with this bullshit.

“Are you sure?” Laufey asked with a raised eyebrow. “She has submitted to you. It will be a much more enjoyable experience than with just the three of us.”

“I’m not looking for pleasure. Get it over with so I can do what you assholes want me to do.” I noticed a massage table standing a few meters to the side of the pool, beside it was a small wooden chest and three buckets.

“Ha,” Laufey let out a light laugh, “She was right about you.”

“I’m sure she was,” I growled. “You need to cut my hair or something. Get on it. I have friends waiting.”

“We will take off your clothes and armor first,” Laufey said as she gestured to the blonde women soaking their feet in the pool. The pair stood and came to stand around me with Laufey.

“Whatever. Just hurry,” I said.

They spoke in their own language as they removed my armor. I heard “Prime Valkyrie” mentioned a few times, but I couldn’t put any other meaning to their words.

Once the plates of my armor were off, the women moved to take off my flight suit. It was still covered in blood from the wound, and Laufey pressed her fingers against my back and chest while she spoke in an excited whisper. The other two women spoke words that sounded like a question, and Laufey chuckled.

“You look like Madalena,” I said when the other woman began to tug my suit to my hips.

“Yes,” she said with a nod.

“Are you related?” I asked when Laufey didn’t explain.

“She is my daughter.”

“I wondered. You look young, and I thought you might have been siblings.”

“I am not serious. It keeps me young.” Laufey laughed, and the other two women joined her as they unfastened my boots.

Laufey finished pulling down my suit, and I stepped out of my boots and clothes so that I stood naked.

The blonde woman named Nilda said something in her language, and the other two women laughed. It was probably the last sound a man wanted to hear when he was standing naked in front of three beautiful women, and I felt the animal in my stomach begin to growl.

“Nilda said she wishes she was the Prime Valkyrie,” Laufey explained, and the blonde woman who spoke blushed.

The other blonde woman said something between her bouts of giggling, and she smiled at me.

“I won’t repeat Fiuna’s words exactly, since it is a bit crude, but she’d

like to know if she can submit to you.” When Laufey finished speaking, Fiuna also turned red, and she spoke rapidly as she mock slapped the other woman’s arms.

“Did you say you needed to cut my hair?” My question interrupted the women’s giggling, and Laufey nodded.

“Yes, please sit over here. I apologize for our humor. You are an unusual occurrence, so we are having fun.”

“Can we hurry this up?” I asked as I sat on the rock Madalena’s mother indicated.

“Of course,” the woman said as she rested her fingers on my shoulders.

The two blonde women moved to retrieve the buckets and chest from beside the pool. They set them beside the rock where I sat, and then they filled the buckets while Laufey began to sort through the chest.

“You should enjoy yourself more,” she said over her shoulder.

“Hard to enjoy myself when I know I’m going to die.”

“We are all going to die,” she commented as she stood from the chest with a few bottles in her hands.

“I think you know what I mean,” I replied as she moved behind me.

“I think you know what I mean as well,” she countered.

“I have friends who need me. They were captured by slavers. I don’t have time.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” she said as she picked up a bucket of water. The woman poured it over my head slowly, and I slowly felt some of the tension in my shoulders begin to ease.

The blonde women sat on either side of me on the rock and took one of my hands in theirs. I was about to pull my arms away from them, but they each began to rub my fingers, and the pleasure radiated up my tense nerves.

“Were they your women?” Laufey asked as she ran her nails through my wet hair.

“Huh?” I asked as I struggled to keep my eyes open. Her fingers felt magical on my scalp, and my mind started to drift away.

“Your friends. Were they your women?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “Two were my lovers, the other two my friends. We have been through alot together. I made a mistake, and they were captured.”

“You are hard on yourself,” she said as her nails lightly dragged across my scalp.

“If I’m not, who will be? It was my fault.”

“You are a good fit for my daughter. I am sorry she has angered you.”

I didn’t answer, and Laufey continued to massage my scalp while the other two women rubbed the tension out of my hands. As much as I wanted to hurry up with this, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had a massage. The three women were skilled with their hands, and I was finding it hard to keep my attention focused. I finally gave up and relaxed my thoughts. They scattered and went a million different directions at once before they settled on a memory.

My mother was crying, and I’d come out of my room to ask her what was going on. I was a child at the time, maybe only seven, but I guessed what the problem was. She was a good-looking woman; still young, but the task of taking care of my sister and I took a toll on her.

She spoke to me, but I didn’t hear her words in my memory. I still remember what she said though, one of the places she worked had laid her off, and she was going to have to find another job. She smiled at me and said everything was going to be okay, but I was old enough to understand the fear in her eyes.

I had asked her if I could help, but she shook her head and told me I already helped her a bunch by taking care of my sister. I told her I could do more, but she said she would figure it out. I just needed to focus on being a kid.

The next day, I ditched school, snuck onto the maglev train, and went to the industrial district. Most of the production plants were automated and didn’t need any additional workers, the places that weren’t machine-controlled told me they wouldn’t hire a kid since they had a line of adults looking for a job, but I eventually found a naval ammunition supplier. The owner was a real shitbag, but that was what I was looking for. He gave me a job picking up ammo casings from the floor, pushing crates across the warehouse, and cleaning the toilets. He paid me a tenth of what the adults

made, but it was a job, and I worked my ass off so I could give my mom a little help.

The work was tough, but I built solid muscles and got to hang out with a bunch of soldier types. None of them were good role-models, but I was too focused on taking care of my mom and sister to adopt any of their habits. I did listen to their stories though, and I quit school as soon as I could to join the Marines.

“Adam, please raise your arm.” Laufey’s voice tugged me from my memories, and I opened my eyes to see one of the blonde women trying to lift my hand up. I raised my arm, and Laufey began to apply a soapy cream to my armpit.

“What are you--”

“Removing your hair,” she interrupted. She had a long straight-razor in her other hand, and she wiped the edge of the blade across my skin. I didn’t even feel the blade pass over me, but it came away with a chunk of my underarm hair. “Relax, please. I have already finished with your scalp. We will work on your arms, groin, and legs next.”

“Ummm, my groin?” I didn’t like the idea of anyone else getting that close to my dick with a blade, but all three of the women had straight razors in their hands now, and they were spreading more cream over my arms.

“It would be better if Madalena did this task, but Nilda and Fiuna do not have husbands.”

One of the blonde women, Nilda I believed, said something in their language, and both of them giggled.

“I can do it myself,” I said hastily. “Just give me a razor.”

“Nonsense,” Laufey said, “you are attempting Odin’s rite. The Prime Valkyrie has submitted to you. Nilda and Fiuna are eager to please you.”

“I’m not comfortable with other women touching me,” I said.

“That is your old way. You are leaving that behind today and becoming Nordar. You are becoming Vaish. Men can have multiple wives in our culture, and women can have multiple husbands.”

“No thanks, my love life is complicated enough with two women,” I replied.

“Three women,” Laufey corrected me.

“I’m not counting your daughter,” I replied.

“You should.”

“Whatever,” I sighed and looked down at the work the women were doing on my legs. Half of each thigh was shaved now, and I reached out to take one of the blades from them.

“Adam,” Laufey said as her fingers closed around my wrist. “You have two choices here: You can let Nilda and Fiuna finish their job, or you can call Madalena to you so that she can finish. There is no third option. You are leaving your old ways behind.”

“Fine,” I said.

“Should I call Madalena?” she asked.

“No,” I replied.

“Very well,” Laufey sighed, and the other two women began to rub cream on my groin area. The sensation was a confusing mix of pleasure and anxiety, so I looked away from their hands and tried to focus on something else.

“Women can have multiple husbands? Does that mean Mikhael is sleeping with Madalena?” The words escaped my mouth before I even thought about them, and I felt a bit of surprise when the jealousy hit my chest. I shouldn’t have cared about the woman’s lovers.

“Valkyries do not allow men to submit to them.”

“Does that matter? I didn’t want Madalena to submit to me, but she did anyway.”

“You could tell Madalena to kill herself,” Laufey said. “That is why men do not bother. Mikhael is submitted to Josefinna, who is submitted to the Prime Valkyrie. Goran was submitted to Nikki.”

“Shit,” I gasped. Partially because one of the blonde women wrapped her hand around my erection, and partially because of the way Madalena had spoken to Nikki after she put a bullet through her husband’s head.

These people were insane.

I felt fingers rub my scrotum, and I closed my eyes to keep from

looking at the women kneeling before me. I was going to have a hard time explaining this to Zea, and I doubted the snarky hacker would be super understanding. I could almost hear her voice say “Oh rigggggghhht. I’m sure you didn’t enjoy the two hot Viking babes rubbing cream on your nuts and dick.”

“What is after this?” I asked through clenched teeth.

“We will move you to the table so we can massage your muscles. Then the bath. Nilda and Fiuna would like coitus with you after the massage, or you can call Madalena.”

“So, part of the rite is me fucking someone? How is that--”

“No, that is optional,” Laufey said with a laugh. “Madalena is your wife, and wishes to be with you before your rite of passage, but you have shunned her. Nilda and Fiuna want to be with the man who the Prime Valkyrie has submitted to.”

“I’ll pass.”

“That is unfortunate. The journey ahead of you will be brutal. You should enjoy yourself one last time, or at least take pleasure in giving others pleasure.”

“You all are really casual about sex. What happens if I get one of them pregnant? I’m probably not coming back from this.” I thought about growing up without a dad. It was something my four friends all had in common.

“They would be honored to bear your child. We take pride in having a strong offspring. The Nordor care about the outcome, not the process. We are at war with the other tribes, and soon we will be at war with the Draugr. We need strong children. Your old ways are foolish and have led to weak civilizations.”

I was about to argue with her, but I recalled that I was in a giant space fortress surrounded by thousands of warships. The Jupiter Navy was one of the strongest in Earth’s solar system, but was probably a tenth of the size, and had nowhere near the technological advancements of Madalena’s people.

Something they were doing was working.

“Are they done?” I asked as I felt Nilda and Fiuna’s hands stop.

“Yes,” Laufey said. “Stand, and we will work on the back of your legs.

Then we will massage you.”

“Fine, but hurry. I want to get started.” I stood, and the three women moved behind me. They chatted as their hands and fingers ran over my butt, legs, and calves. I felt the metal of the razor, and I focused on that instead of their whispering.

“We will now rub you with oil. Will you lie on the table?” Laufey pointed to the massage bed beside the beautiful pool of water.

“Can we skip it? I am fine to just--”

“No,” she said. “Lie on your stomach.”

“Fucking shit,” I groaned as I walked over to the table and lay face down on top. There was a lowered donut pad for me to put my face, and I felt three pairs of hands began to rub oil on my back and shoulders.

“Aren’t you married to King Vaish?” I asked.

“I have submitted to him, yes,” Laufey said.

“And he’s okay with you touching me like this?”

“He has grown bored with me and does not care about my hobbies.”

“Bored with you? Is he an idiot?” I asked. Then I hissed when one of the women found a thick knot in my upper back. She began to knead it with her fingers, and an electrical current ran down my arms.

“Is that a compliment from you, Adam?” the woman asked.

“Uhhh. Well, you look like your daughter, and you seem happy. You have a pleasant personality. I haven’t known you for very long, but--”

“I understand,” she interrupted me. “Thank you for the compliment. When you submit to someone, you are bonded to them and come to care about their happiness. I have served Madalena’s father faithfully, but now he would rather have other women. Perhaps one day he will want me again. Until then, I ask him if I can have other lovers. Sometimes he agrees, sometimes he doesn’t.”

“So he controls your sex life, even if he isn’t sleeping with you?” I asked. I didn’t think I’d ever be able to get the hang of being a Nordar.

Good thing I was planning on just grabbing Persephone and getting out of here.

“I have submitted to him,” she answered.

“That seems to be the answer you people have for everything,” I replied.

“You are one of us now, Adam.”

“Not yet, I haven’t completed the rite. No one has completed Odin’s rite.”

“Perhaps you will be the first. Madalena believes you will.”

The women began to push harder on my muscles and I tried hard not to enjoy the experience. They were talented, and as soon as one found a tense muscle, they worked to relax it.

“You spoke of the Magate Order earlier,” I said after what felt like twenty or thirty minutes. Two of the pairs of hands were still working on my back, but someone else had moved to my glutes.

If I somehow got out of this and saved my friends; Zea was going to kill me.

At least Eve would think it was funny. She would probably be good friends with Madalena.

“Yes, I know of the Magate Order. Why?” Her voice was coming from my shoulders, and I felt quite a bit of relief that she wasn’t the one massaging my ass.

“Do you know where their homeworld is?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied.

“Where?”

“Why do you wish to know?” Laufey asked.

“I told you they kidnapped my friends.”

“Madalena knows where they are. She will help you find them after you complete the rite.”

“I am curious as to the name of the system,” I said as I tried to keep my frustration out of my voice.

“It is named Magate-Pru Y-78. I have never been there.”

“Ahhh,” I sighed when one of the women found a knot in my calf and

started to work on it. “Do they trade all their slaves out of their home solar system?”

“They have a network of stations that are copacetic to the slave trade.”

“Do you know the locations of them?” I asked. One of the pairs of hands moved down to my leg and worked on the calf beside the other one.

“Adam, once you have finished your rite, my daughter will help you with your search.”

“I’d feel better if I knew where they were.”

“How will it make you feel better?” she asked.

“It will give me hope,” I said, even though it was a bit of a lie. Laufey didn’t seem suspicious of me, but I didn’t know if I could continue to press her for information.

“We are done with your back,” she said. “Flip over.”

“I’m fine. Can you tell me about the stations?” I asked.

“We must complete your preparation for the ritual. We have already seen your manhood. Now is not the time to be bashful,” the woman said.

“Fuck,” I growled as I rolled over on the table and lay on my back. Laufey moved to my head and began to rub my temples while Nila and Fiuna each worked on a bicep.

“This should be a comfort to you,” Laufey said. “You are tense.”

“No shit,” I said. “I’m wasting time while my friends are--”

“Just close your eyes and enjoy this, Adam. In a few hours, you will be in Niflheim. It will be cold, and you will need to remember this warmth in order to survive. Your friends are fifteen light years away or more, and you still will need to complete your rite of passage. An hour will not make much of a difference in your quest to save them.”

“I’m sure an hour is an eternity to them.” My stomach knotted, and I forced my eyes closed. The pair of women eventually move to my chest, and Laufey moved down to my jaw. The muscles there were like boulders, and she slowly rubbed them. It took a while for the tension in my face to relax, and I felt myself drifting toward another lucid dream.

In the dream, I was stuck in a glass tube, unable to escape while I

floated in a liquid which gave me oxygen. The only sounds I could hear were the whirling of water pumps and the breathing of electronics.

Then I heard the sound of explosions in the distance. The roars were accompanied by screaming, and the massive door to my vault blew open. Four women walked into the room, and they peppered the group of scientists experimenting on me with hundreds of bullets.

I recognized my friends, but they wore armor I wasn't familiar with, and the carried weapons that looked like a cross between laser and plasma rifles. They each scanned the room for more hostiles, and then Eve gestured for Zea, Paula, and Kasta to move toward the tube where I was captured.

Zea said something to me, but I couldn't hear her through the glass of my prison. I saw movement behind her when she plugged her cord into the control panel below my tube, and I shifted my tired eyes over to the vault door. Two more figures were positioned at the doorway there. The one on the right looked like she wore Madalena's wing-etched heavy power armor, and the one on the left looked to be Juliette. They fired into the hallway beyond the door, and then they stepped back toward my tube-prison.

The glass suddenly fell away, and cold air hit me. I shivered and then felt my friends' hands lift me up. I was tired though, and I couldn't seem to keep my head up. Then I was kissing Madalena, and I felt her armored hands wrap around my back so that I could stand. The kiss was surprisingly passionate, and my entire body felt heated from the sun. When our lips parted, the beautiful Prime Valkyrie smiled at me.

Then Zea slid her arms around my shoulders and kissed me. Then Paula. Then Kasta. Then Juliette. Finally, Eve's lips were on mine, and my mouth burned with our passion.

"Adam," she said, but then I realized it wasn't Eve's voice, and I opened my eyes to find myself back next to the pool.

"The pains of your old life have been removed." It was Laufey's voice, and I had to blink the sleep away from my eyes for a few seconds before I could focus on her.

"Okay," I sighed. It felt like I had slept for ten years.

"Do you wish for me to call Madalena?" she asked.

"Ahhh..." I thought about the lucid dream I just had, and my words

hung in my mouth. “No.”

“Would you like Nilda and Fiuna to stay? Your body looks eager for--”

“No!” I growled as I realized that I was sporting an erection. Fucking dreams.

“We will leave you to your bath then. Inside the chest, you will find your new clothes. An alarm will sound when you should leave the bath. Change quickly and then make your way to the door where you entered. You will be given a small survival kit and then sent to Niflheim. I will return your weapons and armor to your ship.”

“Thanks,” I said as I leaned over to the side and set my feet on the ground. I hated to admit the massage felt good. It didn’t feel right to be wasting time here when my friends needed me.

“Do you mean that?” Laufey asked after I stepped into the pool. The water was just as hot as I would have liked it, and a long exhale left my chest.

“Huh?”

“You said ‘thanks.’ Do you mean that? Was my treatment of you to your satisfaction?” Laufey raised an eyebrow.

“Uhhh, yeah.” I didn’t see Nilda and Fiuna nearby, but I hadn’t heard them leave.

“Excellent. Is there anything else I can do for you?” she asked.

“If you are offering yourself, I’m going to say no, this whole ‘submission’ shit is already fucking weird with you seeing me naked and shaving me, and then massaging my naked body.”

“Ha!” she laughed, and the sound surprised me. “No, Adam. I was not going to offer myself to you. If you weren’t already my daughter’s, then I would be more than interested, but you are her’s, and she is yours. I was here to take care of you because you turned her away.”

“Ahh. Okay,” I replied.

“Which brings me back to my original question. I would request a boon from you. It will be simple for you.”

“A boon?” I asked. “What is--”

“A gift, a favor. I’ve rubbed your back, and now you can rub mine.

Metaphorically speaking, of course.”

“What do you want?” I sighed and rubbed the bridge of my nose. The tension in my jaw was starting to return.

“Please call Madalena to you. She is upset that she has displeased you. She wants nothing more than to see you before you leave for the rite.”

“I actually doubt she gives a fuck,” I said. “She shouldn’t have submitted to me. By bringing me into this, she’s sentenced me to death, and—”

“She did not want to bring you into this though. She told you what her intent was. One of her crew betrayed her.”

“You seem awfully sure about what your daughter wants, Laufey. The rest of her crew wants me dead. Either she can’t control her own people, or they are following her real orders.”

“They will accept you once you have completed the rites.”

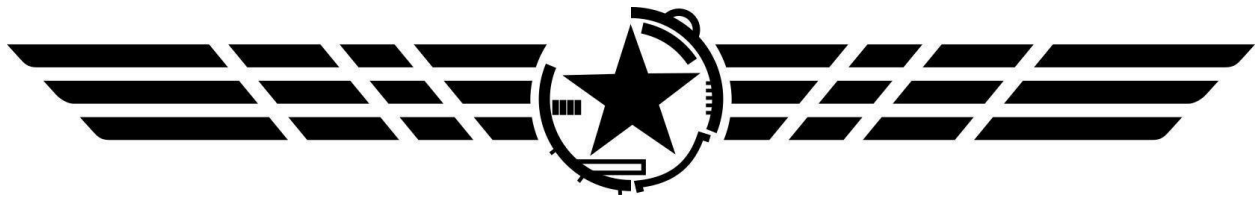
“I’m not going to complete them!” I shouted. “How can anyone hang from a tree for nine days? How about nine minutes? It would be just as effective as strangling me. Fuck all of you. I helped your daughter and her crew. I saved their lives when I was on death’s door. I keep telling all of you I didn’t want this, but none of you seem to care. Leave me alone with my sorrow.” I turned from the woman and saw my reflection in the water. It had been a long time since I shaved my head, and the image brought up memories of my time in the Marines.

Laufey walked away without another word.

I didn’t know how long I stared at myself, but eventually, I grabbed a bar of soap and washed the oil from my body. Then I sat under the waterfall and tried to think of nothing.

Then the alarm sounded, and I moved to the chest. There was a simple pair of leather boots, thick wool long-underwear, fur pants, and a matching fur jacket. There was also a small backpack with a short knife attached. I put it all on and then walked toward the far door of the room.

It was time for the tiger to escape his cage.



Chapter 4

The guards met me at the door. There were four of them, wearing power armor and helmets that kept their faces hidden. One of them gestured for me to follow, and I walked through the stone hallways of the castle behind them. We passed a few servants, or maybe they were ‘thralls,’ while we walked, and they each bowed to me with a strange reverence.

“Why are they bowing to me?” I asked one of the guards.

“You are attempting Odin’s rite of passage,” one of them replied.

“Ahh,” I said. “How much farther do we have to go?”

“We will return to the fortress’ hold bay, my lord,” another one replied.

“You don’t have to call me ‘my lord,’” I said.

“You are attempting Odin’s rite of passage, and the Prime Valkyrie submitted to you,” he replied.

I nodded at him, and we continued our walk out of the glass castle. I half expected Madalena to show up on the route, but I didn’t see her. Part of me was relieved since I still felt anger toward her, but another part of me wondered how true her mother’s words were. In the end, it didn’t matter. I had way too many problems in front of me now. I didn’t need to waste energy thinking about Madalena. She wasn’t the one who was kidnapped by slavers.

The guards took me to a hovercraft, and I floated through the beautiful city once again. The return path gave me a new point of view on the buildings inside of the fortress, and I found myself thinking back to what Laufey said about Nordar culture. These people did have a technologically advanced civilization, but I didn’t know if that was because of their strange customs, or because they just got lucky with their ark ship. Survivor bias tended to obscure reality.

We eventually reached the harbor, and we parked our hovercraft at the foot of the white spire-building. I thought we would walk toward one of the shuttles, but the guards gestured for me to follow them into the white building. The inside of the structure was crafted out of what looked to be white marble, and every surface was polished to an almost mirror-like shine. They led me to an elevator and then pushed the button for the lowest floor.

We rode in silence for about half a minute, and then the doors opened. There were four men in dark blue uniforms waiting for me there, and they gestured for me to follow them.

“Are your clothes to your liking?” one of the men asked.

“Yeah, a bit hot, but I’ll probably appreciate that when I am on the surface.”

“You will,” he replied without emotion. “I see your supply pack. There should be a waterskin, two days’ worth of food, a firestarter kit, a length of cordage, and a utility knife. Can you confirm?”

“Yeah,” I said as I pulled the pack open. I found the waterskin, paracord, firestarter rod, and foil wrapped packs of food. I also found a thick wool hood for my head, but the man hadn’t asked me about that, so I decided not to mention it. The knife was hanging on the outside of the pack, and I checked to ensure the blade was sharp.

“This is the observer,” the man said as he gestured to a bowling ball-shaped device sitting on a table. It was black in color, and a red dot suddenly appeared in the middle of the sphere. The device seemed to have turned on, and it floated into the air about a meter above the table.

“It follows me around?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “It will start a few minutes after you reach Niflheim.” He held out what looked like a watch to me. “This is your locator watch. You can use the screen to find your next checkpoint. I have it set to English, and you can toggle through the menu buttons to learn how it works.”

“Got it,” I said as I buckled the device to my wrist. “What happens if this breaks in combat?” I asked.

“The observer will see, and we will drop you a new one.”

“What if I lose the device and the observer?” I asked.

“You will not lose the observer unless you try to lose the observer. If you try to lose the observer, we will take it to mean that you have quit the rite.” The man didn’t frown, but I got the warning.

“Still, someone could steal this from me and shoot down the observer against my wishes.”

“Do not let that happen,” the man said. “Do you have any other questions?”

“Guess not,” I replied.

“We can take him the rest of the way,” the uniformed man said to the four armored guards who had escorted me this far.

“Good luck, my lord,” said one of the armored men before they turned and walked back to the elevator.

“The pod is this way,” he said as he led me into the next room. There was a single escape pod in the center of the room as well as a handful of screens.

“Will someone be watching me through the observer?” I asked as I pointed at the screen.

“No. No one will be watching you.” The man nodded at the other three uniformed men, and they each pulled out daggers.

“Fuck!” I growled as I spun to my side to dodge a thrust from in front of me. The blade cut through the fur of my coat, but I didn’t feel it bite into my skin.

The back of my hand slapped his arm away from me. I tried to catch it with my fingers, but he was a bit too fast, and I was in the process of spinning around so that I could face the other three assassins.

The one on my far right slammed his dagger into my right shoulder, but I ignored the wound and punched him in the nose. His face made a crunching sound, and I aimed a kick at the center man. He blocked my leg with his knee and then brought his dagger down into my thigh.

I grabbed his hand to keep him trapped and then yanked the dagger out of my shoulder. The fucker tried to escape, but I managed to thrust the point of my new blade into his throat. He choked out a wet scream, but I twisted the blade to sever his vocal cords before he could get much of a sound out.

The fourth man made a quick slash toward my face, and I turned my head away. The tip of his blade still sliced open my cheek, and the dagger in my left thigh kept me off balance. I stumbled a bit to my right and then felt the first man ram his knife into my back.

“Fucker!” I growled and then tried to crack him with my elbow. He was too quick, and my blow scraped past his cheek.

I turned around to face the fourth man, and I found myself staring into the barrel of a pistol.

“Get in the pod,” the man with the gun said.

“Why not just pull the fucking trigger?” I growled.

“Get in the pod or I will,” he said.

“I need to die on the planet,” I spat.

“You are not as dumb as you look. Now get in the pod.”

“As if hanging from a tree for nine days wasn’t going to kill me,” I said as I took a step away from the pistol.

“King Vaish doesn’t take chances. Especially with the Prime Valkyrie.” The man nodded to the pod behind me. “I can shoot off one of your arms and throw you in, or you can get in.”

I thought about shifting, but I didn’t think I’d be able to do it before the man got the shot off. If Madalena’s father really had ordered these men to stab me and throw me in the pod, it was probably so that my murder wasn’t connected to him. It meant the king was fearful of pissing off his daughter, which also could have meant these men wouldn’t want to kill me up here, or else Madalena would find out.

She didn’t want to take the throne away from her father, but would my death push her enough to challenge him?

“You have three seconds. Two.”

“I’m going,” I said as I stumbled into the pod.

“He’s moving pretty good for someone I stabbed in the back,” the first man said.

“Niflheim will finish him off,” the fourth man said as he threw the backpack into the pod. “Get the observer in.”

“Here,” the other man threw the metal drone into the pod, but instead of smacking into the floor, the drone floated in midair and spun to face me.

“Good luck,” the man with the gun said.

“Fuck you,” I growled.

The man’s eyes narrowed, and I almost thought he would shoot me, but he just hit the inside button on the escape pod, and then pulled his arm out before the hatch could close on him.

Then I felt the thrusters engage, and the g-forces pushed my stomach against my back. The momentum made the blood pour out my cuts. The wounds were deep, and I had already lost a lot of blood from when my earlier chest wound, so I decided that I would need to shift for improved healing.

I buckled myself into one of the four chairs and let my rage beckon the animal out of my stomach. I was fucking pissed about being stabbed, so the beast came easily. My spine elongated, my muscles reformed, my vision changed, and my teeth emerged from my jaws. My fur clothes were tailored for my human size, and the seams ripped on my pants and jacket. My boots also tore open, and I cursed.

I had forgotten about my clothes. I was going to need them to navigate through all the ice caps on this part of the world, and now I’d pretty much ruined them.

The dagger stuck in my leg popped out during the change, and other wounds felt fully recovered. I glanced out the window of the pod and saw the massive battlefortress grow smaller above me. The sight angered me more, as I suddenly realized that I had blown an opportunity to cut a massive corner in this whole plan. I didn’t know the four men in uniform would betray me, but I should have just taken them out as soon as the heavily armored guards left. Then I could have taken the elevator to the harbor, gotten on Persephone, figured out how to get Madalena’s crew off, and then warpdrived away.

But that wouldn’t have worked. The only way I could have gone through those guys was if I attacked first, and I wouldn’t have done that to men who hadn’t expressed any hostility.

I also couldn’t use Persephone’s warpdrive. It was still cooling down. I didn’t know exactly how far away from Queen’s Hat Nordor - 13 was, but I estimated it was over seventy light years. That would take over two months.

Unless I could figure out how to use the hyperdrive until the warp drive's cool down was over. Then I could switch back to them.

"Doesn't fucking matter," I growled to myself as the fortress got smaller in my view. I would have to figure out how to use the navigation system once I got back on Persephone, but my main concern right now was getting to these checkpoints as quickly as possible.

I thought about switching out of my tiger-man form, but these escape pods often times hit the surface of planets like missiles, and I felt it safer to stay in this form until I was safe on the ground.

As soon as I thought about landing, the pod shuddered as it entered the atmosphere. The bottom thrusters of the craft engaged to slow my speed, and the atmosphere screaming past the view windows of the pod changed to a light orange color. This experience reminded me of the time I escaped the Alloprize carrier with Zea, and I spent the next few moments thinking about her and Eve instead of the shit I was going to have to deal with once the pod landed.

The chute opened, and I felt a massive lurch in my stomach as the wind caught my craft. The bottom thrusters were still engaged, but they just came on in small pulses. I guessed they were being used to adjust the trajectory of the parachute, but I couldn't see anything out of the window but sky and snow.

The pod landed with an impact that ran up my tailbone like a sledge hammer. I growled with surprise and then gasped when the pod leaned over onto its side.

The craft started to roll.

The movement was slow for its first rotation, but then it picked up speed for its second, third, and then my brain lost track of the spins. The lights inside of the pod broke when the craft smashed into something hard, the loose dagger on the ground bounced around the interior like a ping pong ball before it stabbed my left leg, and the backpack slammed into my face. I managed to bite onto the strap so it didn't get away from me, but then the pod rammed into something hard again.

It was still rolling, but for half a dozen moments I felt weightless. Then there was another slam, and the side of the pod caved in as if a giant mallet

had crushed the thick metal. This last impact caused every bone in my body to vibrate, and the safety straps broke a few of my ribs. They healed close to instantly, and I was thankful that I decided to stay in this form.

The last impact slowed the roll of the pod significantly, and it soon came to a stop. I waited a long minute so my head would stop spinning, and then I opened the locks on my safety harness. It felt like my seat was now on the bottom of the craft, so I stood from my seat and yanked the dagger out of my leg. Then I wiped the blade off on my sleeve and moved to one of the windows.

It looked like a shitload of snow and gray sky. I was happy that it wasn't storming, but I couldn't make out any distinguishing landmarks from the view inside of the craft.

I checked the device on my wrist. I was glad it was still there, but the rubber band around my much thicker tiger-man wrist was close to breaking. I unhooked it with a careful movement of a furry finger, and then I debated my next few moves.

If I left the pod now, I'd only have twenty minutes before I'd have to change back, then I'd be tired, and need to find shelter in a hurry. I was already in the pod, so it made sense to just return to my human form and rest here. I didn't like the idea of wasting any more time, but there was no other choice.

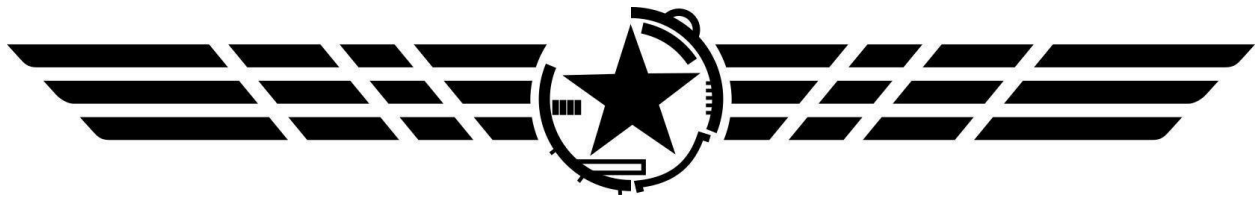
I sat on the back pad of my chair and thought about the oceans of Earth. I thought about the palm trees and the sand.

I thought about Zea and Eve, but Madalena also entered my thoughts, and I felt my calm dissolve. I let out a growl of annoyance and focused my meditations back on the ocean. I kept thinking about the Vaish woman though, and it felt like my shift back into human form took much longer than usual.

But I did eventually return, and exhaustion filled my muscles. The door to the pod was on the left side of me, and I walked over to the control panel. I wanted to ensure there was some sort of lock on the door, but all the writing there looked like runes, and I had no idea what the buttons did.

I'd figure it out when I woke up. Then I'd get to the checkpoints, get off this planet, get back to Persephone, and then find my friends.

And I'd kill any man, women, or monster that got in my way.



Chapter 5

The howl of a storm woke me up from a dreamless sleep. For half a moment, I thought I was still back on Persephone, and I reached over to my dresser for where I kept a pistol. Then I remembered the descent to the planet's surface, and I let out a sigh of frustration.

The inside of the pod had cooled significantly, and my breath came out in puffs of steam. I didn't know if the change in temperature meant I just slept a long time and the chill had eventually sunk into the interior, or if it was just really fucking cold outside. Neither possibility was comforting.

I looked down at my boots and saw my next problem. The seams around the sole had torn apart because of my shift, and the cold air was tickling my sock covered toes. I grabbed the utility knife on my pack, cut a few strips of fur-lined leather off my coat, and then wrapped them around the boot so that the top part wouldn't come free of the sole when I walked. It was a sloppy job, and it wouldn't really help with the cold air flow, but it meant I'd still have the protection on the bottom of my feet.

I heard a beep above my head and looked up to see the observer drone. It must have turned on while I was sleeping, and the red eye made a cartoonish blinking motion as it studied me. Then it beeped again. Was anyone up in the fortress watching me? Was Madalena? I thought about her for a few moments and then forced my mind to the task at hand.

I looked at the device on my wrist. It was loose now that I was back in my human shape, so I tightened the strap and began to fiddle with the small control buttons. I soon had the instruction manual displayed, and I read through them as quickly as I could.

The device had three functions:

First was to tell me the direction of the check points. This was just a simple arrow direction pointer, like a compass, and a measurement of

kilometers.

The second function was to tell me if I had made a qualified kill. It wasn't clear about who made that decision: the drone's AI, or someone watching me from the space fortress. Either way, the device would tell me if the last kill had completed the task. I needed to kill something during each of the three checkpoint phases.

The third function was to help the observer drone track me. The instructions said I shouldn't take the watch off, or let it become damaged. The device looked pretty durable, and I doubted it would get damaged during my normal travels, but the screen wouldn't stop a bullet or melee weapon strike, so I needed to be careful in combat.

I turned on the checkpoint function and saw a green arrow point toward the door to my pod. The reading showed I had 5,481.43 kilometers more to go till I reached the checkpoint. I figured I could traverse rough terrain at about 50 kilometers a day, but I would also have to hunt, get water, worry about shelter, and try to find a threat to kill.

It would take me at least four months to get to this checkpoint on foot, and then I would still have one more to go before a shuttle took me to the next planet where there were three more.

This rite could take me years to finish, and my friends didn't have years.

"Better get moving," I said as I moved to the control panel of the door. I didn't know which button unlocked the door, so I pressed a bunch of them. Eventually, the door made a hissing noise as the air-seal broke, and I was able to push the metal open.

Bitter cold poured into the pod's interior, and I gasped with shock. There was a terrible wind, and even though I didn't think it was snowing, an intense gust pushed a bunch of snow inside of my pod.

I stopped pushing open the door and reached into my backpack for the wool hood. It fit over my shaved head perfectly and had flaps that covered my ears. There was a drawstring on the bottom of the hat, and I tied it around my chin. Then I pushed on the door some more, and the full force of the wind assaulted me.

"Fucking shit," I hissed as the cold assaulted my face. I almost thought

about closing the door to the pod again, but hiding in here wasn't going to help my friends, so I stepped out and onto the snow.

I looked around the pod and then let out a laugh. The craft had come to rest against a rocky outcrop on the side of a snow covered mountain. The pod seemed to have landed closer to the peak of the mountain, and then it tumbled down a quarter of the elevation, slammed into a bunch of rocks, and then finally come to rest here. If the roll had a bit more momentum, it would have launched off this rocky edge, and I would have continued down the steep snow-covered side of the mountain. That might have been for the better since I could see the beginning of the tree line a few thousand meters down below me. Or, the pod could have smashed into more rock, and it would have finally broken open.

I was alive now, so I had reason to be thankful. I just needed to figure out a safe way down this mountain, and I needed to do it quickly, the cold was already starting to numb my toes, and shifting through frostbitten toes would probably be all sorts of painful.

The slope angle was extremely steep, but it leveled off a bit where the pod finally came to rest. I walked to the edge of the outcropping and looked down the snowy sides. The angle here was even more severe, and I didn't think I'd be able to get down without an ice axe. Was this rite meant to start at the top of a mountain? Or had the fuckers who stabbed me changed the drop off location?

The answers to my questions didn't matter. I was still a few thousand meters from the bottom, and the slope leading down was much too steep to try to walk down. I was going to have to find another route.

I moved back to the pod and then crawled to the end of the rocky outcropping that halted my craft's descent. The other side of the slope in this section was just as steep, but there were additional rocky outcrops every few hundred meters. This might be an easier way to get down, but the paracord in my pack wasn't long enough to reach between the distances.

Fuck. I was really stuck up here, and a sudden gust of wind reminded me that it was way too cold to be stuck out here for much longer.

I stepped back into the pod for a bit of warmth. Waiting here wasn't really an option, but I was losing body heat standing outside. I grabbed the door of the pod and pulled it shut. Then I sat down on the seat pads and tried

to figure out how to descend the mountain.

Then I looked down at the seat and got an idiotic idea.

The back pad was a little over a meter long. It was some sort of plastic material made to feel like soft leather, and it was attached to a metal backing frame with a series of bolts. I reached down to unscrew one, but the bolt was tightly screwed in.

I grabbed the dagger one of the assholes who stabbed me with and examined the cross-guard of the blade. The safeguard was set at too much of an angle, but my smaller utility knife had a straight guard, and I set it against one of the bolts. I twisted the knife against the metal, and it unscrewed a tiny amount.

A few minutes later, and I'd managed to get the bolt loose enough to unscrew with my fingers. The next one was easier, but it still took me about an hour to get them all removed. The pad came away easily, and I flipped it over to look at the back. It was a hardened plastic composite, and it looked like it would be able to slide across the snow or ice just fine.

I'd never used a sled to go down a hill, but I've watched videos on the subject. I knew I could push my heels out into the snow to steer, but I'd never done it before, and my boots were already close to tearing off my feet. I was going to need another way to brake as well, so I used my dagger to drill twin holes in the front corners of the pad. Then I unwound my paracord, threaded it through the holes, and made a single steering loop that I could hold. In theory, I should be able to yank on the rope and use it to steer and brake.

I glanced down at the other seats and began to unscrew the bolts to the various bottom pads of the seats. When I had removed three, I used more of the paracord to tie them to my spine and elbows. The setup wasn't very clean, and it might come off if I actually crashed, but I figured a little protection would be better than nothing.

I looked for anything else I could scrap from the pod, but all the other metal plates, poles, and pieces were attached with clean soldering or tiny screws that I wouldn't be able to unscrew easily with one of my blades.

Satisfied I'd done what I could do, I pushed open the pod door and ventured out to the side of the mountain.

Part of me wanted to just jump on the makeshift sled and plow down

the slope, but I wanted to make a bit of a test run before I committed to two thousand meters of downhill sledding. I needed to make sure I could steer and stop this thing, so I walked up the steep hill above the pod for a good fifty meters. The walk was tough because my feet kept sinking into the snow, and the angle was too steep, but I quickly figured out how to crawl up the slope while I held the paracord in my teeth.

“Alright, here it goes,” I said to the wind as I tried to place the sled so it was pointing at the back side of the pod. Then I set my ass on the pad, put my boots up to the front, and let the thing slide down the snow. I pulled up on the paracord after ten or so meters, and the sled slowed before it hit the side of the pod. It hadn’t slowed much, but it was a controlled slide.

I wasn't ready to go down the mountain yet. To test the steering, I climbed back up the hill and aimed my sled so it would pass on the right side of the pod and angle down the main flow of the mountain.

I jumped on the sled and let it travel for a few seconds, then I tugged on the right side of the rope while I leaned and managed to steer it over to the pod. Once my angle was correct, I pulled on both sides of the cord and slowed it down enough to keep me from face planting into the metal craft.

This was probably as good as it was going to get.

I took a few deep breaths to steady my nerves and then walked sideways so that I was a good ten meters to the right of the rocks and pod. The view down the slope made my stomach churn a bit. There weren’t as many rock formations jutting out of the snow, but there was still half a dozen, and I’d have to steer around all of them while controlling my speed. How fast would I end up going on this thing? The section ahead of me didn’t seem to have any more cliffs or vertical drops, but I wouldn’t be able to see something like that until I was right on top of it.

Even if I had some ice axes, it would take me all day to get down. I couldn’t tell exactly what time in the day it was since the sky was gray, but I couldn’t stay up here any longer.

I set the sled down and then jumped on it without another thought.

The pad began to slide downhill, and I reactively pulled on the paracord to slow myself. It worked for about fifteen seconds, but then the sled started to pick up too much speed, and I felt the cord stretch in my hands

as I yanked, but I was sliding too fast for it to make much of a difference.

I cut through the snow like a bullet, and the cold wind stung my eyes. There was a mass of black rocks jutting out of the snow down ahead of me, and I was going to hit them if I didn't turn. I yanked on the cord and leaned left to steer the sled away, but I pulled a little too hard, and the sled twisted on its side.

"Shit!" I growled as I tried to twist the pad back so that it was facing downhill. I yanked hard with my right hand while I leaned back, and the sled shifted so it was facing back down again. But now I'd closed a lot of distance between the boulders and myself, and I was running out of time.

I shifted right to continue the motion that had straightened out my sled, and I pulled only slightly on the steering cord. The sled responded smoother this time, and the pad shifted to point away from the rocks. I passed within a meter of one as I streaked down the slope, and I felt relief flood my stomach.

I was still going way too fast though, and I pulled left on the cord so I could avoid a distant group of sharp looking boulders. The turn happened as I expected and my makeshift sled steered away from the jagged chunks of rock.

I noticed that I slowed a bit when I turned, probably because I was yanking on the cords and leaning away from the slope. The motion reminded me of the various videos of skiers. They almost never took a line straight down the mountain. Instead, they carved long smooth lines across the surface of the slope. Maybe they did that to control their speed?

I pulled on the cord with my left hand a little more and angled the sled, so it was more horizontal across the drop of the mountain. I did start to slow significantly, but I couldn't continue on this route; there was another rocky ridge a few hundred meters ahead of me.

I turned right, so I faced down the hill and then continued to pull so that I was cutting across the face again. I was still going pretty fast, but the sled felt completely under my control now, and I was able to have way more time to figure out how to approach the rocky boulders.

I didn't know how long it took me to get down the mountain on the makeshift sled, but my arms, back, neck, and legs were sore by the time I made it to where the snow met with the rock garden at the foot of the

mountain.

My stop was a bit less than perfect, and I ended up not being able to slow down before the snow line. I bailed before the sled hit the rocks, and rolled through the snow. I wasn't injured from the tumble though, and I got to my feet with a long exhale.

"Well, that went better than I guessed," I said to the wind as I looked up the mountain. It was still cold down here, and there wasn't any tree cover for what seemed like another five kilometers of rough rocks.

I removed the pads from my body and then tied them together with the sled. I wouldn't need it anymore for snow, but the pad was going to be way more comfortable to sleep on than the ground.

And I was going to be spending a fuck load of nights on the ground.

I continued my way down the long expanse of rocky terrain. The stones here were all a bit bigger than bowling balls, sharp on at least two of the edges, and shifted under my weight when I stepped on them. The ties I made for my boots got cut off after about a thousand meters of walking, and I used some of the rope to try to tie the sole to the body of the boots again. The paracord was a bit too thick though, and these new straps got chewed up in another five hundred meters.

I didn't want to use more of the leather from my jacket, so I tried using the paracord again, but this time I used drilled holes in the sole with the dagger before I pushed the cord through them. This potentially allowed only a bit of the rope to touch the rocks, and I was able to make it to the tree line without having to work on them again.

The trees here were stout looking pines, and they provided a bit of cover from the cold wind. The sky was still gray, so I couldn't tell exactly what time it was, but it did feel as if it was getting a bit darker, and I estimated I would only have a few more hours before nightfall. I would need to find something for shelter while getting enough wood to start a campfire.

Fortunately, there were plenty of needles, twigs, and branches on the ground. Most of it was wet from the snow, but I was able to find dry pieces by kicking over the wet leaves and digging underneath. Soon I had a sizable stack of wood cradled in my left arm.

"Now I have to find shelter," I said to the trees, but as soon as I spoke,

there was a beep over my head, and I looked up to see the observer drone floating above me. It blinked at me with its single red eye, and I raised the middle finger of my right hand in salute.

I continued through the forest while I looked for anything which could give me a shelter from the wind. I found a fallen tree with part of its trunk eaten out with rot, but it didn't have much of a roof, so I kept walking. I soon came to a shallow ravine that dropped some four meters down into a creek bed. The water was mostly frozen, but there was a bit of water flow to it, and I went down to get a drink.

The water smelled fine to my sensitive nose, but it chilled my stomach when I drank from it and caused me to start shaking. It was just too fucking cold, so I grabbed the waterskin from my bag to drink from instead.

I held it up to my lips and had almost taken a drink, but then I pulled it down from my mouth and sighed. It probably wasn't poisoned, but I didn't want to risk it. I poured the stuff out on the ground and then went to work rinsing the skin out in the stream. I really didn't have a lot of time to waste on activities that weren't finding a shelter, but I also needed water.

After the twelfth rinse, I felt more confident that any potential poison had been flushed out and filled up my waterskin again. I took another few sips, sighed when the chill hit my stomach, and then picked up my bundle of firewood.

I climbed up the other side of the creek's ravine and then continued in the direction of the checkpoint. It could have been the water, but the brisk walk wasn't warming my body, and the sky was beginning to get darker. Either night was coming, or there was a storm brewing. Regardless, I didn't want to be without shelter for much longer.

The trees were growing a bit denser, but I didn't hear any birds or sounds of animals. I told myself it was probably too cold, but I also checked behind me periodically to make sure that nothing was stalking me.

I didn't see anything in the forest of trees, and I didn't smell anything besides the scent of tree sap, pine needles, snow, and wet dirt.

I was already moving at a good walking pace, but I felt like something was watching me, so I picked up my tempo a bit. Another hour of power-walking passed, and the feeling of uneasiness faded a bit. I had reached the

top of an incline, and I carefully descended the five-meter tall face of wet dirt, roots, and rocks before reassessing my surroundings. There was a massive tree at the bottom of the slope, and the center of it had been hollowed out by what looked like a lightning strike. The giant pine was still standing despite its grievous wound, and there was about a meter and half of space inside where I could take cover from the wind and cold.

I dumped my bundle of firewood down and pulled some of the softer tinder material I had collected out of my pocket. It took a single strike for a spark to catch, and I soon had a small fire a half a meter from the opening of the tree.

I roamed from the campsite a bit and grabbed more firewood. It was pretty easy to gather because the forest was thick, and I had soon stacked five new piles of wood in a circle around my tree. It was probably overkill, but I kept thinking about the stuffed uinu-bair in Madalena's waiting room. My campfire might be enough to keep any creatures away, but I liked the idea of an extra perimeter of fires that would help me see hostiles sooner.

The weather was growing colder, but the work of building the fires had warmed me. I didn't want to have to go looking for more wood in the middle of the night, so I roamed out of the camp circle again to collect more wood. I had to stray a bit farther for each armful of fuel, and the chill was starting to seep into my bones.

After I'd stacked wood near each of the six fires, I made a final journey out and toward one of the low hanging tree branches. This species looked similar to a holly tree, and its limbs were straight. I found one that had broken off in a storm, tested the flexibility of it, and then hauled it back to the campsite. It was a little shorter than me in length, but it would make a good spear once I removed the offshoots and made a point.

The first fire I made already heated the inside of the tree cavity, and I let out a long sigh when I sat down in the warmth. I was still pissed off about my current situation, but at least I wasn't chilled.

For now.

I'd have to move again tomorrow and would have to find a new camping spot for the night. I glanced down at the tracking device on my wrist and fought against a growl. I'd only made it seven or so kilometers. Granted, I wasted a bunch of time with fixing my boots and cleaning out my water

skin, but I was going to need to move faster.

My stomach growled, and I remembered the food in my pack. I pulled out one of the foil wrapped packages, pinched the side, and then tore it open. I almost took a bite before I remembered the water in my waterskin. Damn. I was hungry, but I didn't trust the food those fuckers gave me. I sighed and then tossed the opened package on the ground next to the fire. Then I pulled out the other ones and threw them next to the first.

I should have taken Madalena's advice and eaten more of the food. It was going to take a ton of energy to travel across this tundra, and my body would burn even more calories keeping me warm.

I grabbed the branch I intended to use as a spear and went to work on the small offshoot parts with my utility knife. I threw all the discards in the camp fire as soon as the shaft was cleaned, and I proceeded to work on the tip.

Then I heard the growl.

It sounded far away, but it was a cross between an alligator's rasp and a lion's roar. I had no hair on my body, but I felt goose bumps pop up on the back of my neck.

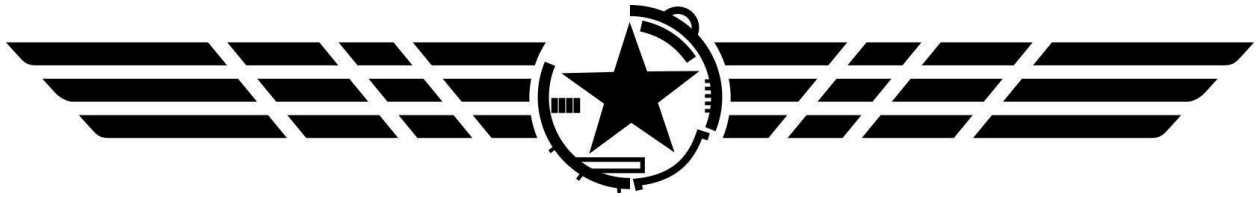
Then I heard another growl, and this one sounded a lot closer.

"Shit," I said as I stood with my half made spear in my hand. My sensitive eyes couldn't see any movement from the trees, but then I heard the third growl, and it sounded like it was coming from the top of the hill behind the tree.

I spun around and looked up the slope. There was little light beside my ring of campfires, but I did see movement on top of the ridge there. I half expected to see a massive uiun-bair, but the creature looked kind of like a wolf, or at least, it had the outline that reminded me of a large dog.

The creature turned its head down the hill to look at me, and its eyes reflected the red glow of the campfire. Then it let out a low reptilian-sounding growl, and I heard it echo from four other locations. They sounded like they had my campfire surrounded.

The drone floating above me beeped a few moments before the creature on the hill charged the ring of campfires.



Chapter 6

The creature tore down the hill with a few leaps then skirted my campfire. As it came into the circle of light, I saw that it looked kind of like an armadillo, only in a wolf-like shape. It had a long, wide mouth and hungry eyes that were fixed on me.

The eyes exploded out of its skull when I smashed it with my long spear.

The impact was hard enough to snap my piece of wood, and the creature stumbled crossways across the ground before it tumbled. I knew it was dead, but its six legs were still twitching, and its tail curled up like an armored snake.

I spun around and saw another one of the armadillo-wolves plunge into my camp. These creatures gave zero fucks about the fire, and I guessed they were either really ravenous or smart enough to know that the flame wouldn't hurt them if they didn't touch it.

Maybe they were both smart and hungry.

I dove toward the tree as the monster jumped at me. Its jaws made a snapping sound as it tried to bite my leg, but I somersaulted on my shoulder, and it missed me.

I brought the half length of wood back around and tried to smack it in the head, but the creature seemed to understand my intent, and it ducked back so he was out of range of my swing. Then he darted forward and tried to snap at my exposed leg. He didn't realize how fast I was though, and I brought the stick back around to hit him before his jaws could close around my knee.

The armadillo-wolf let out a yelp of pain when I hit him, but I didn't feel any bones crack with the impact. If anything, the fucker seemed even more pissed off than he was before, and he hissed at me as he paced around

to my left side.

I wasn't holding a weapon in my left hand, so I figured that these things were really damn smart.

I scanned the campfire line and saw two more of the creatures step into the light. This wasn't good. I might be able to take out this one fucker with my stick, but I couldn't defend against three.

Then four more of them stepped into the light from my right side.

I looked at the hollowed out tree while I waved my stick at the fucker in front of me. The hollow of the massive pine was large, but the opening was big enough for two or three of these wolf-creatures to come at me at once. I'd also be stuck in there, and wouldn't be able to retreat if I needed to.

One of the incoming monsters darted toward my right side and snapped at my leg. I lifted my foot up so that he missed, and then I brought my heel down on his skull. The armadillo-wolf yelped when my foot hit it, but he made an almost immediate bite at my foot. I threw myself backward and felt the thing's teeth scratch against the bottom of my boot sole.

One jumped at me, and I managed to get my stick into his mouth before it could bite my face off. The thing was heavy, but I was stronger than most men, and I managed to twist my hips sideways and fling him into two of the other armadillo-wolves. His jaws were strong though, and he ended up taking my stick with him when he flew.

I ran back toward my tree, and I heard jaws snap behind me. The trunk was too wide for me to get my arms around, but there was a knot in the wood about four meters up. I increased my sprinting speed, felt my boots start to break, prayed they would hold out for a few more seconds, and then jumped onto the trunk.

My right boot slammed against the tree bark, and I pushed off hard to help give me some extra height as I brought my left foot against the trunk. The boot started to break apart, but I pushed off as hard as I could so that I could turn and try to make a grab for the knot.

My fingers wrapped around the top of the knot, and I quickly pulled myself up so my legs were as far off the ground as I could get them.

I heard scratching down below me and planted the bottoms of my boots against the tree so I could lift myself farther away from them. The creatures

were making jumps up against the trunk, scratching the surface with their claws, and then trying to bite me. They were still a few meters short of reaching me though, and I let out a sigh of relief.

“Not tonight, fuckers,” I spat. They seemed to understand that I was taunting them, and they stopped their movements so they could look at me. Then they growled together, and I felt another chill of fear descend my spine.

They were super smart.

I looked up for another knot, or a branch, or anything I could use to climb higher, but I didn't see anything close enough for me to grab easily. The first branch of the tree was still a good three or four meters above me, and the knots between looked like they wouldn't hold my weight.

Fortunately, the knot I grabbed onto was large enough for me to get both of my feet on. It was still too small to be comfortable, and I wasn't looking forward to staying up here for a long time, but it was better than being eaten by a pack of armored wolves.

“I don't suppose you all would want to just fuck off and leave me alone?” I asked them as I glanced down at the forest floor. The creatures had been silent since I first spoke, but my question made them growl again.

One of the creatures moved over to the campfire by my tree, and it started to sniff at my backpack. It didn't find anything of interest there, but then it reached the pack of food I had opened, and let out a whine that sounded like surprise. The rest of the armadillo-wolves turned their heads around to stare at the other one, and they darted toward him as soon as he started eating the package of food.

The creatures tore into the packs of food urgently, and their feeding frenzy turned into a massive dogfight. The struggle allowed me to see the exact size and shape of their fearsome teeth and jaws. These creatures were all sorts of bad news, and I had been lucky to escape on the tree.

I couldn't stay up here forever though. Eventually, these things would finish fighting over my food. Then they would wait for me to come down. I was going to need a plan. I might be able to shift and take a few of them out, but I doubted I'd be able to fight all of them. All it would take was one tearing my throat open, and I would be dead.

The pack of beasts stopped fighting. There had been eight of them, but

three were now dead, and the rest continued feeding on the few packs of food I'd thrown. They finished eating them in half a minute, and then the group sat on their haunches and looked up at me.

"Well, shit," I said after I stared at the pack of animals for a few minutes. My legs were starting to get uncomfortable, and I had to switch the position of my feet on top of the knot. I was also starting to get cold again, and another shiver ran down my spine.

How the fuck was I going to get out of this?

If they had just given me a gun, the journey would have been a lot easier. I could have shot these fuckers without breaking a sweat and then gone back to sleep. But the spear had been next to useless against the pack. I knew that these rites were supposed to be completed by a group of young Nodar, but I couldn't imagine a group of kids getting through this mess alive.

Maybe that was why this pack was here. Maybe they knew the Nodar dropped off their young here, and they learned they could get an easy meal.

I looked up at the tree again and leaned my head around the trunk in an effort to find anything else I could grab onto. The bark had some deep valleys where I might be able to grab and pull myself up, but the activity seemed akin to kicking the can down the road. I would need to eat and drink. It would also be colder the higher I got on the tree.

Eventually, these things would have to leave, or I would have to fight them.

It was probably better to fight them while I was fresh.

I glanced back down at the campsite and debated my options. I could shift up here, then try to jump down and land on one of them. Maybe I could break its back when I landed on it, then I could cut into the others before they could jump at me. I would have to keep my chin down to protect my throat, but I'd also have to keep my arms free. All it would take is one of them clamping down on an arm or leg, and I would be pinned for the others to bite me.

As I studied the creatures, I noticed that one of them was shaking his head and looking at the ground. The behavior seemed a bit odd, but then he opened his mouth and vomited purple blood. The other scaled wolves turned

to look at him, and he leaned down to puke again.

Then his limbs froze, and he fell to the ground. He twitched once, twice, and then a third time before he lay still. It was obvious he was dead, but it took me a second to realize what was going on.

The food had been poisoned.

Another one of the armadillo-wolves started to puke, and the others turned to look at him. Then another one started to puke.

Soon they were all growling, puking blood, and twitching on the ground.

Then all of them were dead.

“Hot damn,” I gasped as I looked at the pile of dead creatures surrounding the tree.

The device on my wrist vibrated, and I looked at it while I clung to the bark.

Niflheim threat completed.

“Even better,” I said. Then I reached back down to the knot, hooked my fingers on top, and lowered myself down to the floor of the forest. My camp now smelt of disgusting vomit mixed with rancid blood, but I was alive and had completed the first part of three challenges.

I had gotten lucky, though, and I understood it wasn’t going to get any easier.

The fires were burning happily, but I knew I couldn’t stay here. The scent of blood was filling the air, and the wind would be carrying it in all directions. Any predator or scavenger within two kilometers would be here soon, and I needed to clear out before I had to fight any more of them.

I grabbed my backpack, adjusted the ties on my left boot, and then pulled a few brands from the fire. I held them in my hands like torches, and even though they didn’t burn that bright, they still provided a bit of light and heat. It would also be easy to light a new fire with them.

I moved away from my camp and into the dark forest. The temperature probably wasn’t much lower in the trees than it had been in my circle of light, but the darkness added to the chill factor, and my arm holding the burning wood began to shake. Fuck, what I wouldn’t give for a gun or a vehicle, or be

back on Persephone.

Or to be with my friends again.

An inhuman scream resonated through the freezing forest, and I turned back toward my campfire. The light was impossible to see now, but I guessed something smelled the blood on the wind.

I picked up my pace a bit more.

There was another embankment ahead of me, and I made my way down the loose dirt and into the belly of the snow filled ravine.

There was another scream, and it filled the air as if a thousand trumpets were being played out of tune. It still sounded as if it came from back at my campsite, but it wasn't that far away, and I didn't know if the creatures there would be able to track me.

Madalena did this shit when she was fourteen? Granted, she said she had been in a group, but this was still fucking insane. I was a grown man, a Marine, a trained killer, and I could shape-shift into a weretiger. The Nordar were tough motherfuckers.

I heard another screech, but this one came from the direction I was heading. I was still in the small gorge, and the screech had sounded above me. I didn't know if the creature who made the noise knew I was down here, but I decided I wanted to be safe instead of sorry, and I started running away from where I thought the noise originated.

There was another screech, and I turned to look behind me. The glow from my brands provided enough light to see eighty or so meters behind me, but I didn't see any movement in the gully where I ran.

I turned around, and my heart skipped a beat when I saw an uiun-bair standing fifty meters in front of me.

It was like the creature knew I would be coming from this direction. It stood on its hind legs, with massive paws raised like it was a praying-mantis. The stuffed one I saw in Madalena's waiting room had been huge, but the white furred monstrosity standing before me was much larger. It probably stood five, maybe even six meters tall, and each of its six paws was as large as my chest.

The thing opened its shark looking maw and screeched to the cold

night sky.

Four other screeches answered in the distance, and I let out a long exhale. The steam came from my nose and mouth, curled around my face, and then disappeared into the cold air as if it never existed.

I was so tired, and hungry, and cold.

But more than anything I was really fucking angry.

I wasn't going to die here. Fuck this monster. Fuck Madalena's father, fuck the Magate Order, fuck Alloprize, Nebula Gammon, and Elaka Nota.

Fuck that blond bastard who experimented on me.

Fuck the SAVO.

I wasn't going to let any of them win. I wasn't going to let them rule the galaxy. I was going to find my women.

The six-armed shark-bear monster looked down at me with a snarl, and time seemed to stop.

But I was shifting. I was changing. My body felt the strongest it ever had, but my mind embraced the rage and forged it into blades of malice that sprung from each of my fingers.

I felt my bones bend, elongate, and change along with my muscles and tendons. I felt the fur spring from my skin, and the cold instantly vanished. My teeth fell out and were replaced by razor sharp fangs that wanted to tear this monster's throat out.

My vision changed, and I saw the confusion in the uiun-bair's eyes. It had expected a man. It had expected an easy kill, but now it was faced with a monster more terrifying than it had ever imagined.

And the beast wondered if it was about to die.

"You are," I growled as sprinted the distance between us.

The shark-bear monster hadn't expected me to move so fast, and it was a half moment too late in getting one of its massive paws up so it could strike me. I dove at its right leg, and I scythed both of my paws across its right knee joint. I expected a bit of resistance to my claws, but they sliced through the thick fur as if it was made of soft clay. The creature screamed a moment after I struck, and it tried to bring a paw down to crush me, but I'd already darted

through his legs.

I swung my left-hand paw out at the back of the creature's left leg. My claws sliced clear through the monster's hamstring, and it howled in pain. The uiun-bair tried to spin around and bat me away with its claws, but I'd already jumped on its massive back, and I was using my claws as a climber would use an ice axe to scale a mountain. Each of my finger claws dug into its flesh with a spray of thick blood, and the monster let out another screech as I clawed my way up toward its massive head.

The uiun-bair's neck was surprisingly flexible, and the beast was actually able to turn its shark-maw toward me as I scaled his back. It snapped at me, but I was in mid-climb and my left hand was ready. I punched through one of his eyes with my claws, and the thing stumbled forward. I rode it as I climbed up another half meter. Then the thing tried to shake me off with each of its six arms.

It was too late though. I'd reached the monster's shoulders, and my own jaws sank into its thick neck.

My mouth filled with its blood. The liquid tasted coppery and warm, and like victory. I felt a set of the creature's paws move up to scrape across my back, but I tore my head up as I pushed away with my arms. The movement tore a massive chunk of the creature's flesh off in my mouth, and blood sprayed through the night sky like a fire hydrant spewing water.

The uiun-bair screeched and tried to paw at me again, but I bit down on the other side of its neck while I dug my right hand talons into the wound I'd created on the other side. My claws drilled through the warm flesh of his neck before they found its spine, then I tore another bite out of him while I pulled my arm back. His neck bones were as thick as a baseball bat, but it shattered in my hands, and my movement caused his head to rip free of his body.

The uiun-bair collapsed on its knees before it fell forward, but I had already sprung clear of his twitching corpse.

I was soaked in steaming blood. It felt as if I was standing in a sauna, but the beast who lived in my soul relished the taste and scent of the giant monster's death.

And I did as well.

I leaned my head back and let out a roar. It filled the night louder than the uiun-bair's had, and the other screams in the forest suddenly grew quiet. I knew they were coming, and that was fine. I'd kill them all, just like I did with this one.

I saw another uiun-bair lumber down the side of the gully and then roll down the slope. It really did move around like a bear and trotted toward me on all eight of its legs. This second one wasn't as large as the first I killed, but that didn't mean it wouldn't be as fun to murder.

The shark-bear skidded to a stop as it got closer, and the temporary halt to its momentum provided me the opportunity I wanted. I dashed toward the crouched monster and sprung onto its back before it could rear up and strike me.

My claws tore into its shoulders and neck as easily as I would fling up snow, and my quick strikes caused the air to fill with a shower of blood. I scooped up large pawfulls of the creature's fur and flesh with each strike. There was soon more blood outside of the monster than left in its body. It collapsed with a death moan, and I let out another roar of victory.

I scanned the top edges of the short ravine and saw four other uiun-bairs. They crouched along the edge and watched me with glowing red eyes. Steam from the gore on my body spiraled into the air, and I gestured for them to come down and feel my claws.

The creatures stared at me for a few more moments, looked at each other, and then moved away from the edge of the ravine. They were running, and I was half tempted to chase them down. I actually stepped toward the edge and reached my hand out to grab onto a root I could use as a ladder, but then realized it would be a waste of energy.

These monsters knew I was a more terrible creature than they were. They would leave me alone.

I reached down to the corpse of the second monster and plunged my claws into the still warm flesh. I found its massive heart, tore it out, and bit into it. I felt a purr of pleasure escape my maw as soon as I began my feast. The human aspect of my mind began to plan what I could do with the other parts of the two corpses.

The heart was about half the size of my head, but I ate it in less than a

minute. Then I pulled out the monster's liver, ate it, and then went to work on skinning the uiun-bair. My claws were sharp enough to do the work on the first corpse, but then I felt the tiger part of my DNA trying to take control of me, and I forced myself to shift back into a human. The change was harder than expected, and exhaustion hit me almost immediately. I still had enough energy to skin the first monster, but the task was much slower, and the sky was beginning to brighten by the time I finished.

Were the nights short on this world? Or had I just lost track of time and spent all night running, fighting, and skinning these creatures?

I now had two massive pelts. They were covered with a lot of blood that might attract other creatures, but I didn't have any more energy to worry about it. I rolled them both up, folded them twice, and then set them on my shoulders. They probably weighed a hundred kilos combined, and the shift back to my human form took most of my energy, but I wasn't ready to sleep yet.

I crawled up the side of the ravine, set down my load so I could repair my boots, and then picked up the pelts before moving again. Each footfall quickly became agonizing, and I started to stumble with every third step. Gone was the confidence I'd possessed when I was in my tiger-man form, and I knew I needed to find shelter soon.

I didn't know how much longer I walked, but the desire to sleep became overwhelming. I was now stumbling every other step, and I feared I'd faint soon. I normally slept right after I shifted back into my human form, but that must have been four or more hours ago.

I stumbled and fell on my knees for the first time. Getting up was difficult, and I groaned with pain. I hadn't seen any good spot to camp since I left the ravine where I skinned the uiun-bairs, and my brain was starting to tell me it didn't matter where I slept, as long as I did it right now.

"Fucking move, Adam," I growled to myself as I continued my walk.

My head was spinning, and I couldn't keep my eyes open. I stumbled again, and getting up to my feet felt like the hardest movement I had ever made. I needed to sleep more than anything else.

Then I heard a cry.

My eyes snapped open, and I peered into the branches of the trees

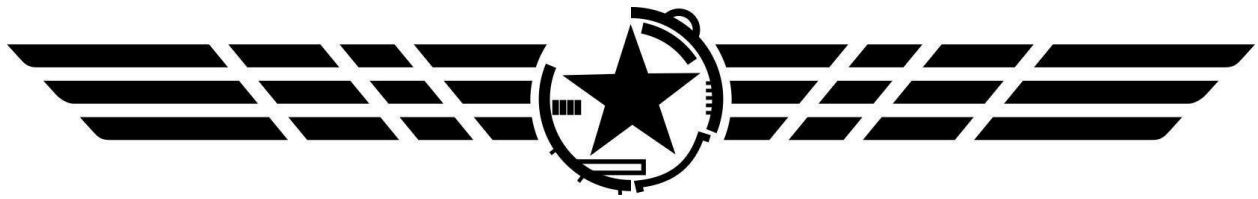
above me.

The cry sounded again, and I realized the noise was coming from a black bird sitting in the branches of a large tree. The bird was large, and it had a curved beak like that of a raptor. It looked a bit like a black eagle, but its feathers ended at its head, and there were armored scales on its head instead.

The bird turned to look at me with intelligent eyes, and then it cried out one final time before it took to the air. I didn't see where it flew. Instead, my eyes stayed focused on where it was perched. Three branches were running in parallel there, and they formed a bit of a platform. The ledge was some ten meters above the forest floor, and other low hanging branches created a bit of a ladder I could climb to reach it.

I didn't question my luck for too long. I almost didn't have the strength to climb up the branches with the pelts on my shoulders, but the effort was worth it. I rolled out one of the pelts on the shelf, lay on top of it, and then covered myself with the second one. Everything smelled like blood, and death, and violence, but the scents were strangely comforting.

Then I slept.



Chapter 7

My journey was significantly easier after the first night.

When I finally awoke, I made my way down the tree and continued toward the first checkpoint. I found a stream to wash off the pelts, and I was able to use the paracord to craft better foot coverings with the skins. I also fashioned bulky winter clothes from one pelt and kept the second as a blanket. That process took most of my second day, but then I traveled much faster.

The cold days passed. The colder nights came.

I was hungry. I was thirsty. I was lonely, but soon those sensations and desires took a backseat to the goal of moving toward the checkpoint. When I slept, I dreamed of Zea, Eve, Kasta, and Paula. But around the third night, I started thinking about Madalena, and I couldn't seem to get the brown-haired warrior woman out of my head. It was frustrating, but only because the anger I felt for her had cooled, and I wished I had seen her before I left for this planet.

I could have sent her to Queen's Hat to talk to Juliette. I could have sent her after my friends. I could have spoken with her and learned more about her life. Instead, I'd focused too much on trying to get out of this rite instead of doing something useful.

The beast in my soul growled as if to tell me I was being too hard on myself.

The conversations twisted and spun in my head after days of lonely walking and surviving. I'd grown bored with talking with myself, and all I possessed were my memories of the things I'd fucked up. Maybe it was the way of warriors though. We tended to agonize over the mistakes we had or often hadn't made. On top of the kidnapping of my crew, I had dozens of fallen brothers during my work in the Marines. I'd always beaten myself up

over the what ifs. What if I'd shot the enemy a split second faster, what if I'd been to the location two seconds sooner? What if I'd zigged instead of zagged? In hindsight, every death of a comrade was my fault.

I should have been better, but that was part of being a Marine. I was still alive, and I'd work my ass off to get better.

Then I'd save my friends and kill the assholes who took them.

It could have been day five, or maybe it was six when I crested a snow-covered hilltop and saw a settlement in a valley down below. It was only twelve or so buildings, but I saw a trio of vehicles parked in front of the largest of them. It was mid-morning, and the rising sun kissed the rooftops of the structures with an orange glow.

One of the vehicles was a truck, and the two others were smaller sloped vans. They had big snow tires on the rear, and the fronts had a single large tire lifted over the hood. Where the tire should have gone were a pair of ski-like sled skiffs. I saw that the wheel could be lowered to use instead of the skis, but the ground was still deep with snow, so they were running it the other way.

The buildings looked surprisingly stout, almost like mini-fortresses, and some even had two-meter high brick walls around them. I supposed it made sense since the uiun-bairs and armadillo-wolves were roaming throughout the wilds.

I had crafted a new wooden spear that served a double purpose as a walking stick, and I leaned on it for a few seconds while I plotted my path down the steep side of the hill. I wasn't sure if these people would be friendly, or if they would help me, but I knew I needed to get one of those vehicles. Maybe someone would trade a pelt for a ride, or maybe they would take me south out of the goodness of their heart.

Or maybe I'd have to take one.

I didn't like the idea of stealing, but I was a desperate man, and every day that passed meant another day my friends spent in captivity. I'd do my best to barter with people or exchange work for a ride, but I was done being nice to people.

I'd been nice to Madalena and look where that got me.

I growled to myself as soon as the thought entered my mind. It wasn't

fair for me to blame her. She'd been grateful I'd saved her, then had given herself to me because she felt honor bound to pay me back. Her crewmate fucked up her plan to help me, and she tried to do the best she could to prepare me for this.

And I'd turned her away.

"Fuck," I sighed and then wiped the uin-bair mitten over my face. I was thinking about the Prime Valkyrie again. It was getting harder to not think of her. I remembered every detail of her face, her eyes, her hair, and the shape of her body under her suit. She had mentioned something about me thirsting for her. The sensation wasn't quite that powerful, but I did find myself thinking about her every time I thought about Eve and Zea.

I occupied myself with trekking down the hill. Once I'd made it to the main street of the village, I moved to the door of the main building and listened. I heard voices inside, but I couldn't understand what they were saying. I did see a picture of what looked like a beer mug on the side of the door, so I guessed this was a tavern.

I took a deep breath and entered the place.

The voices stopped conversing as soon as I stepped inside, and I scanned the dimly lit room to get my bearings. The place was a tavern, with a long bar at the far side of the room, a dozen wooden tables in the middle, and three large booths on either side of the wall. There was the stuffed head of some horned creature above the bar, along with a pair of Viking style shields and axes. There was also a television on the right wall, but no sound came out of it.

Ten men and three women were inside the tavern. Two of the men were stationed behind the bar. Three were sitting at the bar, and five were gathered around one of the tables. The three women sat at a separate table to the side of the men, and they gave me terrified looks. All the men and women were clothed in wool sweaters, thick pants, and wore mittens tied around their necks. The men were all drinking beer and eating breakfast, but the women weren't eating or drinking.

The inhabitants of the tavern stared at me in silence, and then a beep sounded from the ceiling above me. The room looked up to the observer, and then down to me.

“I need a ride south. I’ve got a little over five thousand kilometers to go before--” I knew enough about body language to know that something in the men’s faces was off, so I dropped the pelt from my shoulder and drew my spear arm back as one of the men at the table reached toward his belt.

He got a revolver halfway out of its holster before my spear hit him in the chest. The man had his finger on the trigger of his gun, and it went off at the same time as my throw punched through his ribcage. As he tumbled back, the rest of the men in the tavern went fishing for their handguns.

I reached to my right and grabbed the legs of one of the tables as the tiger in my soul roared a warning. The table was made of a heavy hardwood, but I was able to toss it through the air with a twist of my hips and a grunt. The table flew three meters and smacked into the two closest sitting men.

One of the assholes behind the bar pulled out a double-barrel, and I dove to my ten o’clock position a half-moment before his blast went off. He missed me somehow, but I heard the women scream with terror. Their cry was interrupted by another two shots that sounded as if they came from revolvers, but these also missed me as I rolled, and I managed to come up next to the table where the closest group of men sat.

The table I had thrown caused the remaining two men to fall backward out of their chairs. Neither one of them had pulled their guns out of their holsters yet, so I decided to worry about the fuckers at the bar for now. I grabbed the edge of the table, flipped it over for some cover, and then leaned out the side to assess the situation at the bar.

It was just a quick glance, but the men were pointing their firearms toward the table, and I had to throw myself backward as they shot. Their bullets tore into the table, but all of them missed me.

One of the pair on my side had gotten his revolver out, and I rolled away as he fired. His hands shook as he aimed at me, so I guessed he would miss, and I was proven correct when his bullet went wide.

More bullets tore through the air and punched through the table, but none of them came close to hitting me. That wasn’t going to last forever though, all these fuckers had to do was take a few dozen steps to either side to flank me, and there wasn’t anything I could do about it.

For the moment.

I finished my side roll and then pounced forward to the man who just missed me. He tried to twist his revolver up so he could aim at me, but I grabbed his arm and bent it so that his weapon pointed at the other man who had dived to avoid my table.

I pushed my finger through the trigger guard and then squeezed the man's hand. The revolver went off and the second man's head burst open like a rotten watermelon.

The man who I grappled with was strong, but he wasn't nearly as strong as me, and he didn't really know how to wrestle. He tried to pull his revolver away from me, but I just smacked my left forearm into the inside of his elbow while I pushed on the handgun. Despite his efforts, his arm collapsed into a bicep curl, and I was able to twist the gun so the barrel pushed into his jaw.

Then I pulled the trigger causing the top part of his head to erupt like a volcano.

I yanked the gun from the dead man's fingers a half-second before one of the three men at the bar got the idea to move around the side of the room. He was making a run toward one of the tables, but he was only five meters away, and the revolver I held obeyed my aim. The bullet took him in the chest, and he spun around like a top before he tumbled to the ground.

Silence fell across the room, and I crawled back so I was closer to the wooden table between the bar and the two men I'd just killed. I didn't think the other two men I'd hit with the table were dead, but I saw that they weren't moving, so I didn't think I would have to worry about them for a few minutes. I only had to worry about the two fuckers behind the bar, the two men in front of the bar, and the women.

I glanced over to the women and saw that they had all moved to the far side of the room. Then I saw something shiny on their legs, and I narrowed my eyes.

The women were all shackled together.

I heard the action of the double barrel shotgun snap closed, and I popped up from behind the table with my new revolver ready. The fucker with the shotgun was lifting it up to aim at me, but I put my penultimate bullet in between his eyes before he could line the weapon up.

I popped back down below the table, and the other men shot through the table again. One of the bullets hit me in my right shoulder, and I felt it shatter a bone there. Fortunately, it punched out the other side, and I wasn't going to have to worry about digging it out later.

I switched the revolver to my left hand and then leaned out the same side of the table. One of the men was jumping over the bar, and my last shot hit him right in the tailbone. He screamed as his spine shattered, and I saw the lower half of his body go limp as he fell.

I was out of bullets now, but the last two fuckers might not know that. All they knew was that I had fired five shots and now six of their friends were dead. I imagined I'd have a bit of time, so I ignored the agony in my shoulder, belly crawled over to the man I'd taken the gun from, set my revolver down, and reached into his pockets. His pants had a wallet, and metal devices I guessed were keys to one of the vehicles. His coat pocket had what felt like ten loose bullets, and I yanked them out with my fingers as deftly as I could.

My sensitive ears heard the men whispering to each other from the other side of the bar, but I couldn't understand their language. I grabbed the revolver in my right hand and clenched my teeth against the pain of my shattered shoulder bone while I opened up the cylinder. I pushed on the cylinder's ejector rod to push out the bullets, but I let them fall on my chest instead of on the ground. Then I pushed six bullets in as quietly as I could. The men were still planning how to take me out, but they stopped talking when I pushed the cylinder back into the revolver.

I moved the gun back to my left hand, scooped up the spent brass with my right, and then shifted to a crouching position. I heard muffled movement from the bar, and I knew that they were moving to opposite sides so they could both flank me.

I slowly let the brass fall out of my right hand while aiming my revolver out the left side of my table. The asshole took my bait and sprinted from behind the bar so he could catch me while I was reloading. My shot hit him in the neck, and he tumbled to the floor with a gagging sound. I heard the other fucker start to run, and I pushed down on my heels so that I sprung up from behind the table. He had grabbed the other man's double barreled shotgun, but my bullet hit him in the center of the chest, and he fell over

backward as he pulled both of the triggers. The shotgun went off, but it only sprayed buckshot into the ceiling.

I spun around and aimed my gun at each of the bodies. The fucker I'd just shot was gagging still, but I didn't want to waste a bullet on him. The two men I'd hit with the table were breathing, and I did decide to waste a bullet on each of their skulls. I moved to the rest of the men, confirmed they were all dead, and then turned to the women.

But I froze when I saw the television screen.

A video of me inside of the space fortress' elevator was playing.

"Hey, do any of you speak English?" I asked the four women. They looked at each other, and one of them nodded.

"You do?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered with a head nod.

"Why am I on this screen?" I pointed up with the gun and realized my injured shoulder was starting to itch.

"You are Adam," she replied. She had ice blue eyes and dark red hair. One of the other women looked very similar to her, and I guessed they were sisters. The third woman was blonde, and she had dark eyes. All three of them had dirty faces, but they were attractive.

"Yes, I am Adam. What the fuck does that have to do with me being on the screen?"

"They say you murdered King Vaish's warriors and escaped here. Every news station is playing your picture. There is a..." she grasped for the word and then her eyes opened when she seemed to have remembered it, "reward. There is a big reward for anyone who kills you."

"Fucking shit. Of course there is." My heart hammered in my chest, and my stomach went numb. How many people were on this planet? Would they all be looking for me? Would they know the location of where my pod landed?

The women's eyes opened wide when I cursed, and I forced my lips to smile.

"Look, I didn't murder anyone. You three are safe from me."

“You murder them,” the woman said as she pointed at the dead men.

“That was self-defense,” I said.

“You had spear. They were ten with pistols. They are dead.” The woman smirked a bit and then shrugged.

I looked around the room at the dead bodies and then gestured to the women’s legs. “Why are you chained? Are you slaves?” Madalena had told me her people didn’t have slavery, but here were three pretty women shackled together.

“No slaves,” she said as she shook her head.

“Then why the shackles?” I asked, and my mind drifted to thoughts of my enslaved friends. Were they shackled like this inside of the Magate Order ship?

Had they already been sold?

“We are thralls,” the redhead said.

“So slaves.” I sighed.

“No. Thralls. We are no slaves.”

“Whatever. Which one of these fuckers had the keys?” I asked as I gestured to the bodies.

“Him,” the redhead said as she gestured to the first man I shot.

I went over to the corpse and searched his pockets. This man had three speed loaders, a wallet, condoms, and a keyring. I tossed the keys to the redhead, and she caught them easily.

“Unlock your shackles. You are free.”

“Not free,” she said as she shook her head. “Thralls.”

“Okay, well. I have to get to my checkpoint and complete the rite of passage. So you can do whatever the fuck you want to do.” I pulled the man’s gun out of his dead hand and inspected it for quality. It was a bit larger of a caliber than the one I had used to kill all these men, and I set it down on a table along with his gun belt.

The three women unlocked themselves and then watched me search the corpses. I stopped after I took the wallet, bullets, and gun off the third body, and glanced over at them.

“You are free. You can leave if you want.”

“We are thralls. Nowhere to go,” the redhead answered.

“What does that mean? I’m not Nordar.”

“We served him,” she said as she pointed to the first man I killed. “We still owe debt. Now we serve you.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. No. You can all go. I release you from your--”

“We did not like him,” the other sister said. Her accent was broken, and she was hard to understand. “He mean. Hurt us. Sex with other men.” She looked at the corpses on the ground.

“And you aren’t slaves?” I asked as I tried to keep my blood from boiling.

“No. We were Idonan blood clan. Rowers on the ship *Yessanda*. We were captured by Vaish,” the sister who had done most of the talking so far said.

“Rowers? How do you row a spaceship?” I asked.

“Ahh. I might not know right word. We helped with upkeep and duties around ship. Logs and cleaning.”

“So non military?”

“Warriors? All Nordor are warriors, we are not the best warriors. We good rowers, though.” The woman smiled, and her face seemed to brighten.

“How did you end up down here on this planet then?” I moved to the next corpse and started checking his pockets. Another set of keys, more ammo, another revolver, and a wallet filled with paper money.

“Thrall,” she stated.

“No, I get that, but if you were on a starship, and the Vaish captured you, how did you end up on this planet?”

“We asked to serve here. Dangerous on starship because of war and we might fight our own clan. Thralls on planet can become freemen or women, and have families. Maybe become adopted into clan if they pass new rite.”

“And then you ended up with him?” I asked as I gestured to the corpse.

“Ya. Sold.”

“This sounds a lot like slavery to me,” I said with a sigh.

“No. We are thra--”

“So you want to pay off your debt?” I cut her off.

“Ya,” she nodded, and then the other two mirrored her movement.

“Can you help me get to my check point? I am doing Odin’s rite of passage.”

“Odin?” she asked with amazement. Then she turned to the other two women and spoke a few words to them.

“Yeah. I need to go about fifty-one hundred kilometers south to the next checkpoint. Then I have to go another fifty or so before they will take me to the next planet. I don’t know if that will clear your debt, and if you don’t want to, you don’t--”

“You hurt,” one of the women said as she pointed to my shoulder.

“I’m fine. Like I said, you all don’t need to worry about me. You can leave now and have your freedom. I just need to get south to the checkpoint so I can complete my rite.”

“We will do it,” the first woman said quickly. “We can submit to you, and then--”

“No!” I shouted, and the women flinched. “I got into this whole mess because the wrong woman submitted to me. You don’t have to help me, but I’d appreciate it. Don’t just agree. Ask your friends.”

The woman I spoke to turned to the other two, and they exchanged a few words while I finished looting the rest of the men. There were two revolvers in the larger caliber and six speed loaders for them. I strapped on two of the belts, holstered the handguns, and then stashed the loaders in small leather pouches on the belt.

The other seven pistols were smaller caliber, but I had about eighty bullets left. I picked out the nicest four of weapons and then went through the men’s wallets. Once I was done sorting their cash, I grabbed the shotgun, broke it open, left it on the table, and pulled the two boxes of shells from behind the bar. It was thirty shots, but that meant I’d be able to kill thirty fuckers.

“We will do it,” the woman with the best English said.

“Alright. Thanks,” I said. “You might need these,” I said as I gestured to the four guns.

“Thralls cannot have weapons, unless for hunting.” She shrugged.

“Alright,” I replied. “No guns. I can carry more.” As I spoke, I saw the woman with the blonde hair and the dark eyes stare at the plates of discarded food on the ground of the tavern.

“What are your names?” I asked.

“I am Hegeia,” The woman with the best English and the light blue eyes said. “My sister is Waiola.” The other redhead nodded at me. “This is Uma.” The blonde woman with the dark eyes smiled at me.

“Are you three hungry?” I asked Uma as I made an eating motion with my hand.

“Ya,” she said with a nod.

“Is there food in the back?” I asked them as I pointed to the door at the side of the bar. “How about a shower?”

“They brought the food from the back, so there will probably be a kitchen,” Hegeia said. “I do not know about shower. The building is big, and the owner lived here. There must be one.”

“Alright. You three go cook us breakfast. Then we can shower and get out of here. Do you all know how to drive?”

“Ya. We can drive.” Hegeia nodded.

“Do the cars here take fuel cells? Or powerpacks? Internal combustion?” I asked as I moved to the door. There was a narrow window on the side of the exit, but the glass was thick, and I couldn’t really see the cars parked in front.

“Fuel cells. If you want to drive ten thousand kilometers, you will need to purchase more.”

“Is that money on the table enough?” I asked as I locked the front door of the tavern.

“Ya,” Hegeia replied. “For food too.”

“Good,” I replied. “You three figure out breakfast and get showered. I’ll finish with the guns and then search the rest of the house. Understood?” I

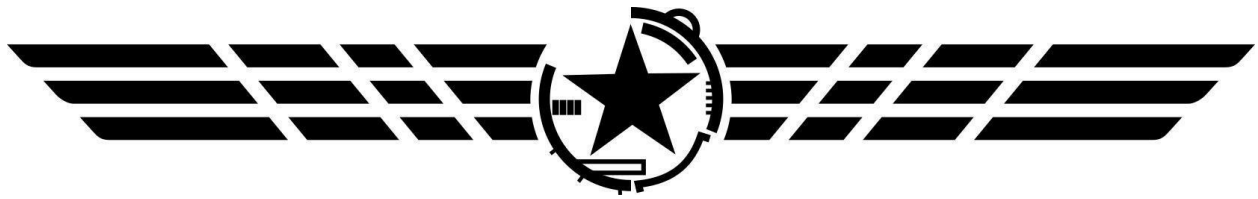
looked out the window again, but I didn't see any movement on the street. I guessed the walls of the tavern had dampened the sound of my gunfight, or maybe the men inside here were the only other people who lived in this village. Either way, it didn't look like anyone else was on the streets, and this locked door looked stout enough to hold off an uiun-bair.

For a few hours at least.

"We cook for you. Then we will bathe." Hegeia spoke a few words to the other young women. They nodded, smiled at me, and then walked back behind the bar.

I went back to the bar, grabbed a bottle of whiskey from the top shelf, opened it, and then took a long pull from the bottle. It burned a bit heading down my throat, but that was what I wanted. I was alive still. Even after King Vaish had tried to stab and poison me.

Now I just had to worry about an entire planet that wanted me dead.



Chapter 8

My three new recruits cooked a bunch of eggs, toast, and bacon they had found in the kitchen. I ate my plate in less than ten seconds, and Uma told Hegeia she would make me more while the other two women showered.

I finished searching the house above the tavern and found a large jacket I could wear instead of the uiun-bair fur. I had hoped to find a nicer pair of pants or some boots, but the man who owned the tavern was much smaller than me, and the only garment that fit me was the bulky jacket. The clothes the other men wore were either stained with blood or food, and they were all too small for me, anyway.

Hegeia and Waiola had finished showering when Uma brought me out a second plate of eggs. The sisters cleaned up nicely, and they had replaced their previous clothes with loose fitting pants and sweaters I presumed they took from the man's closet.

"Uma, go shower," I told the blonde woman with the dark eyes after she proudly presented me the second plate of hot food. Hegeia translated, and the dark eyed women nodded to me before she went up the stairs to the home.

"How long has that been playing?" I asked Hegeia as I nodded to the television on the wall.

"Three or four days," she said.

"Hmmm," I said around my food. King Vaish must have started playing it shortly after it was apparent I was going to get out of the wilderness. Did Madalena know about her father stacking the odds against me? It seemed like a lot of extra work to ensure that I died before he got the chance to hang me from the tree.

"You not hurt?" Hegeia asked as she pointed at my injured right shoulder. I was eating with my left hand, and I could feel the shattered bones

on my right starting to pull back together.

“I am, but I’ll be fine,” I said as I ate another bite of breakfast. It was actually delicious, and I thought about asking them to make me more, but I also wanted to continue on with my mission.

“Most people are looking for you,” Hegeia said.

“Most people?” I asked.

“Ya. It is high bounty. A lot of money. Ronnolo came up here with us because others are coming to look for you, and they might want sex at night.”

I already guessed from their earlier conversation that their owner was pimping them out, but the way Hegeia spoke was strange. It was as if she bore the man no malice. Maybe the strangeness wasn’t so much the lack of emotion, but these women had seemed much easier to read than Madalena’s clan. The Idonan’s appeared to be more emotional, but Hegeia didn’t seem angry about being pimped out.

“I didn’t see anyone else in the wilderness,” I said.

“This is far off place. They are coming,” Hegeia said, and then Uma said something as she walked into the room where we ate. The blonde woman had also found some bulky and loose fitting clothes to wear, and she was towel drying her hair with what looked like a bed sheet. Hegeia nodded at her, said a few words in their language, and then turned back to me.

“We think that we should be leaving soon,” the redhead said to me, and the other two women nodded.

“Okay. Let’s load up one of the cars with whatever we need to bring and then get going.

“You should shower first though,” Hegeia said. “We are grateful to be your thralls, but we will be in the vehicle for many days together.”

“Oh yeah,” I sighed. “I probably smell terrible.”

“We will prepare the van for the journey.” Hegeia stood from the seat she’d taken at the table and took a step toward the front door.

“Wait,” I said, and the three women turned to look at me.

“I’ve been betrayed before. I could use your help, but I also want to let you know that you three can go free if you want.”

“We are thralls. We--”

“Yeah, I get you have some sort of honor wrapped up in this. Here is the thing, I don’t want to get down to a city somewhere, have you three decide you want the bounty on my head, and then turn me in. You just saw me kill ten men. I don’t want to kill women, but I need to get to the checkpoint. You three can go free now, or you can promise to help me. If you are thinking about turning me in, it won’t end well for you. Get it?”

“I understand,” Hegeia said with a slight smile. Uma asked a question, and Hegeia spoke to the other two women. They seemed upset, and both of them shook their heads as they looked at me. Uma spoke rapidly, and then Hegeia translated.

“You have already treated us better than we could have hoped for. We will help you. We will help you until we are freewomen or you let us submit to you. We owe King Vaish nothing.”

“Alright,” I said. “Load up whichever vehicle you think will get us to where we need to go. I’ll take a quick shower.”

The three women smiled at me and then moved toward the front door of the tavern. I took the last two bites of my food and then ran up the stairs and to the shower.

The bathroom was only two meters long by maybe a meter and a half wide. It had a small sink, tiny toilet, and shower that my shoulders were too wide to fit inside of. In fact, the shower in my suite on Persephone was probably about twice the size of this space.

And it was a hell of a lot cleaner.

I locked the door, turned on the water, and stripped off my clothes as fast as I could. Then I jumped into the lukewarm water while I held onto one of my newly acquired revolvers. I really wasn’t expecting the women to betray me, but the last time I’d thought nothing bad would happen, I’d lost my four best friends.

It was a bit difficult to wash with the injury in my right shoulder, but the range of motion was returning, and the broken bone felt as if it was halfway healed. As soon as I finished cleaning myself, I threw back on my blood stained pants and tied my boots on. I looked at the shirt, realized it was too nasty smelling, and just decided to put the jacket on. Next I put my gun

belts back on before unlocking the door and heading down the stairs. I kept one of the revolvers in my hand as I poked my head back into the front room of the tavern. I realized that I had lied to myself a bit; I expected the three women to betray me, so I was surprised to see them come in through the front door without leading a bunch of armed men to me.

“We have cleaned one of the vehicles, taken some extra fuel cells from the other two, put some food inside, and also some alcohol.” Hegeia pointed to the top shelf of the bar, and I saw that they had cleaned it out.

“Okay. Great. So you are ready to go?” I asked.

“Ya, but you should bring shotgun.” Hegeia gestured to the double barrel sitting on the bar. “We are not allowed to move it.”

“I won’t forget. Let’s get--” I stopped talking when I heard two doors slam through the walls of the tavern. The three women’s eyes opened wide, and they dashed to the window beside the door.

“Men. They have guns and come this way.”

“How many?”

“Four. No. Five,” she answered, and the three of them moved away from the window.

“Did they see you packing up the vehicle?” I asked.

“No. We saw no one outside,” she answered.

“Get back into the kitchen,” I told them.

The beast in my stomach growled and then screamed when I didn’t let him take control of my body. I didn’t need him to kill these men, and he’d just scare the shit out of the three women helping me.

“We could lock door?” she asked me with a hopeful expression.

“Nope. Something tells me these are the first of many. I need to take care of them, and then we have to get the fuck out of here.” I pointed to the back room and reached for the shotgun.

“We could distract them?” Hegeia asked with a shrug, and the look on her face explained what she meant by distract.

“No. I can take out five. You three don’t need to do tricks while you’re with me.” I loaded the shotgun with shells from my pocket, snapped the

action shut, and then put four shells into the palm of my left hand.

The women ran back into the kitchen without saying anything else, and I aimed the shotgun at the front door. The handle on it twisted, and I took one step to my right so I'd have a better angle on the opening.

The first man took a load of buckshot in the chest and flew away from the doorway like a rag doll. The other four men didn't have time to gasp because I stepped through the open door, aimed my weapon at the man bringing up the rear, and pulled the trigger. My second shot caused his head to disappear, but his corpse stayed standing as I turned to the closest fucker on my right.

These men were dressed in cold weather gear, and they carried bolt action hunting rifles. They hadn't expected me to be waiting for them, so their weapons were resting on their shoulder straps instead of in their hands.

Too bad for them.

The butt of my shotgun smashed the third fucker's face in, and then I spun to elbow the fourth man in the nose. He screamed as my strike caused his face to break, but I was already turning to the last man. He was actually bringing his rifle up to aim at me, but I brought my shotgun low and around to knock his weapon clear before I brought the butt back up to slam into his face. His head snapped back, and he tumbled down the stairs to land in the snow.

I broke open the action of my shotgun and replaced the two shells with fresh ones from my left hand. The other homes and structures on the street showed no activity, but I couldn't shake the feeling that there were eyes on me.

"Waidola, Uma, and Hegeia!" I shouted back into the tavern, and the three women ran out of the kitchen. I gestured to the bodies of the men, and they helped me pull them inside of the tavern. I thought two of them were still alive, but the damage I'd done to their skulls hinted that they might not wake up from their coma.

"Search their pockets and take any money," I ordered after we'd dragged the men inside. The women quickly dug through the men's pockets while I checked the snowy street. I didn't see anyone else, but my gut was telling me there were hostiles out there.

“We have all their money--” Hegeia started to say, but I interrupted her.

“There is someone out there,” I said. “I need one of you to hold this shotgun while I use one of the rifles.”

“We can’t--”

“You don’t need to shoot it. Just hold it,” I said as I held it out to her.

“No. Thralls cannot--”

“I take,” Uma said as she grabbed the shotgun from me. She nodded toward the doorway and then took the pair of shells from my left hand. I passed them to her, and Hegeia said some disapproving words in her own language. Uma didn’t seem to care though, and Waiola bent down to pick up a rifle. The action made Hegeia gasp, and she turned to her sister.

“We don’t have time for you to get angry at her,” I said as I grabbed Hegeia’s shoulder. “You need to go out to the vehicle, back it up to the door, and we’ll run in. I’ll cover you from the doorway. You have to go quick. Any assholes out there might guess you are helping me.”

“Ya,” Hegeia said as I grabbed the nicest looking bolt action rifle from one of the men. It only had iron sights, but it felt comfortable enough in my hands, and I stepped next to the door.

“Ready?” I asked as I looked over my shoulder at the three women. Both Uma and Waidola were grabbing short stack rifle magazines from the men, but Hegeia’s eyes were on me. The redhead nodded, and I gestured for her to run.

She sprinted out the door, and I leaned out afterward. My thumb flipped off the safety, and I swept the sight across the walls of the buildings while she ran. She made it to the middle van, jumped in, and I heard a chime sound as the hydrogen engine cycled on.

There was a movement at my two o’clock, and I leaned out of the door so I could bend around the side of the entry. There was a figure in a second story window, and I saw the outline of his silhouette against the sunlight. I couldn’t make out his exact details, but he was in a crouched firing position, and it seemed as if he was pointing a rifle in my direction. My reflexes kicked in, and the sight of my rifle swung to his position. My finger squeezed before I even realized I had the shot lined up, but I knew my aim was true a

split second after the bullet left the barrel of my rifle. It punched through the window across the street, and the silhouette went down before he could get his own shot off.

Hegeia's rear tires spun for a second before they grabbed onto the snow, and then the van lurched back into the street. I swung my rifle over the buildings and saw a flash of light come from the far left part of the settlement.

A gunshot echoed out across the street, and I saw the man's head explode. I glanced down and saw Waiola crouched next to me in the doorway. She made the shot, and it had been a damn fine one.

"Good job," I said as I turned my rifle back to the right side of the street. "You cover that side."

"No talk Hegeia," Waiola whispered as her sister backed the van up to the stairs of the tavern. I figured she didn't want her sister to know she'd killed someone, and that was fine with me. She'd probably just saved my life.

"Got it. Uma, go!" I ordered as I scanned the right side of the street.

The blonde woman ran between Waiola and me, jumped down the bloody stairs, and then sprinted toward the van. I heard Waiola fire and saw another man fall out of the corner of my eye.

"Go, Waiola!" I shouted as soon as Uma had jumped into the van.

"I go!" The redhead sprang up from next to me and dashed down the stairs.

As Hegeia's sister made the short sprint, I saw a pair of men lean around the farthest building on my right. They popped back around the corner quickly, and I figured they guessed I didn't see them.

Their position left me in a bit of a bind. The direction was south, and that was the direction we needed to drive to get out of the city. The men knew I was positioned at the door of the tavern, and I guessed they were either trying to flank me, or they were holding their position at the south side of the structure. If we drove past the two men, they would be able to get shots off at Hegeia. The van didn't look armored, and I believed the bullets would have no problem hitting her, or maybe taking out a tire.

I scanned the left side of the street and didn't see any other movement.

These two men could be the last in the village, but I had no way to be sure. All I knew was that I was going to have to take them out before we got away, and they weren't going to make it easy on me.

I jumped down the stairs and sprinted past the van. I heard the women cry out, but I didn't have time to explain what I was doing. They were going to have to figure it out from my actions.

I sprinted across the street, dove beside a thick stone wall, and brought my rifle up to aim at the end of the alley. I didn't hear anything but my heart hammering in my chest. So, I got back on my knees and sneaked to the end of the wall. I hated that I was leaving the women alone, but I had a suspicion that Waiola would have no problem using her rifle again.

I reached the end of the walled structure and listened for any sound of movement. At first, I didn't hear anything, and I almost stepped around the corner, but then my sensitive ears picked up the sound of a footstep crunch on the snow. I waited another moment and heard the step again. It seemed maybe fifteen meters off to my right. There was a third step, and I knew someone was approaching me.

The bolt-action of my rifle operated with my right hand, so I'd only get one shot if I switched it to my left. I'd probably be able to swing out and get a single shot off before the fucker could retaliate, but I didn't like the strategy, so I moved my rifle to my right hand and pulled out a revolver for my left.

I popped around the side of the wall with my handgun out. My target was trying to sneak around the wall, and had his rifle aimed toward me, but my movement still caught him off guard. I squeezed the trigger of my revolver a second before he pulled his rifle trigger, and my bullet hit him in the left shoulder. He spun, missed me with his shot, and then died when my second bullet opened a crater in the back of his skull.

The second shooter was at the corner of the wall twenty meters behind the man I had just killed, and I ducked behind my wall as his rifle sang out. The bullet hit the bricks where I stood a moment ago, and I popped out to take a shot at him. He ducked back when I pulled the trigger of my revolver, and my bullet pierced the air where he had just stood.

I held my position and aimed at the spot where I expected him to lean out from. My opponent surprised me a bit by sprinting out from behind cover. He probably reasoned that the sudden movement would catch me off guard,

and then he'd be able to shoot me after I missed. I'd been in hundreds of gun fights, so I easily tracked his sprint from behind the corner and put a bullet through his chest while he was in midstep. He fell to the ground with a shriek of bloody agony, and my next bullet ended him.

I holstered my revolver and then dashed back to the street. Hegeia had backed the van up, and Uma yanked open the side door so I could dive in. As soon as I hit the chair beside her, she shouted to Hegeia, and the van accelerated. The movement was a bit too sudden, and the rear tires drifted across the snowy road, but then the woman gained control of the vehicle, and we raced away from the buildings.

"Looks clear," I said as I watched the structures fade into the distance. "Are you three okay?"

"Ya," Hegeia said. "I was worried when you ran past van."

"Had to take those two fuckers out, or they would have shot at us when we tried to go past them on the way out of town."

"I understand," she said. "But, how are you moving with shoulder hurt?"

"I'm fine. Don't worry."

"You might get infection. Should we stop for supplies?" she asked, and I turned to see Uma studying me with her dark eyes.

"How close is the next town? Or city? I'd like to get some new clothes. Definitely need new boots."

"Maybe ten-hour drive," Hegeia said after she spoke to the other two women.

"Ten hours? Damn. There aren't any other cities or towns closer?" I pulled my left revolver out of my holster and reloaded the cylinders with fresh bullets.

"There are, but they are looking for you. Might be too hard to buy clothes. We can stop if you want, but my sister and Uma think we should get more distance."

"Alright. I agree," I said. Exhaustion suddenly hit me, and I glanced behind us to keep myself occupied. No one was chasing us, and I felt relief flood my tired muscles.

“Shit. I forgot about the observation drone!” I groaned.

“It follow us. They move fast,” Hegeia said.

“Really?”

“You can roll down window and look,” Hegeia said, “but I see it in my mirrors. It won’t lose you easily.”

“I guess that’s good, except King Vaish wants me dead, and I’m sure he is using the drone to see my location. You three are probably in a lot of danger.”

Uma asked a question, and then the three women talked for a few minutes. Then I saw Hegeia’s light-blue eyes study me in the rearview mirror.

“Why does King Vaish want to kill you? You do Odin’s rite of passage, ya?”

“Because he’s an asshole,” I said.

Hegeia translated, and the three women surprised me by laughing.

“I guess you three agree,” I said as I mirrored their smiles.

“We help you,” Hegeia said as she took her eyes off the snowy road to glance back at me. Her sister sat in the passenger seat, and she nodded as she smiled at me.

“This next city, are you familiar with it?” I asked after we rode in silence for half an hour.

“No. We drive through before.” Hegeia frowned, and I presumed that her pimp wanted to reach the frontier area before others.

“Do they have starships there?” I asked.

“Hmmm,” she replied, then she spoke to Uma and Waiola for a few moments.

“There was an airport, might not have starships, but might have atmosphere shuttles and planes.”

“Better than nothing,” I said as I glanced down at the tracking device on my wrist. Even a simple plane would cut down my travel time significantly. “One of you wouldn’t happen to know how to fly would you?”

“We are Nordar,” Hegeia said with a shrug.

“Yeah, you all keep saying that as an answer to my question. Be a bit more specific.”

“Ya, Adam, we can fly planes or starships. Do you want to steal a starship?” she turned her eyes to the rearview mirror so she could look at me.

“Yeah. I need to get off this planet, and onto my starship. It is on King Vaish’s fortress.”

“You no complete Odin rite?”

“I don’t really like the idea of hanging from a tree for nine days,” I said.

“Ya, most don’t. That is why powerful.”

“You don’t have to come with me. I can leave you in the city. I’ll just take the ship up to his fortress and--”

“How you dock shuttle?” she cut me off.

“I don’t know. I just thought I’d fucking fly right in and--”

“We help you, Adam. You are nice to us. We are thralls, and--”

“You don’t have to explain it,” I said, but then I got an idea, and leaned forward in my seat. “Hey, do the three of you know how to use a starship navigation systems?”

“Ya, we were rowers. We can operate systems. My sister especially.” Hegeia turned to Waiola, and the women spoke for a few moments. Waiola smiled at me when she was done talking to her sister and nodded her head enthusiastically.

“Okay. So, my starship has a navigation system, and a warpdrive.”

“Inside Vaish fortress?” Hegeia clarified.

“Yeah, so we’ve got some challenges. We need to get a starship so we can leave this planet, then we need to get inside the fortress, then we need to get to my ship and escape.”

“This will make King Vaish very angry,” Hegeia said as she raised her eyebrow.

“Fuck him. Asshole wants to hang me.”

Hegeia laughed and then she spoke to the other two women, they both echoed her mirth, and Uma rested her hand on mine as she wiped away a tear from her eye. The women spoke rapidly to each other, but the language still wasn't making a lot of sense.

"We might be able to get transport ship and lie to docking authority," Hegeia was choosing her words carefully, and I guessed she was stretching her English language skills to their maximum.

"Do all Nordar speak the same language?" I asked.

"Ya. Different accent. I can sound like Vaish." She nodded to me, and her smile grew larger. "It will work. We help you."

"Great," I said as a bit of relief flowed through my tired muscles.

"You tired. Sleep. We drive."

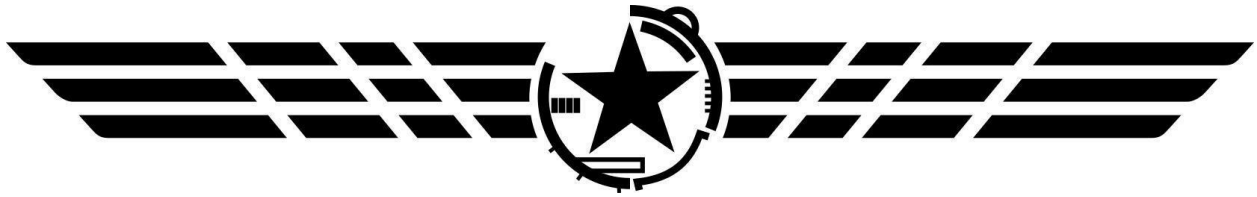
"Naw, I'm good," I said, but as soon as Hegeia had said the word 'sleep' my eyelids felt impossibly heavy.

"We take turns with the sleeping. Part of spear unit. We will serve you, Adam."

"Alright," I said, and then I realized that Uma still had her hand on mine. She rested her head against my right shoulder and let out a sigh. I saw Waiola lean against the side of her seat, and the woman gave me a half smile before she closed her eyes.

"Sleep. I good," Hegeia said, so I leaned to my left and rested my head against the door of the van.

Then I was asleep.



Chapter 9

“Adam!” I heard a voice hiss to me, and I startled awake. For half a moment, I had no idea where I was, but then I saw the three Nordar women, and I recalled the events that put me in their company.

“What’s wrong?” As soon as I said the words, I knew the answer. It was obviously nighttime, and I could make out flashing lights in the far distance.

“Police,” Hegeia said, and I felt my stomach drop. It was hard to tell how many there were ahead of us, but there were a lot of flashing blue and purple lights.

“It’s a roadblock,” I said. “They must be checking everyone who comes through. Do you think they are looking for me?” I noticed the front sleds of the car had been exchanged for tires. I must have been too tired to wake when they stopped the vehicle and made the switch.

“Ya,” Hegeia said.

“Can you turn around and take another route?” I asked. It looked like highland scrubs around us, there were a few clumps of trees on the side of the road, but the area was mostly open. I noticed our van’s headlights were off, and I felt reassured that these women really did want to help me.

“This is main road out of Uminheim,” she said.

“Uminheim?”

“It is the south most country in Niflheim. There are other roads, but we took this one up here. We would have drive north and find other way. I don’t know other way.”

“Fuck,” I growled. “Slow the van down a bit.” Hegeia was already driving pretty slow to buy us some time, but she slowed down to a crawl.

“They might be watching us slow and be worried,” she said, but I doubted they could see us in the darkness without the headlights on.

“I’m going to have to fight them,” I said.

“Police?” Hegeia asked.

“Yeah.”

“Dangerous. There will be many with guns.” Uma asked a question, and Hegeia spoke with them for a few moments.

While they talked, I double checked my pistols and grabbed the double barrel shotgun.

“My sister think you hide in back of van,” Hegeia suggested.

“Until they search the van, and I’m a sitting duck.” I checked the shotgun to confirm it was loaded, and then I double checked my jacket pocket for the two boxes of shells. If they were police, they might have body armor and semi-automatic weapons. They would probably be better trained than the men I had killed in the tavern.

They might also be waiting for me.

“Pull over,” I ordered. “I’m going to get out and try to flank them.

“Adam, we go back. Find new road.”

“Nope. Just wait here. I’ll try and take them out. Stop the van.”

Hegeia nodded and then she pushed her foot down on the brake. I reached to pull the door on my left open, and I felt Uma’s hand on my arm.

“Safe,” she said as her brows knitted together.

“I’ll be fine,” I said to the three of them, and then I exited the van.

I ran around the back of our vehicle and then plunged into the dark field at the side of the road. I estimated that the lights were about two kilometers away, and I tried to make my way through the scattering of bushes, clusters of trees, and rough terrain as quickly as I could. There wasn’t any snow on the ground, but it was still really cold, and the thick jacket I wore wasn’t nearly as protective as the uiun-bair mantel I fashioned.

I was soon close enough to count six cars and ten uniformed men. They wore padded jackets, thick hats, cold weather boots, and they all stood around in a circle chatting. I was a bit too far away to hear them, but I doubted I’d be

able to understand them, anyway.

Their cars had large wheels and a raised outline. It did look like the doors had a bit of armor on them, but I doubted it did any more than stopping small firearm rounds. The men laughed, and I noticed a few of them held mugs of steaming drink in their hands. The sight caused the tension in my shoulder to relax a bit, but then I noticed the guns that hung from their shoulders. They were assault rifles, with laser pointer sights. Two of them carried auto shotguns with long magazines. I thought about the sniper rifle back on Persephone. It would have made short work of these fuckers, but all I had now was three revolvers and a double barrel shotgun. Best case, I'd get through five or six of them before the other men got their rifles up.

I sneaked forward while I continued to watch the group. Half of them were drinking from the hot mugs so it might be a bit better to target those men last. They would have to drop their cups and then reach for their guns. It would only take them an extra half second, but that might make all the difference.

I reached the side of the cars and watched the men for a few minutes. They had no idea I was hiding in the darkness next to them, and I reviewed my killing order a few times before I reached down to unlace my boots.

I didn't like the idea of killing police, but I doubted these men felt the same way about killing me. They wanted the reward the king offered them.

They wanted to stop me from saving the women I loved.

I picked up my shotgun and let the monster in my DNA take control of my body.

The power filled my muscles. The roar of anger filled my mind. I felt my vision spin as my spine destroyed itself elongating. The shift was more painful than I was used to, but that could have been because I tried to keep myself from groaning.

My old teeth started to fall out, and I kneeled on the ground so they wouldn't make too much noise when I spit them out. The fur pushed out of my skin, and the chill of the night disappeared with the beast's anger.

My eyes were the last to change, and my new vision cut through the dark night like lasers. My human sight was already improved because of the experiments, but I could now make out all the details of the road and the dark

sides of the field where I hid.

The men were gathered on the other side of the street, and I almost considered running around the cars so I could approach them from the better angle, but then I reconsidered. What mattered was how quickly I could kill all of them once I'd fired my first shot.

I sprung out from the darkness with my double barrel shotgun in my hand and rushed the group of men.

One of the men standing at the farthest side of the circle saw my charge, and his eyes opened wide with disbelief. He was the only one who noticed me, and he had a cup of coffee in his hand. Before he could shout a warning, I kicked the back of the leg of the man who I ran behind. He collapsed backward, and I pointed my shotgun at the one who had seen me.

I squeezed both triggers, and the shells fired in unison. The man who had seen me and the fucker standing next to him were instantly shredded by buckshot, and their blood sprayed across the men beside them.

I threw my shotgun at the man standing to the left of my initial target, and the weapon bounced off his face with a sharp cracking noise. My right hand yanked out one of my revolvers while my left claws tore open the throat of the man standing next to me. I lifted my revolver to aim at one of the men across the circle who didn't have a mug of coffee in his hand, and my bullet tore through his eye socket before he could reach for his rifle.

I fired the revolver in my right hand at the next man in the circle while I reached for the weapon on my left hip. My second bullet hit this man in the chest, and he went down with a shriek of surprise. There was one more on my right, and I aimed my gun at him while the revolver in my left hand aimed at the man closest to me on that side. I pulled both triggers at once, and both of my bullets bore into their skulls.

There were three men alive now. The one I'd thrown my shotgun at was still stumbling backward, the man to the left of him, who had dropped his mug of coffee and was reaching for his shotgun, and the man whose leg I had kicked out from under him.

I aimed both my revolvers at the man reaching for his shotgun. One of the bullets hit him in the stomach, and he flew backward. The momentum of his fall convinced me I must have put the bullets into his body armor, but I

also realized that had bought me an extra few seconds of reprieve from him shooting me with his shotgun.

I aimed the revolver in my right hand down to the man I'd knocked on the ground and pulled the trigger. He was lying right below me, so the bullet only had half a meter to go before it found his brain. The man I'd hit in the face with the shotgun was still stepping back while also trying to pull his weapon from his strap, so my left revolver put two holes in his throat.

The last man was on the ground, and I had to give him some credit because he was trying to swing his shotgun at me. He was too slow though, and another bullet from my left revolver gave him a third, and very bloody, eye.

Then they were dead, and I was alive.

A beep sounded above me, and I turned upward to see the observer drone's red eye focused on me. Almost as soon as I heard the drone beep, I felt a vibration on my wrist.

Svartalfheim threat completed.

I let out a dry laugh and then flipped off the drone again. Then I looked down at the weapons on the corpses.

I wasted no time searching the bodies of the men I'd just killed. I left my double barrel shotgun on the street and grabbed one of the cop's auto shotguns as a replacement. Then I grabbed all of their ammo belts, an additional three rifles, and their wallets. One of the cops was a big guy, and I calculated that his pants and boots would be able to fit me. As soon as I had my weapons and ammo belts sorted, I shifted back into my human form then went to work removing his clothes. They fit fine, and I threw all of my old clothes on the side of the road before grabbing all the ammo belts and guns. I took four steps back up the road toward where the Idonan women were parked, but then I paused when I saw the van crawling through the darkness toward me.

Uma opened the side door for me again, and I dumped all the gear inside.

"Thanks," I said. "Saved me the trouble of running back with all this." I got into the van after I'd dropped the last rifle on the floor, and then I threw the door closed. Hegeia drove around the police cars on the shoulder of the

road, and then we were past the blockade.

“We heard lots of gunfire. Thought it meant you won. Since it would only be a few otherwise,” Hegeia said after she steered the van back onto the road.

“Are we in Svartalfheim?” I asked. “My device said I completed the threat.”

“Ya, we might be,” Hegeia agreed.

“Huh. Seems like I’ve only traveled a few thousand kilometers since I landed,” I said as I looked down at the compass on my wrist.

“Niflheim not that large. Just artic.”

“Ahh,” I said. “This rite is a serious pain in the ass. I’m surprised all Nordar do something like this.”

“Only if want to be on starship,” the redhead said.

“Really? So not everyone has to do it?”

“Ya. All Nordar warriors, so most do rite. Can’t be on starship until rite is passed.”

“Is the Idonan rite easier than the Vaish rite?” I asked.

“Ya,” she answered. “Vaish hardest of all. They are the dark ones.”

“Dark ones?” I asked.

“No joy, or fun. Don’t drink much mead, sing songs, or dance. They just want to kill.”

“Yeah. I noticed that they don’t have much of a sense of humor.” I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes. It was a mistake, and I almost couldn’t open them again.

Uma and Waiola started talking, and then Hegeia translated.

“They want to know how you were given Odin’s rite. You are a great warrior. Were you captured in battle?”

“No,” I said as I reached down for one of the ammo belts. I wanted to set up my new belt and get familiar with the shotgun before I passed out. “King Vaish is just an asshole.”

“You did not want Odin’s rite?” Hegeia asked, and her question made

my eyelids feel as if they weighed a hundred kilos. I was in massive sleep debt, and shifting into my tiger-man form hadn't helped. I didn't think I would be able to sort through the guns before I fell unconscious.

"I need to sleep," I said with slurred words. "Can we talk about it when I wake up?"

"Ya," Hegeia said as she bobbed her head. "Sleep. Talk when wake. We will be in city by then. Then we find ship. Then we help you."

"Sounds good," I said, and then I leaned up against the door of the van and fell into a dizzying pit of darkness.

It seemed like I had just closed my eyes, but then I felt fingers brush my face to wake me up. I opened my eyes and found myself back in my room on Persephone. Eve was lying next to me on the bed, and it was her gentle caress that woke me.

"Eve?" I asked as confusion filled me. Had I dreamed about her capture?

"Adam," she whispered but her voice sounded far away, as if she was whispering to me from across a room.

"I..." reached up to rub my own fingers across her cheek, and she smiled down at me. Relief flooded my chest, and I exhaled the breath I'd been holding. Damn. I thought I had lost her.

"Adam," she said, but her lips didn't match the words coming out of her mouth, and her arm went down to shake my shoulder. Eve disappeared, and I saw Uma shaking me.

"Fuck," I growled, and the woman recoiled with surprise.

"Sorry, Adam," Hegeia said. She was sitting in the passenger seat now, and Waiola was driving. "We are about to enter city."

"How long have I been asleep?" I asked once I swallowed the lump in my throat.

Eve had just been a dream.

"Almost seven hours," Hegeia said.

"Damn," I said as I sat more upright and realized that my head was resting on Uma's lap. I nodded at her and then looked out the side window. It

was dark again outside, but I still seemed as if I had just closed my eyes. My body felt exhausted, and I probably could have gone right back to sleep.

“The city lights are ahead,” Hegeia said, and I leaned down so I could look out the front window better. The skyline had four tall buildings, maybe ten stories each, and a halo of lights filled the air above them.

“You all have been driving this whole time?” I asked.

“We stopped once for bathroom and stretch. Also switched out fuel cell and bought some better clothes and more food.” Hegeia gestured to her shirt. Her outfit was a more feminine combination of a sweater and pants. All three of the women were wearing better clothes now, but their beauty reminded me of the four friends that I needed to find.

“You stopped at a store?” I asked.

“Ya. We tried to wake you, but you sleepy.” Hegeia shrugged.

“Ahh,” I said as I exhaled. The women had all probably left the car to buy the clothes and extra food. They could have easily sold me out and would have collected a reward, but they hadn’t.

“We will help you.” Hegeia nodded, and her facial expression made me think she had guessed what I was thinking.

“Thanks,” I replied. “I’d be in trouble without the three of you.”

“We also,” Hegeia replied. Then she translated for the other two women, and they both smiled.

“We’ll need to find an airport, or somewhere where there are shuttles, just something that will either let us fly out the fortress, or will let us fly to somewhere that does have a shuttle.” I didn’t see any aircraft in the sky over the city, and I felt my hopes dim a bit.

“This big city,” Hegeia said. “We will need map or waste time driving around.”

“Agreed,” I said, and Uma yawned next to me. Then Waiola yawned, and I had to fight against my own yawn. “How long have you three been awake?”

“A day. Maybe more.” Hegeia answered after she asked my question to the other women.

“We should find a place to park and sleep,” I said. “Then we can--”

“Adam!” Waiola called out, and I followed her pointed finger toward the city.

There was a massive checkpoint on the road some five kilometers ahead of us. There must have been thirty police cars, and an APC parked on the side of the road. There was a long line of other vehicles waiting to pass the checkpoint, and I saw heavily armed soldiers patrolling down the distant line. We were still too far away for me to tell what kind of rifles they held, but they looked like they were bulky plasma types.

“That can’t be good,” I growled.

“Waiola will turn around,” Hegeia said to me before she spoke to her sister. The other redhead slowed the car and pulled over to the side of the highway. There were a few cars in the traffic heading each direction, and she had to wait a few moments before she could turn the van away from the city.

“Damn it,” I said after we’d jumped to the other side of the road. “How are we going to get through?”

“We will try the caves,” Hegeia said with a confident nod.

“Caves?”

“Ya, see?” She gestured to the sides of the road.

“I don’t see anything,” I said with confusion.

“Vaish’s Svartalfheim is caves. Network deep underground. Warm there. Lots of people live there. Entrance is a few kilometers back north,” Hegeia explained.

“And the caves lead to that city?” I asked

“Ya. Then we get inside and find ship.”

“Sounds good, but I’m sure they will have more guard points in the caves.”

“Maybe ya. Maybe no.” She shrugged, and then Waiola made a right-hand turn and got onto another highway. This road had fewer cars driving around us, but it wasn’t empty.

“See? No police,” Hegeia said half a minute later. The woman pointed ahead of us, and I leaned forward to see the road.

“Shit. You weren’t kidding about a cave,” I said. The highway was lit up ahead, and I saw the road descend into what looked like the open maw of a massive monster. There was a giant illuminated sign at the top of the opening, but it was written with the same Nordar rune letters I’d seen written other places.

Hegeia was right, there weren’t any police around, and our van began to descend into the mouth of the planet.

“People live down here?” I asked.

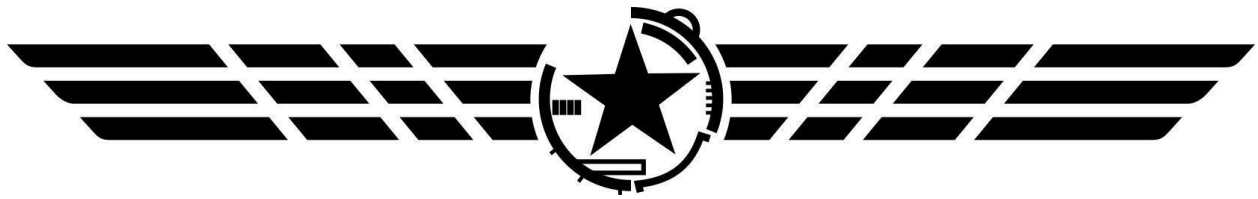
“Ya,” she said. “Many people, but no starships. We have to get to the city and then come up.”

“Alright,” I said. “Thanks again for helping me.”

“Ya. We help you, Adam. You nice to us.”

I returned their smiles, but then I turned my attention to the descent. It felt like we were driving into hell.

The sensation wasn’t comforting.



Chapter 10

The slope of the tunnel leveled out after another minute of driving, and we came to a bridge that spanned an underground lake. The water was darker than a black ink stain, but the lights on the side of the bridge were plenty bright enough. I could see clusters of buildings on the far distant shore, but they looked like a strange cross between a barn, and those old viking style longhouses. They were made of metal but painted in bright colors.

“Is warmth the only reason to live down here?” I asked as we reached the end of the long bridge.

“Water from the lake, and less creatures.” Hegeia shrugged.

“Do uiun-bair come this far south?” I asked.

“Ya. They are everywhere. Did you kill one? You wore its hide.”

“Yeah,” I replied.

“You strong,” Hegeia said with a nod. “Odin’s rite is good fit for you.”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “Don’t like the idea of hanging from a tree for nine days.”

“Odin lived, maybe you will.”

I didn’t answer. Instead, I sighed and then wiped my fingers over my eyes to clear out some of the sleep.

“With spear?” Hegeia asked.

“Hmm?”

“You kill uiun-bair with spear? It was the weapon you carried into the tavern.”

“Something like that,” I replied.

“See? You strong. Like the All Father, Thor, or Vidar.”

“I’m not a god,” I said, and I had a flashback of telling Madalena the same thing.

“You have powerful eyes,” Hegeia said. “My sister and Uma agree. You have their strength. You could be Odin’s Avatar.”

“I’m not Odin’s Avatar,” I said as I sat back in my chair and looked out the windows of the van. The homes looked to be made out of a unique blend of wooden logs, rough cut planks, and metal reinforcements. They looked like something out of a fairytale movie, but there were still streetlights, and hydrogen powered cars sitting in the driveways that we passed.

“How you know you aren’t? Does he speak to you?” she pressed.

“If he spoke to me, wouldn’t I know it?” I smirked at Hegeia and hoped she would leave the topic alone. Her words were reminding me of Madalena, and I didn’t want to think of the Prime Valkyrie anymore.

“He sends birds. They will have dark wings. Have you seen one?”

“I saw what looked like a black feathered eagle in the--”

I stopped talking and thought about what I had just said. Wasn’t a shadow kind of similar to black? Madalena had called Persephone a shadow eagle.

“A black eagle?” Hegeia asked with surprise. “It is rare bird. It was Odin. What did the bird show you?”

“A place to sleep up in a tree,” I admitted, but my thoughts were still on Persephone.

“The All Father wants you to complete his trial,” Hegeia said, and then she translated for the other two women.

“I have to get back to my ship and save my friends,” I said.

“Ya, but you don’t want to anger Odin,” Hegeia said with obvious concern.

“I’ll worry about that. I keep asking you three if you want to back out. You can if you want to. I’ll figure out how to get there by myself.”

“Adam,” Hegeia said as she shook her head. “You won’t. You need us, and we need you. Ya?”

“Yeah,” I said, and then I turned to look back out the window.

We drove for another five minutes, and the housing structures began to shift from the longhouses to smaller apartment buildings that surrounded shopping centers and parks. The scenery reminded me of the ancient pictures I had seen of Earth during the twenty-first century. Even the over abundance of cars seemed to match with that period.

“The city is ahead,” Hegeia said, and I looked back to the front window. The suburban area was beginning to shift to larger skyscrapers that pushed all the way up the ceiling of the massive cave. There were at least eight of these mega towers, and I guessed each of them had at least seventy floors.

There wasn’t a lot of vehicle traffic on the street, so Waiola was able to drive into the downtown district rather easily. The streets were well kept, and the organization of the cars parked on the side of the road made me think of Uraniel’s organized citizens. Then I thought about Eve, Zea, Paula, and Kasta.

“What are you doing?” I asked when I noticed the three Idonan clanswomen peering intently out the window.

“These buildings touch the ceiling,” Hegeia said. “One must have path up the higher city.”

“Maybe there is a car lift?” I asked, but I hadn’t seen anything that massive when we drove toward the city.

“One, or many of these buildings go through the earth and into the surface city,” Hegeia explained. “We find one and then take elevator up. Then we are on surface and just need to find ship for you.”

“You make it sound easy.” I snickered, and then Uma said a few words as she pointed to one of the buildings we drove past. The other two women replied, as they nodded, and then Waiola turned the van around so we could drive by again.

“You think this one goes to the surface?” I asked.

“Ya,” Hegeia said. “We will park inside and then explore.”

“What kind of building is this?” I pointed.

“I don’t understand,” she said as Waiola pulled the van into the side parking entrance of the building.

“Are these homes or office suites?”

“Could be both,” she said.

“Hmmm.” I looked down at the auto shotgun and rifles I’d looted from the police on the road. I would probably stick out carrying any of them up through a building, but I didn’t really want to leave them behind.

Uma seemed to guess what I was thinking. She squeezed my arm and then pointed to a larger van sitting in the parking structure. There was rune lettering on the side of the van, and a picture of what looked like a steaming pie. The blonde woman spoke to the sisters, and they both nodded.

“Uma points to catering truck. They might have roller trays that hold food. Maybe fit your weapons in there?”

“It’s a better idea than mine,” I said, and Waiola pulled our vehicle into a parking spot next to the catering truck.

I opened the door and stepped out of our van. It felt good to stretch my legs, and I rolled my shoulders back a bit to loosen the tense muscles.

Waiola didn’t even bother to close her driver side door after she stepped out. She just reached for the other van’s door and then yanked it open. I was a bit surprised it was unlocked, but the other women didn’t seem as taken aback.

Waiola and Hegeia jumped inside of the van, and Uma gestured for me to follow her to the back hatch. The sisters opened it up from the inside, and they pointed to a single roller table that they found. The cover of the table was more than big enough for me to fit the four guns, pistols, and ammo belts.

“Good idea, Uma,” I said to the blonde woman, and her dark eyes twinkled as she bowed slightly to me. She then said something to Hegeia and Waiola, and the two women laughed.

“What did she say?” I asked.

“Not important,” Hegeia replied.

I decided not to press her on it. Instead, I loaded up all our guns and ammo belts in the roller table. I also put my pair of revolvers in, but I left my third one tucked in the back of my pants along with a pair of speed loaders.

“Are there any sort of uniforms in the van?” I asked Hegeia as I closed

the lid to the table.

She jumped back inside of the van, dug through some boxes, and then pulled out a few white jackets with the pie logo on them. The other two women clapped with amusement and then put the jackets on when Hegeia presented them.

“Not one big enough for you,” Hegeia said, “but hat?” she reached into another box and tossed me a white cap with the logo on it.

“That will work,” I said as I put it on.

“We make good team, ya?” Hegeia said as she stepped out of the van.

“Sure. Thanks for helping. Close the doors to both of the vans and let’s see if this building will get us to the top.”

The women followed my orders, and then I pushed the roller table across the parking garage. From the brief drive down, I’d gotten a feel for where the elevator was located, and we were soon waiting for it to arrive.

The door opened, and the four of us walked inside with our catering roller table. There were only four buttons to choose from, and Hegeia pressed the top one.

Then the observer drone darted into the elevator and floated up to the ceiling.

“Fuck. I forgot about that asshole,” I groaned.

“Most don’t notice,” Hegeia said.

“How do they not notice? I’ve got a black eyeball following me around everywhere?”

“They might think we are completing our rite of passage together,” Hegeia explained. “It is quite common.”

“I fucking hope so,” I said as I frowned at the drone.

“There might be other elevator on the lobby floor,” Hegeia said as the doors closed.

We moved up, and the doors to the lobby opened a few seconds later. The space was much nicer than I expected. The floors were made from a dark gray slate. The walls were glass fish aquariums, and the area was lit by a set of four large wrought iron chandeliers. The fish aquariums were the most

impressive because they covered every square centimeter of vertical space on the walls. There were a handful of people admiring the creatures swimming in the illuminated water, and the sight made my heart ache a bit. It would have been nice to spend some leisure time here with Eve and Zea. As it was, I couldn't spare the fish more than a glance. I was too busy pushing my cart across the floor and toward where I hoped the other elevators were located.

The front doors to the lobby were on our right side, and I turned my head just as a group of armored soldiers walked through the doors.

The men weren't wearing power armor, but it definitely was the kind of armor that would be useful during a riot. None of the other people looking at the fish seemed to notice the soldiers walk into the lobby, so I hissed to the women and then turned my head back around, so I was staring at the corner across the room.

My heart hammered in my chest, but the beast in my stomach growled and tried to force apart my self-control. I was sick of running and hiding from these fuckers. I fought against the swell of emotions and focused on my breathing. We were halfway across the smooth lobby floor right now, and we just had to continue to pretend we belonged here. Yeah, I didn't have one of the white catering coats on, but I had the hat, and the other three women did have coats. We shouldn't have seemed that out of place here.

Except for the damn observation drone following us.

I looked into the metal cover of the roller table and saw the sphere shaped drone's reflection. It was floating a good four meters up above me, close to the ceiling of the lobby, and I doubted anyone would notice it unless they looked up.

I bent down a little as I pushed on the table and changed my angle of view so I could check on the soldiers. There were four of them, and they approached the front desk of the lobby. That might mean they would waste a few precious seconds talking to the desk clerk, or it might mean they were going to lock down the elevators.

A voice shouted behind us, but I ignored it and pushed the last five meters toward the elevators. The women followed me, but I noticed their backs stiffen.

"Come on," I said as I hit the call button for the lift. Then I glanced

over my shoulder a bit and saw the group of soldiers looking at us. They hadn't made any move to come toward us, and I wondered if the shout didn't actually come from them.

But then the man at the front of the group yelled again, and he pointed at us.

The door dinged, and I turned toward the elevator. The car was empty, so I pushed the roller table inside without turning back to look at the armored figures. The three women followed me, and I was surprised at how calm their faces looked.

"Hit the button to close the door!" I hissed at them as I reached for the revolver at my back.

Hegeia pressed on one of the buttons, and the doors started to slide closed. Before they could shut, the observer drone darted inside of the car.

Then the elevator started to ascend. Its pace was a great deal quicker than I thought, and I hoped the security team didn't get a chance to turn off the lift before we made it to the top.

"This one goes to the surface," Hegeia said as she pointed at one of the buttons that she pressed.

"Will it open at ground level?"

"Ya."

"We'll need to run out, escape from this building, and then try to find another car or the location of a shuttle," I said. "Those armored men down below will take an elevator up to come after us."

"They weren't chasing us," Hegeia said to me, and her face looked confused.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"They yelled because they were closing off the elevator," she said.

"What?"

"They said 'we want to close the elevator so that the man with the bounty on his head can't come this way.' Then they told us to stop again, but we went inside the elevator."

"Really? Why didn't you say anything?" I took a deep breath and then

wiped my fingers over my face.

“You went in too fast.” Hegeia shrugged.

“So they don’t know it was me?” I asked.

“They do now,” she said as she pointed to the drone.

The robot was kind of drifting in a circle, but then it came to float above my head. I resisted the temptation to pull out my revolver and shoot it, but then the beast that lived in my soul screeched at me. He was right. King Vaish had put a bounty on my head, and having the drone floating around me all the time was a lot like keeping a spotlight on me. I wouldn’t be able to go anywhere without people seeing it, and then they would know I was the man they were looking for.

I pulled my revolver out, pointed to the underbelly of the sphere-shaped drone, and then pulled the trigger. The women all jumped when my bullet exploded through the device, and they turned to me with shock plain on their pretty faces.

“You destroyed an observer?” Hegeia gasped as the hunk of black scrap metal fell onto the floor of the elevator car.

“Yeah. It will be easier to go now.”

“You will get in trouble,” she said as she shook her head.

“I’m not planning on finishing this rite. I was already going to be in a lot of trouble.” The elevator began to slow. Then the doors opened with a beeping noise that sounded a lot like the one my drone would have issued.

I poked my head out the elevator and looked left. It was set up a bit like the lobby at the bottom of the building, but the color scheme here was a bit brighter in hue, and instead of fish tanks on the walls, there were gray paintings. I half expected to see a platoon of armed guards, but I didn’t see anyone except for a few people looking at the artwork, and a woman behind the front desk. She held a phone-like device pressed up against her ear, and her eyes were looking in our direction.

“Shit. She knows,” I said as I looked to my right. This was a long hallway, but I could see a small sign with glowing red rune letters hanging over a door some hundred meters down the corridor.

“Is that an exit sign?” I asked as I pointed down to the end of the hall.

“I can’t read from this far away, but ya. Looks like it,” Hegeia replied.

“Let’s go,” I said as I yanked the roller table out of the elevator and then pushed it toward the back-exit door.

My friends followed me, and I glanced over my shoulder to see if the woman at the lobby desk would say or do anything. The angle of the hallway was a bit to the left, and the few steps we had taken down the corridor prevented me from seeing her reaction.

“Faster,” I said as I pushed harder on the roller table and began to sprint across the carpet. This almost felt like it could have been a hotel, the doors were evenly spaced, and there were runes etched on metal plates of each door like room numbers.

As we ran closer to the doorway, I motioned for Uma to push on the roller table while I checked the door. She understood my gesture and took my spot while I sprinted up ahead to check the exit. This was another instance of me expecting a group of armored soldiers to be waiting for me with a hail of bullets, but only a blast of cold air hit my face when I cracked open the door.

This was a loading area for the building, and I saw a few parked trucks, trash bins, and the utility cluster of pipes and electrical conduits. The whole area was surrounded by a chain link fence, but it was opened at the side where the trucks were parked. I didn’t see anyone around, and the street beyond the fence was devoid of traffic. There were other buildings beyond that street, and I guessed we would be able to take the back alleys.

“It’s clear,” I said to the women as I motioned for them to run out the door. There were stairs down to the street, and I grabbed onto the front of the roller table so I could help Uma carry it down.

“We can run across the street and into the--”

Hegeia shouted something in her language, and each of them ran toward one of the trucks. These were semi-truck vehicles, but they weren’t attached to any trailers.

“No, we need to--” I started to say, but the women had already popped open the doors to each of their three vehicles.

Half a moment later, the truck that Uma dashed into rumbled awake, and the other two women sprung from the cabs of their vehicles.

“Adam!” Hegeia called out to me, but I was already pushing the roller table toward the truck Uma had started. The women got into the cab before me, and I threw them the weapons, belts, and ammo from the table before I jumped in.

Uma threw the truck into reverse as soon as I slammed the door closed, and she kicked her foot against the acceleration pedal. The truck’s tires screeched across the icy ground and then rocketed backward. She cranked on the wheel a moment before we cleared the fence, but there was a bit of a delay in the control of the semi, and we ended up twisting onto the road with perfect form.

“Damn. That’s some good drive--” I started to say, but then the back door of the building opened, and a familiar group of armored men poured out.

The women started shouting, and Uma grabbed on the control stick of the truck. She yanked it down as I grabbed one of the rifles at my feet, and I felt the weight of the semi lean back as she brought her foot down on the acceleration pedal.

“Get down!” I shouted at the women as I brought my rifle up toward the window. The goons in the armor were also bringing their weapons up to aim at the truck, but the wheels of the big rig caught, and we sprung forward.

Their shots rang out like a snare drum, and the passenger window shattered into a thousand pieces. A sharp pain blossomed on my cheek, neck, right arm, and chest, but I thought they were just shards of glass and not actual bullets.

“Go faster!” I shouted to Uma as I leaned out the broken window with my rifle. My urging wasn’t needed. The truck engine was already bellowing, and the group of armored men was now a good fifty meters behind us.

I still took aim with my rifle and figured that I might as well send a few of the fuckers to hell so that they would think twice about following us.

I squeezed the trigger and passed the dot on my sight over the group of men. The rifle had a slower rate of fire than what I was used to, but the recoil felt almost nonexistent. Each of my bullets found a soft target, and the side of the building erupted in crimson. I kept the trigger down while I controlled my weapon, and they were all dead before my magazine emptied.

“Got them,” I growled as I ducked back through the window. I was

about to reach down and grab another magazine, but Waiola already had one in her hands, and she passed it to me.

“Hurt,” the woman said as she pointed at my neck. Her eyes were wide with horror, and Hegeia let out a gasp.

“I’m all right,” I said as I reached up to my throat.

There was a big fucking piece of glass cutting into the carotid artery on the right side of my neck.

“No!” Uma’s face had crumbled when she looked at me.

“Fine!” I said as I yanked the chunk of glass out of my neck and tossed it out the window.

“You need hospital,” Hegeia said.

“No. We need a ship,” I said as I put pressure on my neck to stop some of the blood flow. I could already feel the injury starting to itch, but I figured it would be a few minutes before it was healed. The cut was really clean, and small, and there weren’t any bones to knit. My strange healing powers seemed especially good at repairing these kind of cuts, so I didn’t think I’d pass out from blood loss.

“Face. Arm.” Waiola said as she pointed at my cheek and bicep. I couldn’t see the injury there, but the piece of glass sticking out of my arm was at least ten centimeters long.

“Pull it out,” I said to Waiola. “I don’t want to take my hand off my neck.” Hegeia made to reach across her sister, but Waiola seemed to understand what I meant, and she pinched the glass shard between her fingers carefully. Then she yanked it out, and I nodded toward the window. Waiola threw it out and then moved to pull the other piece out of my face.

The two women stared at me intently, but I turned my eyes to the road and tried to stare down the side streets. This city was large, and there was an even larger city located beneath it, there had to be an airport somewhere.

“What about this?” I asked the women as I pointed to a hand-sized screen on the dashboard of the truck. “Is this a navigation computer? Can it tell us if there is a space or airport nearby?”

“I will try,” Hegeia said as she pushed her finger against the screen. The device illuminated, and she began to chat with Uma in their language.

“You. Hospital?” Waiola asked me, and her face was painted with distress. I did feel blood pouring down my cheek, neck, and arm, but I wasn’t feeling light headed.

Yet.

“I’m fine,” I replied, and then I leaned my head a bit so that I could glance into the side mirror of the massive truck. I didn’t see anyone following us, but the air was freezing outside, and I had to lean away from the door.

“We found directions to airport!” Hegeia exclaimed as she pressed a few buttons on the display. A map appeared on the screen, and I saw a countdown for six and a half minutes.

“Fuck yeah,” I said. “Now turn the hot air on, so we don’t freeze by the time we get there.”

“Ya. Good idea.” Hegeia flipped a few switches on the dashboard in front of her, and a gust of hot air pushed against our faces. It didn’t quite combat the flux of frigid air coming from the broken window, but it was enough to keep the frostbite at bay.

“You sure no hospital?” Hegeia asked.

“Yes. Keep going,” I said.

“You hurt,” Hegeia pleaded.

“I’ll be fine,” I replied, even though I was starting to feel a bit dizzy. My neck was itching like a swarm of ants were there, and I figured I’d be fine by the time we reached the airport.

I just had to stay conscious for that long.

“We worry,” Hegeia said after the three women spoke to each other. The differences between their personalities were becoming more apparent as we spent more time together, but what struck me more was how different they were from Madalena and the other Vaish I had met. These women seemed warm and caring, while Madalena was cold and uncaring.

Thoughts of the Prime Valkyrie seemed to sap my strength even more, and I took a long breath to steady my thumping heart. I’d spent more time with Hegeia, Uma, and Waiola than with the woman who considered me her husband. It was probably unfair for me to call her cold and uncaring. She had indicated to me that she was angry with the events leading to me having to

complete Odin's rite of passage.

"Adam!" I felt arms shaking me, and I gasped. Then I realized I had fallen asleep, or fainted, and Waiola was screaming at me.

"I'm okay," I said, but I wasn't. I was tired, and my eyelids felt heavy again.

Wake the fuck up, Marine. No rest when there is work to be done.

"You not okay. Need hospital," Hegeia said.

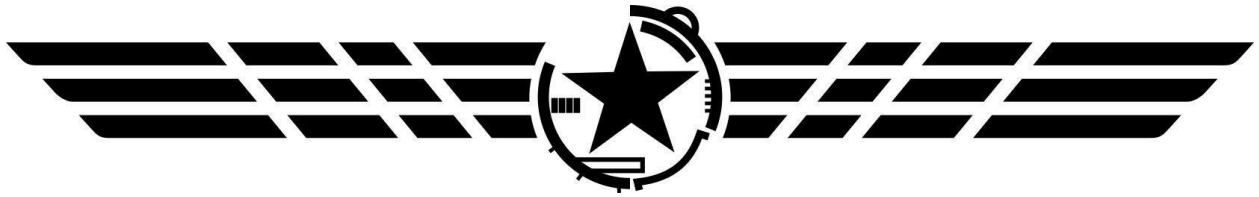
"Looks like we are at the airport," I said as I pointed to the map display that indicated we had thirty-five seconds until we reached our destination.

"Ya, but you need--" Hegeia's words were cut off by a shout from Uma. The blonde woman twisted the steering wheel of the truck to her right and then slammed on the brakes. The sudden stop caused all of us to fall out of our seats and slam into the dashboard, and a growl of anger escaped my throat.

"What are you--" I started to ask, but the semi screeched to a halt underneath a highway overpass, and I saw the reason for Uma's maneuver.

Four shuttles were dropping into the atmosphere. It was hard to tell exactly where they were in relation to our position, but it looked as if they were destined to enter about a kilometer ahead of us.

Right where the airport was.



Chapter 11

“What should we do, Adam?” Hegeia asked after we stared at the dropping shuttles for a few dozen seconds.

“Let’s wait to see if they go,” I whispered, but I didn’t exactly like the idea.

The ships continued their descent for another thirty seconds, and then they leveled out approximately four hundred meters over the ground. For a few moments, I thought that they were just going to float in above the airport, but then three of the shuttles gradually began to drift toward us.

“Shit,” I hissed, and the three women began to talk rapidly with each other.

“They won’t see us! We are under the bridge!” Hegeia shouted as the shuttles began to pick up speed.

“If we can see them. They can see us,” I said as I tried to figure out what to do. Would King Vaish just have one of the ships blow me up with its plasma weapons? I couldn’t understand why he was going out of his way to kill me before I finished Odin’s rite. I would have died anyway.

The four of us froze in the cab of the truck, and I kept my eyes on the front cannons of the shuttle. My heart hammered in my chest, but I knew there was nothing I could do. Driving the semi-truck away would just draw attention to us. I had to pray that Hegeia was right, and they didn’t see the truck parked in the dark nook under the overpass.

Then the ships passed over us, and we all let out a long sigh.

“Why he want to kill you?” Hegeia asked.

“Long story,” I said as I pointed to the last shuttle. It was drifting toward the ground, and I guessed it was going to land right smack dab in the

middle of the airport's runway. "That's not good."

"No," she said. "Also don't see any spacecraft at airport. Just airplanes."

Hegeia was right. The airport was approximately five kilometers wide by maybe seven long. There was a decorative wall at the perimeter, but no gate to keep it locked down. I didn't know if they had commercial flights, but the only craft I could see on the distant runways looked to be atmospheric subsonic jets. There were twenty-four large hangars, and a massive network of connecting buildings I believe were used for processing passengers to their gates.

The shuttle finished landing on one of the runways, and a group of thirty Vaish soldiers in power armor stepped out of the shuttle.

They each carried plasma rifles and, even though I couldn't see their faces because of their helmets, they looked as if they were prepared to be attacked at any moment.

"What the fuck is going on?" I asked. "This feels like overkill."

"You can see that far?" Hegeia asked with surprise. "How many?"

"Thirty..." I paused as I did another count. "Four. They all have plasma rifles and power armor."

Hegeia talked to the other two women, and their faces looked grim.

"Look, you three don't have to help me anymore. I can go from here. I'll sneak into the airport, grab one of the planes, and then try to get to another city. I can always fly to my checkpoint and then go to the one in Helheim."

"No," Hegeia said as she shook her head. Her red hair bounced over her shoulders, and her light blue eyes looked a bit angry. "You won't make it without us. We are thrall, but want to be free women."

"Can't I just free you--"

"Why King Tanal Vaish hate you?" she asked. "No tell us later. Tell us now. Tell us long story, but quick." Her eyes narrowed, and even though her eyes were a lighter shade of blue than Zea's, the expression reminded me of my lover.

"All right," I said as I glanced back to the distant shuttle. "My friends

and I are trying to fight these horrible vampire god-like creatures. We call them SAVOs, but I think your people call them Draugr. We know a few of them are coming to this one planet, and millions of people are in danger. We were following a lead and stopped on a planet to hunt for food. While we were there, my friends were captured by these slavers called the Magate Order. Have you heard of them?”

“No, but we have heard of Draugr. Vaish say they come to our galaxy soon. That is why he wants to unite clans. Other kings laugh at him. He is powerful, but they don’t wish to kneel.”

“Yeah,” I said as I recalled what Madalena told me of the Nordar’s political environment.

“You looking for friends, ya?”

“I had to run from the Magate Order. I ended up at this system named Epsilon Tauri - b. There was a station there that had been attacked by the Jotnar.”

“Jotnar powerful blood clan,” Hegeia said. “Maybe as powerful as Vaish.”

“That’s the impression I got,” I replied. “There were survivors on the station. I saved them and asked if they could help me find my friends. They agreed, but their leader asked to submit to me. I told her I didn’t want her to, I honestly didn’t care, but they said they would kill me if I dishonored her. Then one--”

“The Prime Valkyrie?” Hegeia gasped, and her blue eyes grew impossibly large.

“Yeah, how did you guess?”

“It now makes sense why King Vaish want you dead,” Hegeia said, and then she translated the conversation for the other two women.

“We were supposed to go look for my friends, but one of her crew deliberately set the navigation point wrong so we would end up in this system. King Vaish tried to kill me in his throne room, but I survived. Then he said I needed to complete Odin’s rite. His men tried to kill me before I got into the pod, and then he poisoned the food they gave me.”

Hegeia translated my words to the other women, and they looked

angry.

“He interferes with Odin’s rite,” Hegeia growled. “It is bad omen. He risks his clan, and the honor of the Prime Valkyrie.”

“I don’t know anything about that. All I know is the path to saving my friends involves getting back to the fortress so I can get to my ship. The success of this endeavor lies in getting an airplane and getting to a shuttle. I still need to sneak into the airport and try to take one.” The squad of warriors were still clumped on the runway, but I realized they really didn’t need to try to search the buildings. If I wanted to leave, I’d have to fly past them, and they would be able to shoot me out of the sky.

Even if I got past them, they would just follow me in their other shuttles.

“Why you heal?” Hegeia said as she reached over her sister and touched my bloody cheek. She was right, I wasn’t bleeding anymore from there, or my neck.

“I heal fast,” I said.

Uma said something, and the two sisters turned to her. They spoke urgently for a few more moments, and then the blonde woman with the dark eyes gestured at me.

“What is she saying?” I asked.

“Uma says we should just take their shuttle, but it impossible.”

“Yeah. They have armor and--”

Uma shook her head and then slapped her hand on the steering wheel of the truck. Then she pointed at me and nodded at Hegeia.

“Her plan is to find jet fuel or batteries we can overload. Then we light one of the buildings on fire. Hope that the soldiers go to investigate. Then we get on shuttle, go to fortress, take your ship back, and then save your friends. She says plan is what Loki would do, so maybe both he and Odin bless us.”

“Hmmm,” I said as I thought about the idea. “It’s a long shot, but it might work. We might also be able to distract them and fly out, or we could find a shuttle in one of the hangars, we aren’t going to know unless we get into the airport.”

Hegeia translated what I said back to Uma, and the woman smiled

broadly at me. She was definitely the crazy one of the trio.

“We need to get into the airport. Let’s try searching the first set of hangars. We’ll need to find fuel or batteries.” I looked at the highway ahead of us as we spoke. The correct path to enter the airport gates was still a half-minute drive away, but it was visible to the soldiers guarding the runway. It was still some two kilometers from their location so they might not see us turn in, but we were in a large semi-truck, in the middle of the night, and there were no other vehicles on the road.

They were also carrying plasma rifles.

“We need to drive around the back so they don’t see us,” I said. “Then we’ll have to climb one of the walls and get to a hangar.”

“Ya,” Hegeia said, but Uma must have already guessed what I was thinking, and she threw the truck into reverse.

We drove away from the airport, and then she turned us toward the farthest side away from where the shuttle was parked. There was no road there, but the ground looked to be made of smooth snow. It seemed like a risky drive, but if we got stuck, we could just hoof it the rest of the way.

Uma drove the truck off the road, and it fish-tailed slightly when we hit the icy snow. She didn’t have her headlights on, but the distant lights of the airport provided a very dim illumination. I could make out the details of the ground, and should have been the one driving, but Uma made small adjustments to the path the truck was taking as she drove, so I figured that she knew what she was doing.

The truck handled surprisingly well on the ice, and we soon came to the perimeter wall of the airport. Uma parked the semi right up against the wall then turned the engine off with a press of her finger.

“Good job,” I said as I gave her a nod, then I got out of the truck and helped the three women step down.

I handed them rifles as soon as they exited, and they took them gratefully.

“I thought thralls couldn’t carry or use weapons?” I asked Hegeia as I opened one of the ammo belt’s pouches.

“Ya, but this different,” she said with a shrug.

“How?”

“Prime Valkyrie submitted to you. You heal from cuts and bullets. You on Odin’s rite. You will be King of Vaish and then Lord of the Nordar. We will submit to you, and our honor will be restored.”

“No one is going to submit to me,” I said as I passed her the belt that was filled with rifle ammo.

“Ya.” Hegeia shrugged again and then put the belt on. I didn’t care to argue with her anymore, so I checked the other belts, and handed one to both Uma and Waiola. Then I found the belt with shotgun magazines and put it around my waist.

“Let’s go,” I said as I grabbed the auto shotgun from the seat and gestured to the truck. The women nodded, and then I watched them climb up to the roof of the cab before I made my own way up.

The top of the truck wasn’t quite as high as the edge of the wall, but I was able to give each of them a boost with my hands. Then I made a short sprint, hit the bricks with the bottom of my boot, and caught the top edge. My still wounded shoulder protested when I pulled myself up, but the small twinge of pain indicated I wasn’t seriously injured anymore.

Uma and Waiola grabbed my arms to help pull me up the wall. Once I was on top, Hegeia pointed across a few hundred meters of snow to the closest hangar. Beyond that structure was the main airport building. Luckily, it blocked the line of sight from the Vaish shuttle.

It was a five-meter drop to the snow below us. I landed first, set down my shotgun, and then gestured for the women to jump down to me. The sisters hesitated, but Uma kicked her legs over the edge. I caught her waist when she fell and then set her on the snow next to me. After seeing Uma safely caught, Waiola came next, and then Hegeia fell into my arms.

We trekked across the snow, and I searched the dark horizon for any sign of shuttles or security drones. We were totally out in the open field of white between the wall and buildings, thus at the mercy of anyone who owned a weapon and knew we were here. Fortunately, no one saw us, and we made it to the wall of the first hangar.

“Check the left side of the building for a door,” I said to the women as I began to move to the right side. Hegeia nodded, and the women split off

from me.

I moved to my corner and leaned the side of my face out. There was an entrance door to the hangar about thirty feet down, and I leaned back so I could motion for the three friends to come toward me. They had not reached the left side of the building before one of them noticed my signal and did as I instructed. As they reached me, I straightened back up and prepared myself to make a run for the door. I still couldn't see the shuttle since it was on the other side of the main building, but I didn't want to take any chances. The area still looked clear, so I sprinted to the hangar door.

I expected the door to be locked, and I wasn't disappointed. It was just a metal knob though, and I broke it off with one quick strike with the buttstock of my shotgun. It did make a loud noise when I snapped it, but I didn't think the group guarding the runway would be able to hear across the distance and beyond the howl of the winds.

We entered the hangar, but its vast space was empty of craft. There was a small open top electric car parked inside that I guessed was used for shuttling between the hangars, but I thought using it would just draw attention to us. I'd also have to open the massive roll-up door to the hangar to drive it out, and that would definitely alert anyone looking in this direction.

"Next hangar," I said as we turned around and moved to exit out of the door we came in. I almost stepped out into the snow, but my foot paused in mid-step as I heard a noise coming from outside. I tilted out my head to peer through the opened gap at the edge of the door.

A group of four warriors were using the thrusters on the back of their power armor to zip around the airport. They were hovering above the ground some three hundred meters away while sweeping in our direction.

"Shit, backup." I pushed the women away from the exit and then grabbed the metal door. I still kept the side of my head out to keep an eye on their progress, but it was obvious that the four soldiers intended to investigate the hangars on this side of the airport.

"What we do?" Hegeia asked as I closed the door to the hangar.

"We only have a few minutes before they are here." My eyes scanned through the empty hangar as I spoke, but I didn't see anything we could use as cover. There was the small electric car, other lift equipment that could be

used as scaffolding to work on aircraft, some shelves I guessed would contain tools, and then a back office section. I doubted anything useful was in the office, but I pointed to my eyes, then at Uma, and then back the office. She nodded and ran toward the room.

“We fight here?” Hegeia asked again as she looked down at her rifle.

“Or we try to work around them, maybe they won’t see us.” I knew the idea wasn’t great since it would be hard for conventional bullets to punch through power armor, but we were running out of options.

Couldn’t I get a fucking break?

Then I remembered that I had received help. I doubt I would have made it this far without Hegeia, Uma, and Waiola. The three of them were honorable people, and I hoped I could get them out of this alive, get back onto Persephone, and take them with me to find my friends.

First, I had to figure out how to kill all these dickheads and take their shuttle.

“Adam!” Uma called out to me from the office, and we all ran over to her.

“What did you find?” I asked, and she pointed to the office with a smile. The room was unremarkable, with just a computer terminal, desk, bed, and filing cabinet, but at the back of the space was another door, and I saw stacks of power cells. I wasn’t familiar with their design, but it was obvious that they were used for powering vehicles.

Uma spoke to the other two women, and then Hegeia turned to me.

“She says that these are old style cells, they are volatile if mixed together.”

“So they will explode if I shoot them?” I asked. Hegeia translated, and Uma replied with a shrug.

“She says maybe. Or maybe not, but possibly maybe.”

“There must be more than fifty of them,” I said as I poked my head in the back room. They were about half the size of the semi-truck’s tires, cylindrical in shape, and had a faint purple glow to them. “Let’s take them out and put them near the roll-up side doors.”

I set my shotgun over my shoulder, squatted down, and grabbed one of

the cells. It weighed about fifty kilograms, and I realized there was no way the women were going to be able to help me carry them all the way across the hangar.

“Get that car we saw on the other side of the hangar, bring it back here, and we’ll load it up,” I ordered Hegeia, and she told Waiola, and she ran out of the office.

“I’ll take these to the small door we came through,” I told Hegeia as I squatted lower beside a stack of three power cells. I tensed my stomach, gripped the bottom cell, and then lifted all three of them with a grunt. My right shoulder told me to go fuck myself, but most of the strength required for the movement was coming from my legs, stomach, glutes, and back.

The two women jumped out of my way, and I made a fast walk across the hangar floor and toward the side door we entered. I had seen old fuel cells react with napalm-like explosions, but their designs were different from these models. We might not even need to use them, we might get lucky, and the soldiers might just skip this hangar or think it was unoccupied.

I set the fuel cells down to the side of the door then turned back toward the office. There was a window in the wall there that I could lean out and shoot at these cells, but taking cover in the small office-shed building would be suicide unless I could get the other power cells out.

Waiola stopped the car next to me, and I jumped in. She sped to the small office then backed the car into the doorway. Uma and Hegeia had already stacked three of the power cells on the floor outside of the building, but they were breathing heavy from the exertion.

This wasn’t going to work. We didn’t have enough time to get all the cells out of the office or place them at the entry points to the hangar. We had more than enough cells to cover the entire roll-up door, but we didn’t have enough time or hands to do it in that time.

“I’ll move them up here if you three can stack them at the back of the car.” I gestured to the small shelf at the back of the vehicle. It could only fit two of the cells side by side with maybe one more stacked on top.

I ran to the rear of the office, grabbed three more cells, and then shuffled to the car. The women loaded the three cells they had already moved in the back of the vehicle, and they took one more off my stack to make it an

even four. Then they put the last two on the rear passenger seats.

“I’ll go with you to the side door. We’ll have two stacks there because I think those fuckers will come in that way.” I pointed to the spot where I’d just set the other pods, and then I jumped back into the shotgun seat.

Waiola drove the car back to the side door, and I yanked the cells out as quickly as I could. My shoulder argued with me when I reached for each one, but the pain was slowly fading, and it had stopped protesting when I placed the last cell in a stack next to the door.

“Wait,” I said as I held my hand out to Waiola and stepped toward the closed door. I didn’t want to open it because they might see me, but I also needed to get a better feel for how much more time we had left.

I cracked open the door and saw that it has started to snow. The weather was a bit of a blessing because I could make out the thrusters on the rear parts of the soldier’s armor and see their exact position, but they were going to have a harder time seeing me open the door. The Vaish warriors were moving away from one of the hangar buildings and floating toward the structure three positions removed from me. I did a bit of mental math and figured that we had maybe four more minutes until they got to our building.

But then one of the Vaish floated around the corner of the hangar right next to ours.

The heavily armored warrior was only thirty meters away, and it was apparent that he or she saw me. They raised their plasma rifle, and I threw closed the door.

“Go! Go!” I yelled to Waiola as I jumped in the trunk of the car. She peeled out, and the vehicle rocketed away from the door two seconds before the armored warrior kicked it open.

I was already lifting up my shotgun from my strap, and I squeezed the fuck out of the weapon’s trigger. A flurry of shells ripped out of my barrel and flew into the stacks of power cells I’d put next to the door. I half expected them not to erupt, but they did.

And as the car Waiola and I rode in lifted two meters off the floor of the hangar, I realized I might have stacked a bit too many cells by the door.

The power of the blast almost made my face feel like it had been melted off, but it was just a brief sensation caused by the purple tinted

explosion that the cells made. What hurt more was when the car landed back on the floor of the hangar. Waiola let out a scream, and I was thrown free of the vehicle. I came down hard on my right shoulder, and the injury screamed through my nerves.

I didn't have much time to agonize. I knew that the explosion had killed the warrior at the door, and I raised my shotgun to cover the entrance. It was now a swirling ball of purple fire, and the metal sides of the hangar were starting to melt.

Along with the top beams that were holding the structure together.

"Shit." I could feel the incredible heat coming off the flame from across the hangar, and I guessed it was going to consume the building, or at least melt enough of it so that it collapsed.

We needed to get out of here, but the only exit was the roll-up door, and the other soldiers would be waiting for us. We were fucked either way; the other soldiers had to have heard the explosion. They surely saw the flames and would be heading over here in a few seconds.

"Open up the roller door and get into the car!" I shouted at Hegeia and Uma. They were both peering out at the fire from the office, and I doubted they could hear me over the roar of the flames, but they understood my hand gestures and started to run toward the control panel for the roll-up door.

"Waiola," I said to her after I sprinted to the car. "Drive out the door, make a left to go around the opposite side of the building, then we are going to take the back route around to the other hangars." I motioned with my hand when I spoke and prayed that she understood me.

"Run!" I shouted at Hegeia and Uma after they hit the button to open the roll-up door. The metal began to lift, but a quick glance up told me it might not be able to raise completely. The purple flames were already eating into the sides of the hangar near the roll-up gearing.

I got in the rear left seat, grabbed the support bar for the car's roof, and then pivoted back out with my shotgun pointed back to the entrance. I'd felt certain that the soldier in the fire had died, but I also half expected him to walk out of the flames and start shooting at us.

Uma jumped into the passenger seat, and Waiola slammed on the accelerator pedal as soon as Hegeia followed her. The tires chirped, the car

tilted as Waiola twisted the wheel, and then we shot toward the roll-up door.

I stepped up on the back trunk part of the car so I could see over the roof. The flame had reached the side of the winding roll-up door, but the motor was still working, and the door was raising.

“Faster!” I screamed, even though I knew that Waiola was pushing the pedal down as hard as she could. We still had about seventy meters to go though, and my stomach dropped when the roll-up door jerked to a stop.

The metal of the hangar let out a death screech, and I saw the front corner began to twist away from us.

“Go faster! Just punch out! Go to the main building!” I yelled, but I knew the order was next to useless. Even if Waiola understood me, and drove straight out of the hangar at full speed instead of slowing to turn around the corner, there would just be a group of warriors waiting for us. They would fry us with their plasma rifles before we could get away.

Then the roll-up door slowly began to lower, and I feared we wouldn’t even make it out of the melting hangar.

Waiola and Hegeia screamed as we shot toward the lowering door. One moment it looked like we had enough speed to make it out, the next it seemed as if we were going to slam right into the metal.

I ducked my head down under the roofline of the car and prayed that we’d make it out. Then I felt the bottom edge of the door whizz by my head, the cold air hit my face, and the snowy sky filled my vision. My heart leapt for joy, but then it got caught in my throat when I saw the advancing group of armored warriors. They were flying toward the swiftly melting hangar, and I saw the glowing eyes of their helmets turn toward our speeding car.

“Fuck,” I growled as the group of power armored figures raised their rifles toward us. They were still about a hundred meters away, and our car was tearing ass down the road between the main airport building and the melting hangar, but I had no doubt that they would be able to hit us with plasma.

The women screamed as the Vaish rifles fired. I had thought they were plasma, but the guns sprayed very tiny bits of power, instead of the giant orbs or beams I was used to seeing. The shots almost looked like glowing bullets, and Waiola turned the wheel to avoid the first spray of shots they sent in our

direction.

One of the bullets hit the roof of the car and burnt a path through the metal. Another bullet parted the air between the women and me. Another brushed across the top of the car's front hood, but the remaining smashed into the ground behind us.

Their next shots would be closer to the mark.

I pointed my shotgun in their direction but figured it would be next to futile. I was a great shot, but my targets were a hundred meters away, I was on the back of a speeding car, and the other soldiers were zipping around on thrusters. Shotguns weren't the most accurate of weapons. I still squeezed my trigger, and I sent as many shots as I could into the group. I got a few hits on the pair closest to us, but those just confirmed my belief that their armor was too strong.

"Faster!" I screamed at Waiola. We were actually gaining some distance on them, and I had a small shred of hope we might be able to get to the main airport structure.

Then the armored warriors let out another volley of glowing bullets, and they were right on target.

The women screamed as the bullets tore through the front part of the car, the roof, the sides, and the wheels. I expected to feel a hot flash of pain or to see blood spray across the road from one of the women, but the swarm of bullets somehow managed to miss us. The car had taken critical damage though, and the combination of destroyed tires and engine was causing us to slow.

"So close," I growled as I looked longingly at the main building. It was another three hundred meters away from us. Our only hope was to make the run, but the floating warriors behind us were closing fast.

This was it. I was out of luck. Now I just had one decision to make: did I want to die in my human form or my tiger-man form?

"Adam!" I heard Waiola scream, and then the approaching warriors disappeared in a blast of dark reddish-purple plasma fire. It was a massive blast that destroyed almost a two hundred square meter area. I could feel the heat of the blast, and the force of its impact caused the slowing car to lurch forward.

I turned up to the sky and felt the air leave my lungs.

Persephone.

She spun through the air like a stunt plane and then lobbed another round of plasma down toward the ground. Three craft were chasing Persephone, and her spin in the air had enabled her to dodge all of their plasma blasts. For half a moment, I was almost dumbstruck by the sight of the beautiful manta ray spacecraft, but then I saw her rear cannons return fire on the ships chasing her, and my mind returned its focus to the task at hand.

“Run to the building!” I shouted to the women as I leapt from the back of the car. They were still looking at the dogfight in the air, but they ejected from the car and followed me in a mad dash across the tarmac.

Thunderous blasts and the sound of engines roaring threatened to deafen us, and I spared a glance up to see that Persephone was now engaged with four other craft. They were smaller vessels, but whoever was piloting my ship was a master, and the waves of plasma shots seemed to part the air just moments after Persephone made aggressive banking maneuvers.

I looked down from the sky so I could focus on the building ahead. It might have been a terrible idea to try and take shelter there, but staying out in the open was a worse option. At least inside, we’d have some kind of visual cover.

Then I saw the group of armored warriors from the dropship hover around the corner of the main building. They were still about a kilometer away, but it was obvious that they could see us since we were still in the open.

I glanced up to Persephone and saw a pair of figures jump out of the starship. They both plummeted through the dark air, but I could see a faint outline of blue energy around their armor. Then purple colored energy thrusters fired from their backs, and they spun like plummeting corkscrews.

I didn’t know how, but I knew it was Madalena and Lux. I could feel the Prime Valkyrie’s presence from the sky just like I could feel someone breathing in my ear, and through Madalena, I could feel Lux’s presence.

“Down!” I yelled to the women as the distant soldiers fired their weapons at us. They weren’t very accurate from this distance, but the spray of blue-tinted energy bullets was still way too close for comfort. If we had

not dived onto the tarmac, one of them might have hit us.

Then Madalena and Lux's energy bullets tore into the group.

It was like a rain of energy, or an orbital strike from an armada. An impossible amount of shots seemed to descend on the cluster of warriors in the distance. Their armor melted under the fire, and the ground turned into a black lava soup.

"Adam! More ships!" Hegeia screamed after we all got back on our feet. I followed her finger to the sky behind us and saw the other three drop ships heading toward us from the city.

"Fucking shit," I groaned. "Keep running to the main building."

We set off again, but I kept my eyes on the sky. Persephone was still engaged with the smaller ships, and it looked like they were fighting each other to a bit of a stalemate. The enemy vessels couldn't seem to pin her down with a shot because she was twirling and dancing through the air in a manner that wasn't allowing Madalena's crew to get an accurate shot off with Persephone's cannons.

The Prime Valkyrie and Lux were still falling through the air, but their trajectory had changed so that it appeared they were aiming right toward the front entrance of the main airport building. The wing looking thrusters coming out of their backs flared as soon as they were some twenty meters above us, and the surge of energy slowed their fall enough so they dropped before us gracefully. Both of the women had their horrific looking helmets over their heads, but as soon as they landed, the metal turned into liquid, drained from their faces, and then seemed to pool around their neck joints.

"I have disobeyed your order," Madalena said before I could open my mouth. Seeing her made my heart skip a few beats, and it felt like someone was squeezing my throat. I had missed her, and I was angry at myself for feeling that way.

"What the fuck is going on?" I gasped as my eyes focused on the front of her armor, she had a pack strapped there, and I saw my revolver, pistols, and shotgun attached to the outside of the bag.

"My father is trying to kill you," she replied evenly. "I apologize for disobeying you. Once I have helped you, you may execute me for my--"

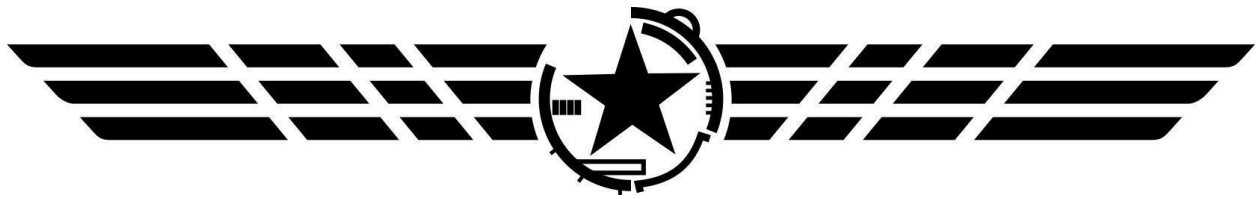
"Of course he's trying to kill me! Why? I was going to fucking--"

“Adam,” Madalena held up her armored hand and pointed to the horizon behind me. I turned and saw each of the three shuttles dropping dozens of armored warriors. They floated to the ground with much less finesse than Magdalena and Lux, but there were at least sixty that I could count. “We do not have much time. Will you follow my instructions for the next few minutes?”

I turned back to her and met her gray eyes. Once I had thought them cold and emotionless, but now I could feel her passion, desire, and love. It poured from her like alluring perfume, and even though we were in the middle of combat, I still wanted to take her in my arms.

The emotions made me hate myself.

“Yeah. Fine. Let’s get through this. Tell me what to do,” I said, and the woman I was bonded to smiled like a lioness.



Chapter 12

“We will move to the other side of this building,” Madalena said as she gestured to the main structure. “It will provide us cover from the drop ships. Nikki will bring Persephone low with the hold door open. Lux and I will use our wings to carry you into the hold. Then we will escape.”

“What about my friends?” I asked as I looked at Hegeia, Uma, and Waiola. I didn’t see them, and then I realized it was because the three women had prostrated themselves in front of Madalena. Their faces were pressed into the tarmac, and I could actually see their shoulders trembling.

“Leave them. We don’t have time--”

“No,” I growled. “We take them.”

“We can only carry you,” Madalena said calmly, and I saw her eyes dart behind me to the approaching legion of armored warriors. These were her clansmen, but she had just killed over twenty of them. What the fuck was going on with her people?

“There is a shuttle parked on the runway past the building. I was going to steal it; we can fly into Persephone--”

“You said you would follow my instructions.” Madalena’s eyes narrowed, and I could feel the anger radiate to me through our connection.

“Your instructions are shit,” I growled at her. “I don’t leave my friends behind. We are taking the shuttle. Hegeia, Uma, and Waiola get up.”

The women looked up at me, then over to Madalena, and then back at me. The Prime Valkyrie barked three words, and my friends shot to their feet as if Madalena had just kicked them in the asshole.

“Move,” Madalena sneered to me and then she kicked the front door of the building. They were stout looking double security doors, but they

exploded inward as if a semi-truck had driven into them.

We ran into the building then made a left to head toward the back side where the shuttle was. This was definitely the terminal building for processing passenger flights out of the airport, and the interior was one long corridor with wings that would lead to connector gates.

Nikki's voice sounded from Madalena's armor, and the Prime Valkyrie barked a few words back in their language. I turned to look at Lux, hoping she would translate, but the dark-haired woman just gave me a disapproving look before her skull helmet reformed around her beautiful face.

My three friends were struggling to keep up with Lux, Madalena, and my running speeds, and I felt the Prime Valkyrie's annoyance begin to boil over the pot of her conflicting emotions. I knew she wanted to save me, and that she felt terrible about me having to do this rite, but I also felt her anger mixed with love, fear, and sadness. It was too much for me to grasp at once, and I tried to pull my attention away from her. Was this how Eve felt around others? Was she constantly reading minds and sensing their emotions? It seemed like there was another person inside of my head.

And my heart.

What the fuck did that submission process do to me?

"Here," Madalena said after we had turned the corner at the end of the building, there were a series of windows here, and I could see the shuttle through the snow storm. The craft was a good two-hundred meters away, and there were two warriors still guarding it, but it didn't seem like they knew we were in the building.

"Put on your armor," Madalena said to me as she yanked the bag from her chest and dropped it on the ground. Then she turned to Hegeia, Uma, and Waiola and barked an order in their language.

"Prime Valkyrie!" they shouted, and then the women began to grab at my clothes.

"Lux and I will retrieve your shuttle and fly it back here. Be prepared to board." Madalena's armored helmet slid back over her face, and the two women jumped through the window. Glass, snow, and cold wind sprayed everywhere, but the three women didn't even flinch.

"I can do that," I said as I yanked my jacket off.

“Prime Valkyrie told us to have you ready, or she will destroy us,” Hegeia said calmly as she jerked open the bag with my armor. I saw my flight suit neatly folded on top of the plates there,

“She’s not going to do--”

“Hurry,” Hegeia hissed as I felt Uma unbuckle my ammo belts.

It was a slower process because of the three women trying to help me strip out of my clothes and boots, but once I’d put on my flight suit, they each went to work putting the armored plates onto the mesh. I was surprised they knew how to put the armor on, but soon remembered that Hegeia told me all Nordar were warriors, and the armor hadn’t taken me a long time to figure out.

While they put the armor plates on my back, I kneeled down and pushed my feet into the pair of boots that were in the bag. They weren’t my old pair, but the hard armored plates on the surface and the material on the inside looked like it would expand to fit me when I shifted.

I had been too busy changing to see how Madalena and Lux killed the guard, but I saw the shuttle lift off the runway, twist in the air, and then float toward us. I still had a quarter of my armor pieces to put on, as well as my weapons, but my friends had figured out how to work together, and they finished attaching all the plates by the time the shuttle landed outside of the window.

“Move!” Madalene’s voice somehow managed to reach my ears over the roar of the shuttle’s thrusters and the screech of the snow storm outside. She was standing at the side door of the shuttle and made a motion for us to hurry the fuck up and get inside.

I grabbed the chest holster for my big ass revolver, the spread of ammo belts, and my trusty shotgun. The other women picked up my other gear, and we all jumped through the window.

A second before the hallway behind us was showered with hundreds of energy bullets.

“Run!” Madalena shouted as she aimed her weapon at some point behind us. Her rifle sprayed energy bullets like a hose, but I didn’t want to waste time looking behind me to see if she had killed the armored warriors tailing us.

We sprinted the short distance to the hovering shuttle and jumped inside. I made sure I was the last one in since I didn't trust Lux to not take off without the three women that helped me.

The shuttle rocketed up from the ground, and the g-forces slammed me into the floor of the ship. A few moments later I was able to push myself up, and I worked on getting my revolver strapped to my chest.

"Move!" I heard Hegeia scream, and I looked up from my chest to see one of the other shuttles angle toward us. I also saw half a dozen new ships in the sky, but they weren't all shooting at Persephone, some were shooting against each other. It was like a war, and my ship was dancing between the burning starcraft like a hummingbird.

I grabbed my old ammo belt with my twin pistols and clasped them around my waist, then I reached for my trusty shotgun. Before I could grab it, our shuttle lurched, I fell on my armored ass, and the pile of weapons and ammo slid to the rear of the cabin along with my three friends.

Madalena shouted something at Lux, who yelled something back from her pilot's seat. The Prime Valkyrie was leaning against the bulkhead of the shuttle, and she raised her rifle to aim out the open door. Her weapon screeched as it poured out energy bullets, and she shouted something else at Lux.

I climbed to my feet and then stepped toward the open door. As soon as I came to stand next to the opening, something hit me in the chest, and I was catapulted to the far side of the cabin. The back of my head slammed into the bulkhead, the air exploded from my lungs, and my vision swam.

Two of these power armored fuckers had somehow flown through the open shuttle door.

The one who was on me was trying to untangle his arms from mine so he could pull up his rifle. The stars in my eyes cleared as soon as he lifted his weapon, and I managed to grab onto his right wrist with my left hand.

"Fuck!" I screamed as we struggled for control of his weapon. He reached back with his left arm to punch me, but I got my right hand on his shoulder so that he couldn't move it. The positioning gave his gun hand a bit more leverage though, and his gun began to crawl up toward my face. The blue eyes of his helmet glowed, and I could hear the servos in his power

armor strain against my strength. I was using everything I had, but the armor was giving him the edge, and the barrel of his gun moved another centimeter closer to my head.

I shifted.

The beast had been screaming the entire time, but his usual screeches were being muted by Madalena's presence. My change came to my back first, as usual, but then the strength flowed through my arms, hands, and clawed fingers.

My right hand squeezed his shoulder, and I felt his armor compress against his flesh. He didn't scream when the metal crushed the bone, but his left hand went limp.

He tried to push his body into his right arm so that the gun would finish rising toward my face, but I was now stronger than he was, and the weapon didn't budge. I let go of his left shoulder, grabbed the massive handgun from my chest holster, pushed the barrel into the eye slot of his power armor, and pulled the trigger. The thumb-sized bullet exited the back of the helmet with a spray of brain and blood that decorated the bulkhead next to the open door.

I pried the energy rifle out of the dead man's hands and pointed it at the man who had crashed into Madalena. They were both trying to wrestle each other's weapons away, but Madalena's head was actually dangling out of the shuttle and she had virtually no leverage. I angled my weapon upward so I wouldn't hit the armored woman and pulled the trigger. The bullet from my rifle took the man in the back of the helmet, and the energy bullet punched three burning holes through his skull.

As soon as the man fell off Madalena, she started to slip out of the shuttle. I tossed aside the rifle and grabbed her ankle before she fell. Then I yanked her back inside.

"Thank you, my lord," it looked like her lips said, but I couldn't hear her over the sound of the thrusters and the wind screaming.

I pushed my revolver back in my chest holster and then reached for the energy rifle I had just dropped.

The shuttle rocked again, and I felt my feet lift off the ground.

Then I was falling through the cold air outside of the shuttle.

I spun through the clouds of snow and the chill burnt through the fur on my face. The weightless sensation reminded me of when I fell from the Magate Order ship, and I felt a roar of frustration. I could assume that this suit had a parachute built in the back, but even if it did go off, I'd be stuck on the ground with the rest of the warriors hunting me. They'd see me falling and pick me out of the air with their rifles.

I fell for another few seconds and began to fear my chute wouldn't open. I couldn't quite tell how high I was because of the snow, but then there was a break in the clouds, and the dawn light illuminated the surface of the planet. I was still really far up, and the massive airport building looked like it was a dab on an artist's painting.

The spaceships hovering in the atmosphere were all around me, as were explosions, plasma fire, and plumes of smoke. I saw armor clad soldiers pour out of the back hold of a ship a few thousand feet away, and then I twisted out of the flight path of one of the carrier shuttles. It looked like more soldiers were jumping out of that door also, and I knew I was going to die as soon as my chute went off. They'd just shoot me.

I was also going to die when my chute didn't go off.

Then Madalena was in my arms. Or I was in her arms. Maybe it didn't matter because the thrusters on her back engaged and we both grabbed onto each other. Our trajectory began to level slightly, and I glanced up to see a group of armored figures diving behind us. I opened my mouth to yell at her, but the wind was too loud for anyone to hear. She still seemed to understand, looked up, and then twisted her body against my chest so we leaned at an angle pointed more toward the ground. The change in direction increased our speed, but then one of the fuckers plowed into us, and I felt my arm break in three parts.

I spun away from Madalena, and the asshole that hit me grabbed onto my broken left arm. I punched his helmeted face, and his head snapped back, but he still didn't let go of my arm.

The limb had already healed, and I extended the claws on my finger so they sunk into his armor. He reached down for his rifle, but the weapon was on his right side, and I yanked him back to me so I could drive my claws into his eye socket. I couldn't hear him scream, but his body twitched, and blood poured out of his helmet holes as soon as I yanked my hand out.

I reached for the dead man's rifle, but another armored figure hit me on the left side, and that same arm broke again, along with what felt like three of my ribs. This fucker was too smart to grapple with me. Instead, he brought up his rifle and tried to shoot.

He was only about two meters away, but our falling speed had an adverse effect on the laser bullets he shot. I dove downward, but the bullets would have missed me anyways; they all arched up into the air.

His missed shots gave me an idea, so I spun my body to position myself under him. I yanked my revolver out of my holster and shot him before he could punch his rifle bullets through me. My hand cannon expelled a flame that traveled the distance between us, and my bullet crumpled his helmet as if it was made of tin.

I saw movement up at my eleven o'clock and twisted to aim my handgun in the direction, but almost as soon as I moved, I knew it was Madalena, and we wrapped our arms around each other again. We were still in freefall, but instead of engaging her back thrusters, she twisted our bodies around so we faced the sky.

Three fuckers were diving toward us, and we both lifted our weapons toward them. I aimed a little lower than I might normally have and squeezed the trigger on my revolver. I half expected to miss, but the massive flame roared right into the armored chest of the nearest warrior, and his torso burst apart as if he was made of confetti.

I hadn't expected my shot to take him out that easily, and I wondered if Madalena switched my ammo out for armor piercing rounds.

Her energy bullets tore into the other two soldiers like a swarm of blue wasps. The back thruster of the rightmost warrior exploded, and both of their armored bodies were incinerated by the blast.

Madalena's back thrusters engaged, and my vision spun as she twisted upward and level. There was another fucker falling down at us, but I was the only one who had a sight on him. I aimed my revolver as well as I could, waited for him to get a few dozen meters closer, and shot as his first energy bullets left his rifle. His shots fell short because of our speed, but my massive bullet hit him in the shoulder, ripped through his armor, and then blew out the back of one of his thrusters. Black smoke exploded from his injury, and his body spun through the air like a crashing helicopter.

I swiveled my head up so I could see where Madalena was flying. Then I felt my blood chill when I saw how many fucking ships were in the sky. I couldn't count them all, but the air that wasn't filled with starships was filled with plasma balls, lasers, or drones.

Her thrusters burst with a bit of extra power, and our trajectory shifted, so we were actually angling up a bit. I focused my eyes on where we were heading and realized that she was throwing us right toward one of the other drop shuttles. Its door was open, and two armored soldiers were shooting at us with their rifles.

Blue bullets arched through the air, but Madalena seemed to guess where they were going to shoot before they knew, and she twisted us around the streams of death as if she was leading me in a ballroom dance.

We were going really damn fast toward the shuttle though, and I kept wondering if she was going to slow the speed of her thrust. She glanced down to me, and I felt time slow as we stared into each other's eyes. Then she smiled, and her armor crawled up her skin to cover her face in the horrific banshee scream visage.

She wasn't going to slow the fuck down.

I focused on holding onto my revolver and keeping my body loose, but I still felt my armor compress, and my ribs snap when we made a body sized dent in the shuttle's innards. Madalena had shielded my head and face with her left arm, but I was still slightly stunned from the impact, and my chest was having problems sucking in air.

We'd knocked one of the armored warriors down when we flew through the door, but there were two more men in the cabin. They spun toward us with their rifles, but my bullet punched through the neck joint of the one on the left and Madlena's shots tore through the other one's armor like a buzz saw.

The man we'd knocked down raised his rifle, but I kicked it aside a half moment before he pulled the trigger. My attack threw me off balance, and I fell to the deck with a growl of pain. Energy bullets sprayed across the interior hull of the shuttle, and a bullet caught the head of the armor wearing pilot. Dozens of electrical parts started to smoke, and the ship lurched toward the shuttle's open door. Madalena kicked out with her boot, hit the man in the shoulder, and then launched him out into the atmosphere. To ensure that he

was dead, she stepped to the edge of the tilting shuttle and drilled a half dozen energy bullets into his body before he could engage his thrusters.

“The pilot!” I wheezed, hacked, and spat blood onto the floor of the leaning shuttle as I tried to crawl toward the two pilots’ chairs. Madalena was already moving though, and she grabbed the controls of the unoccupied seat as her helmet melted away from her face. The drop ship leveled out a second later, and we started to lift upward.

“Nikki,” Madalena shouted over the wind howling through our small ship. “Adam and I are safe in a second shuttle. Lux is in the one nearest to you. What is the status?”

Nikki spoke in their language, and Madalena replied as she swung her head across the cockpit view glass. Lux said something I couldn’t understand, and then Madalena issued an order.

My ribs and lungs had healed, and oxygen started pouring back into my blood, so I holstered my empty revolver, grabbed a rifle from one of the men we just killed, and stood up behind Madalena’s chair. As soon as I leaned over her, I saw Persephone break through a thick cluster of clouds and then bank away from us. The four smaller ships were still harassing her, but I didn’t see any damage to her hull.

“We will have to be quick!” Madalena shouted as she glanced up at me, and I realized she was going to try and fly our shuttle into Persephone’s hold while in the middle of a dogfight. It was all sorts of insane, but it was a plan that I probably would have tried.

“Lux and my friends first!” I shouted over the sound of the freezing air coming through the open door.

“We have better position!” she snarled as she turned away from me and accelerated our shuttle toward the center of the battle.

“No, I want them to go--” I stopped mid-sentence and then looked back over my shoulder. “Our fucking shuttle is on fire!” I stepped away from the flames so that I was standing between the pilots’ chairs. There was a fire extinguisher down at the bottom of one of the seats, and I ripped it free of the mounting with a twist of my hand. The spray of foam took care of some of the flames, but the smoke was now pouring out of every seam.

“Lux, fly the shuttle in first!” Madalena’s voice sounded surprisingly

calm, but she still had to shout over the wind.

Lux said something, and then Nikki replied in their language. I saw Persephone dart through the clouds, bank upward, and then dive again. At the crest of her movement, her rear cannons fired, and the blasts connected with two of the pursuing craft.

“We are climbing,” I thought I heard Madalena say, but her actions spoke enough, and our shuttle’s nose lifted to point up at the massive battle taking place above us. It looked like the entire Vaish fleet was fighting with itself, and there were more explosions than stars.

I turned to look back into the cabin, but the smoke was almost too thick to see through, which was quite an accomplishment given how much wind was billowing through the open side door. It was starting to pool around our heads though, and Madalena shot me a quick glance.

“Lux, are you in?” she yelled.

“No, too many hostiles. I cannot line up an entrance.”

“I will have a break in three,” Nikki said. “Head toward the bottom curve of my swoop.”

“Understood,” Lux answered.

“Our shuttle is damaged,” Madalena said. “I think it will explode shortly. Adam and I must jump. Catch us after Lux mounts her shuttle inside of Persephone’s hold.”

“Understood,” Nikki said with all the calmness of a waitress taking an order for breakfast toast.

Madalena stood from the chair, and we stared at each other for a few moments.

“We are probably going to die,” she said.

“I can’t die,” I growled. “I have friends I need to find.”

“I am sorry about--”

“Save it,” I cut her off with a snarl. “It wasn’t your fault. I understand you better now. I take it I don’t have to complete the rite?”

“We will talk about it if we live through this,” she said.

“That’s not the answer I want to hear,” I growled again.

“It is a long explanation, and our shuttle will either lose power or explode at any moment.” Her face was emotionless, but I could feel her anger and frustration.

“Then you’ll have to tell me later.” I grabbed her hand, and then we jumped out of the shuttle.

We floated through the light of the dawn. Amongst the explosions, the plasma fire, and the thousands of dying I enjoyed the deafening scream of the air zipping past my ears. My fur protected me from most of the cold, but I saw that Madalena’s helmet had slithered back over her head again.

Her arms hooked under my shoulders, and my arms wrapped around her lower back. She was a tall, athletic woman wearing armor, but I was in my tiger-man form, so she felt small and feminine squeezed against my chest.

I looked upward, which was really toward the ground then saw Lux’s shuttle dart into Persephone’s top triangle shuttle hatch. As soon as the ship entered, Persephone’s hatch closed, and the black starship banked hard to her right. Nikki was going to loop her around to intercept us, but she also had the two smaller craft pursuing her.

Madalena and I were going to have to time this perfectly.

There was little I could do but watch and hope that the Prime Valkyrie knew what she was doing. I saw Persephone dive away from us, then arch up and launch a salvo of plasma balls at the two craft on her tail. The shots both missed, but the enemy craft had to bank horizontally and away from the direction she was heading. As soon as they turned away, Nikki pushed on the engine, and Persephone zipped past us like a ballistic rocket.

I turned my head to look down at my boots and saw Persephone make a tight turn and then loop around toward us. I understood what the plan was, and I looked back toward the surface of the planet. The two other craft were swooping back around to come at Persephone, and they were already firing their plasma guns.

We had maybe ten seconds to get inside.

Persephone dove next to us, and I thought she was going to open up her top hatches, but then she flew down past us, and her back hatch spun open. Madalena’s thrusters engaged, and the purple wings sprouted from her back. I felt the heat of the flames on my armor, but it didn’t feel hot enough

to melt the metal there.

Our dive speed increased, and then we plummeted into Persephone's hold.

I gasped as soon as we entered and the hatch twisted closed. The absence of screaming wind was more than welcome, but the feeling of being back on my ship was close to joy. Relief flooded through my massive muscles, and I felt a purr rumble through my chest.

Madalena angled our flight toward crew stations on the side of the hold. Persephone was still banking, diving, and twisting through the air, and we had to float above the surface of the hold to keep from getting beaten to death by the floor or ceiling. After a dozen seconds, we dropped to the floor, and then we both strapped ourselves into the available stations.

"Nikki, we are secured," Madalena said as her helmet dripped away from her face.

"Understood, Prime Valkyrie. I will head into orbit," Nikki said.

"Engage warp drive when we are clear," Madalena said.

"Yes, Prime Valkyrie."

"Wait, warpdrive?" I asked. "Where are we--"

"Queen's Hat," Madalena said. "You told me you had someone you needed to speak to there?"

"Yeah, but I was trying to find out the location of the Magate Order. We need to rescue my friends."

"Your friends will be sold at an auction in one of their various slave markets. I know where some of them are."

"Then we need to go to one of those first," I said.

"Calisto, change of plans," Madalena said. "Set course for Red Eye - 13."

"Yes, Prime Valkyrie. Should I use warp or hyperdrive?"

"Warp," Madalena replied as her eyes met mine.

"Understood. We need three more minutes to recalculate."

"Nikki, keep us alive until then," Madalena said.

“Persephone is faster than *Dance to the Dirge*, Prime Valkyrie, we have already lost our pursuers. I am taking a heading away from your father’s forces.”

“Engage the warpdrive when ready.” The brunette warrior turned to me, and I felt relief pour off her.

Or maybe it was my own relief that I felt. I couldn’t believe I was still alive.

I looked over to the far area of the hold where the shuttles were and saw the craft we stole attached to the floor. I guessed that Lux, Hegeia, Waiola, and Uma were still strapped to chairs inside. It was far too dangerous to try to get to the bridge during a dogfight.

I figured I didn’t need to be in my tiger-man form anymore. If we got into a battle now, it would be starship versus starship, and my combat prowess wouldn’t matter. I did want to spend a few hours talking to Madalena about the Draugr, her ship, Parnarta, and what was going on with all these assholes trying to kill me, but I was going to need to sleep as soon as I shifted. Warpdrive was a fine time to rest.

I closed my eyes and tried to ignore the shifting g-forces of Persephone’s flight. I thought of the ocean again. I thought of the palm trees. I thought of the wind caressing my face. I imagined Eve sunbathing next to me on a towel, Zea drinking some sort of iced drink, and Paula and Kasta building a sand castle.

Fuck. I wanted to see them again, and even though the desire could have brought me anger, it just caused sadness that turned my stomach to ice.

I opened my eyes and found Madalena studying me with cold intensity. We stared at each other for a few moments, and then the armor began to drip and pool across her body. It slithered and trickled up to the amulet she kept on her chest, and the device began to glow blue with strange energy. She was wearing her tight bodysuit uniform under her armor, and I tried to keep my eyes from the curves of her breasts, her flat stomach, and her muscular legs.

“I can feel your rage when you are a tiger. I still feel it now, but the beast is far away.” Her eyes moved to the armor at my chest and then flickered back up to my face.

“That’s what they did to me. The guy in the video. They called him

President Yu.”

“Hmmm,” she said. “It feels like you, but not you. Almost as if you and the tiger share your body, but are different souls. I felt the pain when you changed. It was agonizing.”

“I’m used to it,” I said as I closed my heavy eyelids. I didn’t want to look at her anymore, but it wasn’t because I didn’t enjoy looking at her. “How does your armor work?”

“It is a relic of my people. Passed down from generations of Vaish.”

“And you are the Prime Valkyrie,” I said.

“Yes.”

“That pretty much explains everything you do,” I said.

“Yes,” she answered.

“No,” I laughed. “It really doesn’t explain anything. I was being sarcastic.”

“Oh,” she said. “Adam, will you look at me again?”

“Huh?” I pried open my eyes so I could meet her gaze.

“I have disobeyed you. You asked me to stay away, but I could not.”

“I’m guessing you have a good reason. Can you explain?”

“When my father was born, he had a birthmark over his heart.”

“Okay?” I asked when she paused a few moments.

“It was in the shape of a cat, with teeth. The seers said he would rule our people until a snow leopard killed him. It would be a sign of change in the Vaish, and that we would unite the Nordar.”

“You are fucking kidding me,” I said with a long sigh. I was putting the pieces together.

“No. We have snow leopards in Niflheim, Svartalfheim, and Helheim. He ordered their mass annihilation.”

“Then he watched the video of my shift.”

“Yes, then he sent orders to the planet to have you killed. When you weren’t, he sent warriors to hunt you.”

“Well, I’ve got bad news for you, Madalena. Your dad was a fucker even before I shifted. The men who gave me my starting equipment stabbed me, and the food in my pack was poisoned.”

Her jaw clenched, and I could feel hot pulses of rage surge from her like stormy waves.

“He is not supposed to interfere with a rite of passage. Let alone Odin’s,” she finally said. “When I found out that he put a bounty on you, I rallied my supporters in the clan.”

“So that is why you are all fighting each other,” I stated.

“Yes. I asked him to call off the attack and let you complete the rite, as you should be allowed to, but he is convinced you will kill him and take his throne. He has replayed the feed from the observer hundreds of times.”

“You asked him to call off the attack, he said no, then what? You aren’t the kind of woman who someone says no to.” I gave her a smile, and she surprised me by returning it.

“I was prepared for him to say no. Most of his admirals serve me. The others only serve him because they have submitted. Once I destroy them, he will not have his power base anymore.”

“Sounds like a shitload of people are going to die,” I said.

“It is the way of coup d’état,” she said with a shrug.

“There isn’t another way? Couldn’t you challenge him to a duel? I could have sworn you said something about that--”

“I did, he lost, but then he fled.” Madalena crossed her arms. “He is dishonored. I am the leader of the Vaish Overlord Clan now. We just have to dispose of the last remnants of his followers.”

“But now you are here with me, and we are about to head to Red Eye - 13.” I crossed my own arms and fought to keep my eyes open.

“I swore to help you,” she said. “I am submitted to you. You are my hus--”

“But who is leading your ships? Who is going to catch your father?”

“I have admirals. They will do the work. My promise to you is more important.”

“But you have thousands of starships. We could hit the Magate Order and finish them off.”

“This task will take many weeks, and Persephone will be able to reach Red Eye - 13, or any of the other slave trading stations, faster than all the other ships in our fleet. Even my father’s Shadow Eagle, or *Dance to the Dirge*, is not as fast as Persephone’s warpdrives. If you wish to wait, speak now, and I will stop Calisto.”

“I don’t want to wait a second longer,” I said, “but I also don’t want to attack the entire Magate Order with only one ship.”

“That is what I believed you would say. If we find the outpost where they intend to sell their slaves, we do not need to fight them directly. We can take your friends back and then return to Nordar - 13.”

“Prime Valkyrie,” Calisto said over the transponder. “I am engaging warpdrives. It will take us twenty-nine minutes to get there.”

“Engage,” Madalena said, and Persephone’s flight pattern immediately leveled.

“That doesn’t give me much time to sleep, but I need to rest,” I said as I unbuckled myself from the chair. I stood on wobbly legs and hoped I’d have the strength to make it to my suite. The time on Niflheim had really exhausted me. I’d forced myself to stay awake after a shift, and I was paying for it now.

“We can dock at Red Eye - 13, and then begin our investigation while you rest.” Madalena stood too close to me, so I took a step away.

“No, wake me up when we dock, I need to find them.”

“You are not angry with me?” she asked, and I was surprised by the bit of fear I felt come from her.

“No,” I said, but in reality, I didn’t know what I felt toward the beautiful warrior woman. I was still pissed at her, but I could also feel her emotions.

I knew she cared about me, even through her cold exterior.

“You are hard to read. You are always angry. I will assist you in your room.”

“No. Handle your crew. I will be fine. Give my friends rooms and

work to do,” I said as I gestured to Hegei, Uma, and Waiola.

“Adam, I am the Prime Valkyrie,” she said as she followed me out of the hold. “Let me attend to you. I will relax you so that--”

“I don’t care that you are the Prime Valkyrie. I--”

“You should care,” she interrupted me, and I could feel her anger again. Her face was still emotionless, but her eyes glittered dangerously.

“Madalena, what you did to me was akin to rape. I know you keep telling me you are the Prime Valkyrie, as if I should be impressed, but I never wanted you to submit to me, and now you think we are married. I didn’t want to meet your father, and then I had to do some bullshit fucking rite, or I would die. I should be fucking angry at you, but you did something to me, and now I feel what you feel. I don’t know what you want from me, but I’m not going to love you. I want to find the women that I do love, and then I need to get ready to fight the SAVO. If you want to help, fine, but if you want to keep trying to convince me we are married, I’m going to end up disliking you.”

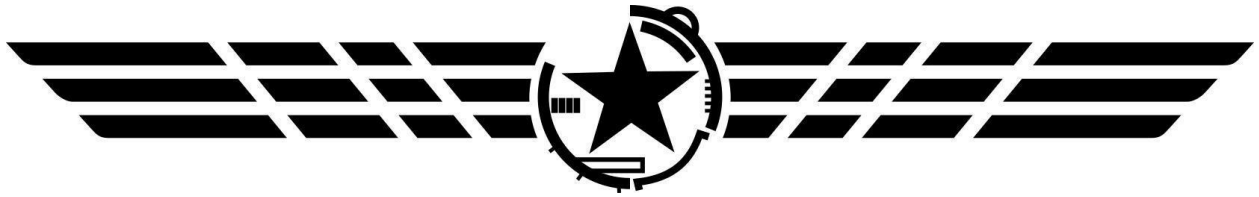
She didn’t say anything, but she didn’t need to. I could feel her disappointment, shame, and remorse. Her emotions overwhelmed me a bit, and I choked on a reply that I knew would make her feel better.

The elevator door opened, and I stepped inside. Then I turned to face her. Our eyes met, but despite the turmoil in her soul, her face was emotionless.

“Wake me when we dock at the station.”

“Yes, my lord,” she whispered.

Then the door to the elevator closed, and I rode it up to my room alone.



Chapter 13

“Adam,” a voice called to me through the darkness, but I couldn’t open my eyes until I felt someone shake me.

“Yeah?” I groaned, but I still couldn’t get my eyes open.

“The Prime Valkyrie told me to wake you.” It was Hegeia’s voice, and I finally managed to force my eyelids open.

Fuck I was tired, and I felt like I’d been hit by a hammer in my chest, back, stomach, legs, and skull. Everything hurt, and I wanted to go back to sleep.

“Why?” I muttered as I closed my eyes again.

“We have just docked at Red Eye - 13,” Hegeia whispered. “She said you wanted to look for your friends, and that I should wake you.”

“Yeah,” I said as my eyes opened. I wanted to sleep, but not even a fraction of the amount I wanted to find Eve, Zea, Paula, and Kasta.

I slid my feet off my bed and stood. I hadn’t bothered to take off my armor, revolver, pistols, or ammo belt when I got to my room. At the most, I’d get half an hour of sleep, and taking off everything would eat into that time too much.

“Thanks for waking me,” I said as I ran my tongue around my dry mouth and teeth. I tasted blood from my shift, so I walked into my bathroom.

It was really damn hard to put one foot in front of the other, but I was closer to finding my friends than I had been since I lost them. I needed to push through this exhaustion.

I grabbed my toothbrush and did the job in a few minutes. Then I rinsed out my mouth and realized Hegeia was still standing next to me.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Prime Valkyrie said not to report back without you.”

“Ahh,” I said as I put my toothbrush away. Then I gestured for her to walk out with me, and we stepped from my suite.

“Adam?” she asked as we walked down the hallway that would take us to the bridge.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for taking us with you. You have honored us. We will serve you with devotion.” The pretty redhead smiled at me and brought her hand up to her heart.

“You three helped me. I couldn’t have gotten here without you,” I said.

“You are good man. Freyja blessed us when you walked into tavern.”

“Freyja? That’s a new one. He like Odin?”

“She, and no, different from All Father. Freyja is love, and beauty, and battle, and lust. All that makes us human. She has giant cats who pull her chariot. Maybe she sent you instead of Odin. Or maybe both.”

“Okay,” I said as I ran a gloved hand down my face. It was no use arguing with these people about their gods.

“We are thankful. Thank you for honoring us. We will serve you however you wish.” Hegeia smiled at me, and I knew what she meant with the last sentence.

“I’ll need help on the ship. For as long as you three want to stay. You can leave at any time. I’ll drop you off where you want.”

“Thank you,” she replied. “Maybe after we have paid our debt, we can be freewomen, but we are happy here now. With you and the Prime Valkyrie.”

We walked past the elevator and into the bridge. Madalena, Nikki, Lux, and Mikhael were looking at a map of a space station on Persephone’s display, and Josefinna, along with the two women who I guessed were Milda and Calisto huddled together over one of Persephone’s gunner terminals.

Madalena saw me and barked a word in the language I didn’t know. The rest of the crew shot to attention and turned to face me. None of them were wearing their armor, but their tight uniforms displayed impressively fit

bodies.

“Is that Red Eye - 13?” I asked after they had saluted. It was a stupid question since the design of the station looked like a massive spherical eyeball.

“Yes,” Madalena said. “We are here.” She pointed at the glowing dot on the underbelly of the station. “There is one Magate Order ship docked over here.” She gestured to the other side of the station.

“We need to go over there and talk to them,” I said as I felt the beast in my stomach growl.

“We have been to this station once,” Madalena said as she pointed to the center of the eyeball design. “They have slave auctions in the main bazaar. We will find Magate Order scum there. We will separate a few from their group and then ask them about your friends.”

“Let’s go,” I said as I clenched my fists hard enough to crack the joints.

“My lord, Red Eye - 13 is an unsavory place. Will you take my advice?” Madalena looked at me, and I could feel her hope. Damn it, she truly wanted to help me and make me happy. It was hard to be mad at someone who felt the way she did about me.

“Yeah.”

“We should not leave Persephone unattended. Also, Red Eye - 13 allows each person to carry one sidearm, but no large weapons. They take no responsibility for any deaths that occur inside.”

“So how many should we take with us into the station?” I asked.

“Just two,” she answered as she gestured to Lux and Mikhael.

“Alright. Just a single sidearm?”

“Yes, we have stocked Persephone's armory with pulse technology.” Madalena smiled, and I realized she must have felt my surge of excitement.

Who didn’t like new guns?

“Let’s swing by the armory.” I was a bit surprised she only thought the four of us needed to go, but she might have thought there was a good chance that assholes might try to steal Persephone.

“Josefinna, you have command until Adam returns. Kill any who

approaches our dock.”

“Yes, Prime Valkyrie,” the woman with the fiery red hair said.

Madalena, Lux, Mikhael, and I walked toward the elevator. Hegeia stepped aside and bowed her head to Madalena, and the brunette woman stopped.

“Thrall, continue familiarizing yourself with the ship.”

“Yes, Prime--”

“Her name is Hegeia,” I said to Madalena.

“She is a thrall,” the brunette warrior woman said, and I felt her distaste.

“Her name is Hegeia, her sister is Waiola, their friend is Uma.

“Adam,” Hegeia said. “It is fine. If the Prime--”

“If not for them, I wouldn’t be here with you,” I said to Madalena.

“No, you would have crushed all that stood before you. I have viewed your--”

“I’m not going to fucking argue with you about this, Madalena,” I spat as I looked at the rest of her people. “All of you need to call them by their names, or you can get the fuck off my ship. Get it?”

“Yes, my lord,” Madalena said quickly.

“Good.” I nodded to her and then continued to the elevator.

Mikhael, Lux, and Madalena followed me into the lift, and we took it down to the bottom level. No one spoke during the descent, and we quickly exited once the door opened.

We walked down the hall and into the armory. As soon as I set foot in the door, my mouth hung open and pleasure cascaded down my spine. The large room had finally been organized, with specific locations for armor, firearms, ammo, and equipment. The weapon racks were now all filled with deadly looking pulse rifles, laser pistols, shock shotguns, and all of our old equipment. I saw the weapons I acquired on Nordar - 13 - a secured on a rack, but my eyes were drawn back to the laser-looking pistols.

“They are pulse weapons,” Madalena explained as she grasped one of the handguns.

“How do they work? I thought all your equipment shot plasma, but they look like energy bullets.” The gun felt a bit too light in my hand, but it had an optical sight that flipped up as soon as I pulled it out of its holster.

“The technology is similar. Plasma weapons run too hot, are too heavy, and do too much damage to a ship’s interior. Nordar weapons shoot micro bits of plasma driven by lasers.” Pride flowed from her, and I looked at the magazine at the bottom of the weapon.

“Are they hard to maintain? How many shots?”

“They require more upkeep than cartridge gunpowder weapons, but the weapons are lighter, shoot faster, and each magazine carries fifty shots.”

“Hmm,” I said as I familiarized myself with the weapon. Lux and Mikhael had already grabbed their pistols, but I put the pulse weapon back in its holster and set it on the rack.

“I’ll use my revolver for now,” I said. “I want to test fire the pulse pistol a bit before I take it into a hostile environment.” I figured that Red Eye - 13 would be filled with a bunch of people I wouldn’t mind putting a pulse shot or twenty into, but there would also be innocents around. I knew exactly how my massive revolver operated, and I trusted it.

“It is an effective weapon,” she said with a slight nod. “I loaded your ammo belt with armor piercing rounds, but they might be overkill for this station.”

“I obtained more ammunition and speed loaders, my lord,” Lux said as she pointed to a stack of boxes on the weapon table beside me. “You will find them there.”

“Ahh, thanks, Lux,” I said as I pulled my revolver from my chest holster. I had yet to reload it from when Madalena and I escaped, so I snapped the thick cylinder out of the body, ejected the five thumb sized casings, and then reloaded it with a box I found on the counter. Then I removed my pistol holsters from my belt and added five speed loaders with non-armor piercing rounds. Madalena had put an additional five speed loaders of armor piercing ammo in my belt, but they had plenty of space because I’d taken out my pistol magazines.

“I’m ready if you all are,” I said after I moved the revolver holster to my right hip and took off my chest webbing. I was trying to move as fast as I

could, but my muscles were still exhausted, and I felt like my mind was in a haze.

The three Vaish warriors gave a brief nod, and then we turned to exit the armory.

We reached the hold half a minute later, and I saw Mildia and Josefinna standing at the entrance with their pulse rifles in their hands. Josefinna hit the hatch button, and it opened up to reveal the docking tube. The five Vaish warriors said nothing to each other as we left, but I gave Mildia and Josefinna a grateful nod.

“Thanks for watching over Persephone,” I said, but neither of them replied. They did return my nod though, so I guess I was making a bit of progress.

We walked to the end of the docking tube, and then Mikhael pressed a green button with “CALL” written on it. Unlike Queen’s Hat, the state and general cleanliness of this tube left a lot to be desired. It smelled like shit mixed with piss, there were piles of trash in the corner, and the tunnel was riddled with bullet holes. Dark red stains decorated the bulkhead in some places, and I guessed that the confined space had seen more than its fair share of gun battles.

“Ye?” A voice came over a speaker located on the top of the door.

“We’re from Persephone,” Mikhael said, and I noticed his accent sounded a lot like the voice coming from the speaker.

“Why you here?” the voice asked.

“Well,” Mikhael said with a nearly identical accent. “We told ye control tower that we were looking to acquire some specialty goods here. I’m sure ye can guess what we mean. We read the rules docket and are only carrying handguns.”

“And you brought ye rhodium?” the man asked. “Raise it up so I can see it.”

Lux pulled three small plastic bags out of her breast pocket and held them up toward the speaker. I estimated it to be about four hundred grams, and the sight of it made my stomach clench. It was a shitload of rhodium, but then I remembered the size of the Vaish armada. They probably had plenty of the rare metal.

“Yeesh. That’s a good spot. Docking fee is ten percent.”

“That’s fine.” Mikhael smiled up at the speaker, but I felt the beast in my stomach roar. These fuckers were going to take ten percent? How in the fuck could they do business? No one would be willing to dock here if they had to pay that much of their rhodium. I stepped forward and looked up at the speaker. I didn’t see the camera, but I guessed the fucker could see the rage on my face.

Madalena grabbed my shoulder and pulled me close to her, I almost pushed her away, but I felt her emotions, and my understanding of the situation became clearer.

“Eh? Looks like your armored buddy isn’t happy with our docking fees,” the voice said.

“He’s fine,” Mikhael said smoothly. “We heard you have the best stock of luxury products here. The docking fee is worth it.”

“I’ll open the door then!” the voice exclaimed. “Ye can pay the fee on the left side. I’ve got a window there.”

The door to the dock slid open, halfway, got stuck and slowed, but then popped free and slid the rest of the way open. Mikhael and Lux stepped out of the docking tube, and then I followed Madalena out.

We stood in a corridor some two meters wide and six meters long. At the end of the hallway was an open archway leading to the main thoroughfare of the harbor. I could see a throng of traffic out there, but the space where we stood was only lit by a single dim bulb, and anyone who wanted to look into this alcove would need to step into the archway.

“Set ye rhodium on the scale here,” the man spoke to our left, and I turned to the window. He was a squat greasy fucker with a dirty uniform and an ugly leer. At first glance, the booth looked to be made out of the same metal as the corridor, but I could see clearly in near darkness, and I saw this was an after addition that didn’t look to even be attached to the wall it stood against.

Two auto guns were fixed on the top of the booth, and they each had a pulsing red light beneath the barrels.

“The scale,” the man prompted from behind the armored glass again, and I saw a dish placed on the edge of the booth.

Without speaking, the four of us drew our handguns and fired.

I wasn't using armor piercing rounds, but the bullets were still massive, and they punched through the thick glass as if it was made of plastic. The man's head exploded from the bullet at the same time as Madalena's energy bullets tore through his chest.

Mikhael and Lux each shot at the automatic guns, and their blue bullets melted each of them before they could fire at us.

"Huh," I said as I holstered my revolver. I knew what the three Vaish warriors were going to do as soon as Madalena tried to soothe my anger. The sensation was unlike when Eve communicated with me. That was more like her speaking into my brain. This was more like I knew what Madalena's thoughts and emotions were as she thought and felt them. And through her, I understood Lux and Mikhael.

It was really fucking creepy, but I could see the usefulness in combat.
Or with lovemaking.

Madalena turned to me, and I squashed the thoughts of her quickly. Fuck, I was tired, so my mind was starting to slip. We had a shit ton of work to do, and I needed to focus my energy on the task at hand.

"No one seems to care we shot that piece of shit," I said as I moved to the archway out of the hallway. The traffic in the harbor looked like the sidewalks of any typical megacity. Most of the travelers wore long coats, armor, or wide-brimmed hats which obscured their faces. A few of them were obviously parties of slavers since they pulled on either control collars or shackles that were attached to men, women, and children.

"Fucking dickbags," I growled as a pair of men walked past us with four women in tow. They were covered in bruises and stumbled after the men on shackled feet.

Before I could even think, my fingers were wrapped around the grip of my revolver.

"We can kill them if you wish," Madalena whispered as her left hand closed over my right wrist. "Or we can focus on finding your friends. I will do as you ask, my lord, but killing every slaver on this station will take us some time, and I doubt it will help you find what you are looking for."

“Let’s find the Magate Order,” I said after a few seconds. I did want to kill every slaver on this station, but Madalena was right. The logistics were impossible.

“I know the way to the bazaar,” Mikhael said, and he stepped around me and out into the thoroughfare of the harbor.

I walked after him, and Madalena walked beside me. Lux brought up the rear, and the crowds of people seemed to part for us.

We walked through the throng of people for five minutes, and I kept my tired eyes busy by glancing around me. I could smell the deceit, sleaze, and diabolical nature of this place. It reminded me of rancid meat, burnt cooking oil, and dried blood. The monster in my stomach was growling non-stop, and it took a chunk of my willpower to keep from shifting.

Every single man we walked past glanced at Madalena. I saw their eyes roam over her athletic body, but then their gaze fell to her pistol holster. Most of them lost a bit of interest at that point, but a few of them smiled sinisterly. Each of those fuckers made the beast scream, and I felt a cold sweat begin to descend my back.

“You do not need to fear for me, my lord,” she said as her left hand slipped around the armor of my bicep.

“I’m not,” I growled.

“Your words do not match your emotions.”

“Your fucking submission hijacked my emotions,” I said, and then I yanked my arm away from her.

“Yes. I know.” She sighed, and I felt her sadness needle through my armor and pierce my chest. “Can we speak more of it later?”

“Whatever. Hey Mikhael, how long until we reach the bazaar?”

“Another ten minutes,” he said over his shoulder.

“Red Eye - 13 seems smaller than Queen’s Hat,” I said as I looked up and around the harbor.

“About a tenth of the size,” Mikhael said, and then a figure in rags collided with the Vaish man.

Mikhael brought his arms up, twisted to his left, and then tossed the

man to the ground with a sharp movement. The rags fell away from the figure's face, and I could see that it was an old man. He was missing an eye, but then Mikhael's boot stomped his face.

The surrounding crowd jumped away, and a few reached for their guns, but Mikhael paid them no mind as he reached down into the folds of the man's clothes and pulled out his pistol. The man must have yanked it from Mikhael's holster when they collided.

"And a hundred times the idiots," the Vaish man said as he slid his handgun back into his holster.

The crowd seemed to realize Mikhael had just dealt a quick justice to the man who tried to steal from him, and the various hands grabbing at guns relaxed. We continued our walk, and the crowd moving in the other direction avoided us.

"The bazaar should be at the end of this tunnel," Mikhael said after we had walked for about ten minutes. The throng of humanity was still as dense as it was at the harbor, but the men seemed less interested in ogling my female companions, and more interested in reaching the marketplace quickly.

"When I last saw them, they were wearing white robes," I said, and my three companions nodded.

"It is doubtful we would have picked the exact station they have taken your friends to," Madalena said.

"I know, but they will know what other stations that they might have taken them to."

"If they do not, there are other stations where we can look," she said. "I will find your friends."

"Thanks," I said, and even though Madalena already told me many times she would help me, hearing her saying it again did sooth me. Maybe she knew that, and it was why she kept reassuring me.

The tunnel flowed into a massive domed room. The ceiling must have been at least six hundred meters up, but seeing the exact height of it was made difficult by the almost endless towers of buildings. These looked like slum dwellings, with each level made of welded together shipping crates, tube trains, or fitted parts of spacecraft. Each of the slum tower levels was connected by a variety of wooden ladders, metal scaffolding, or brick stairs.

The structures looked too narrow to stay upright, but closer inspection revealed the very top parts of each were actually attached to the high ceilings of the station's dome roof.

There appeared to be no rhyme or reason to their construction. I imagined that they were built on top of each other to save space on the streets. There were actually a few ropes tied between the towers, and I saw dirty children crawl across the lines like monkeys. No one else in the station looked up with any concern at the kids dangling hundreds of meters above, and I quickly glanced back down to the street so I wouldn't appear like a tourist mark for pickpockets.

Mikhael led us through the throng of the crowd, and I tried to keep my tired eyes focused on the hands of the men and women we walked around. The stench of unwashed bodies was thick in the bazaar, and my sensitive nose protested every time that I inhaled. Then we passed through an alley of food vendors, and my stomach growled. The last time I'd eaten was with Hegeia, Waiola, and Uma in the tavern. It almost seemed like a lifetime ago.

We moved past the food stalls, then entered a part of the bazaar with weapons vendors. The displays were only handguns, although most did have holoprojectors showing a variety of rifles. These stands were popular, and I overheard a salesman explaining to a buyer that he could pick the weapon up in the docking tube after he had paid for it. I guessed it was probably because the station forbade any weapons besides handguns inside.

I was about to ask Madalena about law enforcement on Red Eye - 13, but then my question was answered by a group of five police officers walking past us. The men, or women, wore black metal plate armor that concealed their sexual identities. Short stubby spikes were coming out of their shoulder armor, and their chest pieces were painted with a red eyeball. They carried big shotguns with drum attachments, and their faces were covered with flat black masks.

"Move along," one of the armored figures growled when he saw me staring at his armor.

"Got it," I said as I turned away from them and stepped after Mikhael. The beast in my stomach wanted to kill all the fuckers in the armor, but that wouldn't help me find my friends, so I ignored his complaint.

We were almost at the end of the weapon vendor alley, and I could

hear enthusiastic shouting up ahead of us. I suspected it was the main area where the slaves were sold, and I was proven correct a few moments later when we stepped into the plaza.

The slaver blocks were also as I expected. There were some fifteen booths set up at the perimeter. The displays faced inward to the mass of bidders in the middle, and the crowd there shuffled from stand to stand as new slaves were added. On the side of each display booth, dozens of men, women, and children stood with some form of shackle around their necks, arms, or legs.

“Fuck these assholes,” I growled as the beast raged in my stomach. I realized that my right hand was tightly grasping my revolver grip, but Madalena’s hand was over mine, and she leaned into my ear.

“Save your anger, my lord. There is no easy resolution at the moment.”

“I could put a bullet in each of these slaver fuckers,” I whispered back to her as my eyes danced to the men operating each booth.

“You would run out of bullets, and Red Eye - 13’s security would attack us. We wouldn’t have the chance to question the Magate Order, and it will be harder to find your friends.”

“You’re right, of course,” I said with a heavy sigh.

Madalena gestured to Mikhael and Lux, and they stepped closer to us.

“Adam and I will move clockwise from this position, you move counterclockwise. Do you both know what to look for?”

“White robes or clothes?” Lux asked as her cold eyes scanned the crowds around the booths.

“Yeah,” I said. “The insignia on their ship is a cross inside of a square that is inside of a circle.” I made the design out with my finger in the air.

“I will look, my lord,” Lux replied, and Mikhael nodded.

“Meet us at the adjacent stall,” Madalena said as she pointed across the plaza.

“Yes, Prime Valkyrie,” they both said. Then they moved to our right, and I watched them disappear into the densely packed crowds.

“I continue to issue orders without your approval,” Madalena

apologized as she stood closer to me.

“You know your warriors better than I do. Also, I don’t think they respect me.” I looked toward our left at the closest slaver booth and then took my first steps toward it.

“They will,” she said.

“I don’t care,” I replied

“You should.”

“They listen to you. You listen to me. It works. By the way, listening to me is optional for you. If you want, I can drop you back off in Nordar - 13, and you can continue leading your people.” I didn’t look at her while I spoke, but I could feel her anger begin to churn.

“You continue to try and rid yourself of me,” she seethed. “Why?”

“I already told you why,” I said.

“You lie to yourself. I know what you feel for me.”

“Yeah, but I only feel these things for you because you forced them on me.”

“Odin has given us to each other so that we might unite the Nordar and defeat the Draugr.”

“Look, Madalena,” I said as I turned to her. “I’m tired and grouchy, and I want to find my friends. Once I’ve found them, and they are back on Persephone, I’m going to feel a lot better about fighting these Draugr.”

“Agreed,” she said, and I could feel relief pour from her.

“These fuckers don’t look like the fuckers I want to fucking kill,” I hissed as I studied the men at the first slave trader station. They were selling muscular men with strange helmets over their heads. I guessed the device eliminated all sights and sound so the person wearing one would be completely discombobulated. Four of the black armored security guards with the spiked shoulders stood around the booth, and they watched the crowds intently. A quick look around the plaza confirmed that each of the booths was attended by Red Eye - 13 guards, and I realized we were going to have a bit of a problem getting some alone time with any Magate Order fuckers.

If they were even here.

Madalena and I moved to the second booth, and I studied the vendors. These sellers were a pair of men and women, and each of them was a cyborg. Their “merchandise” were women and young boys, but the slaves looked thin and sickly. There were still bidders though, and disgust welled in my stomach.

“Fuck this,” I growled as we moved to the next stand. Thoughts of Eve, Zea, Paula, and Kasta standing naked on a slaver’s podium made me want to scream, and I’d never felt so powerless. Even when I wore the control collar, I could have ended my life if I really wanted. I had some sort of control over my fate.

“Love does not make us weak, Adam,” Madalena said as we threaded through the next crowd.

“Get out of my head,” I hissed to her. She didn’t reply, but I felt her sadness, and I regretted the words. “Fuck, Madalena, just... damn it. I don’t know how to feel about you, but give me some time. Keep our conversation on the business at hand. I don’t have the attention span right now. It’s taking everything I have to keep my eyes open and my boots moving, Got it?”

“I understand,” she said. “I felt your sadness and wished to help--”

“Later,” I cut her off and then nodded at the next stand. “Those fuckers are wearing white.”

“Yes,” she replied. “Let us move closer.”

Madalena and I threaded through the throng of bidders and came to stand a meter from the raised platform. There were four naked women on the stage, and two white-robed men shouted bidding amounts into the crowd. The women weren’t wearing any sort of chains or manacles, but they wrapped their arms around their breasts to cover themselves. Behind the women stood four men in white robes, and I saw stun batons holstered on their belts.

The beast in my stomach screamed louder than the bidding crowd, and my head swam for a few moments. I didn’t know for sure if these were the Magate Order, but the women on stage were terrified, and I couldn’t fucking stand it.

“No. Adam, you will never find your friends this way.” Madalena’s fingers were wrapped around my wrist, and it took every millimeter of willpower I had not to push her away.

“Damn,” I sighed as I forced my hand to relax.

“Is that the insignia?” Madalena asked as she nodded to the back side of the stage. I looked over to where she indicated and saw some metal equipment cases stacked in neat rows. The boxes had the gold symbol I recalled from the ship that took my friends, and I struggled to contain my rage.

“Yes,” I gasped, and Madalena nodded toward the four black armored guards stationed around the booth. I understood what she meant. We were going to need to figure out how to get rid of the guards before we “talked” to these fuckers.

A group of slave women stood behind the crates, and my eyes desperately searched for my friends. I didn’t see them there, and my emotions tumbled from my chest. It would have been too easy to find them here, but at least we’d found six of these Magate Order fuckers. They might not know where my friends had been abducted, but I’d still take a lot of pleasure in the interrogation process.

“We’ll wait until they return to their ship,” I said after I watched the auction for a few minutes. I had no doubt that Madalena, Mikhael, Lux, and I could kill the fuck out of the four Red Eye - 13 guards and take the Magate Order slavers prisoner, but there were fifty-six other guards stationed in the plaza, and I wasn’t angry enough to risk a suicide mission.

But I was really damn angry, and the monster in my stomach was pushing my exhaustion away.

The bidding ended on one woman, and a Magate Order representative pulled on her arm to take her down the steps of the platform. I didn’t want to watch, but I couldn’t turn my eyes away from the transaction. Three lightly armored men with red skull caps were purchasing the woman, and they looked indifferent to the process. They’d done this before, and I couldn’t imagine why anyone would be familiar with buying slaves.

“We have visited all the stalls in the perimeter,” Lux said as she and Mikhael threaded through the crowd to stand next to us. “There are no other Magate Order booths.”

“Find out who those fuckers in the red caps are,” I said as I nodded to the men buying the crying woman from the Magate Order fucker.

“Mikhael,” Madalena said, and the man nodded before he slipped through the auction house.

“Will they always have to run my orders through you?” I asked the Prime Valkyrie.

“Once you complete your rite of passage, they will follow you without question,” Madalena said.

“Uhhh, what?” I asked, and I temporarily forgot about the slave auction.

“You will need to complete the rite,” Madalena said. “Then you can take the throne of the Vaish Overlord Clan and begin your conquest of the other Blood Clans.”

“Uhhh. No,” I said. “What are you talking about? Your father gave me the rite of passage, and I thought you said he wasn’t in charge anymore?”

“I am now Queen and Prime Valkyrie, but you are my husband. It will be easier for us to unite the clans if you have completed Odin’s rite of passage.”

“You have got to be kidding me?” I asked, but I knew she wasn’t.

“First, we will rescue your friends, as I swore I would.” Madalena nodded.

“Then I will have to complete that bullshit rite? How about you go fu-”

“I will have to secure my clan first. There will be turmoil after my father’s defeat. I will need to find and kill him first.”

“Wait, Madalena, this is crazy. Your father said I had to complete the rite, he’s not in charge anymore, you are. Can’t you just wave your hand and say I’m a Nordar?”

“We honor decisions of the previous kings,” she said. “He interfered with your rite of passage, so I challenged him. His judgement still stands though, you must complete Odin’s rite.”

“Fucking shit,” I said as I rubbed my tired face with my hands. “You all are bat-shit crazy.”

“You will survive the rite. Odin has deemed it--”

“Let’s talk about it later. I can’t deal with your bullshit right now.” I turned away from the two Vaish woman and tried to keep my emotions in check. I did a terrible job of it, and I was sure she felt my frustration and anger.

“I am sorry I have upset you, Adam,” she said. “I realize you do not see yourself as I see you. Therefore, you have fear.”

“You want to hang me by the neck for nine days. I am being reasonable, and I said I didn’t want to talk to you about it now.” I kept my eyes focused on the auction, and I saw that another woman had been sold to the red cap fuckers. Mikhael was standing a few meters from them, and the Vaish man was watching the group out of the corner of his eye.

“We will speak of it later,” she said, but I didn’t bother answering her.

Fuck, I missed Eve, Zea, Kasta, and Paula.

I watched the auction proceed, and the red caps bought the remaining two women up on the block. Mikhael glanced over at me when the men turned to leave, and I gestured for him to follow them.

“What is the outcome you are expecting?” Madalena asked after she nodded across the crowd to Mikhael.

“I can’t destroy this station, but I can help those women.”

“How will you help them?” she asked, and her eyebrow raised.

“We’ll kill them and then--”

“You are kind, Adam,” Madalena said. “I feel your intentions, and they make me love you more than I thought I could love a man, but you cannot save everyone. If we chase those men, what of the Magate Order? What of your friends? What if we free those four women? Should we take them on our ship? Take them back to their planet? That will delay finding your friends even more.”

“We need more crew,” I argued, even though I felt deflated. “Their lives will be better onboard Persephone than they will as slaves.”

“Perhaps, or perhaps they will serve as luxury concubines, and we will die in the next few days.” Madalena shrugged. “I will serve you in whatever decision you want, my lord.” She glanced back toward the raised platform, and I turned to see the head auction asshole from the Magate Order address

the crowd.

“Our permit today only gives us twelve transactions, and that was our last one.”

The crowd booed, and I struggled to keep the animal in my DNA from taking over.

“But take a look at these beauties behind us.” He gestured to the other cowering women standing next to the crates. “We’ll be back tomorrow after breakfast to sell them. You won’t want to miss it. See you then!”

The crowd began to disperse, and the Magate Order assholes went to grab their crates and the remaining slaves. The six men talked to each other for a few moments, and then they walked into the plaza center with their slaves in tow.

“We’ll follow,” I said to Madalena and Lux.

“What of Mikhael?” Lux asked the other woman, and Madalena turned to me.

“I gave him an order, now I am giving you one.” I glared at Lux, but she ignored me and waited for Madalena to reply.

“We follow the Magate Order. Mikhael will report when he has discovered the identity of the men wearing the red hats.”

“Yes, Prime Valkyrie,” Lux said.

I was already pushing through the crowd of slave buyers, but the desire to drag my claws across each of their disgusting necks paled in comparison to how much I wanted to sink my teeth and taste the blood of these Magate Order fuckers.

Their procession moved to a part of the bazaar that we hadn’t walked through. The stands were more food vendors, but the scents of their wares didn’t make me hungry. All I cared about was talking to these men about where they took my women.

The next part of the bazaar sold drugs, brain implants, and prostitutes, a few of the women moved to proposition me, but I shot them a glare, and they backpedaled as if I had smacked them across the face. I could feel Madalena and Lux’s presence right behind me, but I almost didn’t care they followed me. I wasn’t going to lose these men now that I had their scent.

The white-robed men pulled their slaves out of the bazaar and into one of the connector tunnels leading to the harbor. There was less of a crowd around us than in the bazaar, but there was still enough traffic to conceal the fact that we were tailing the white-robed men.

They moved into the harbor, and we followed them for a good ten minutes. Then Madalena's hand rested on my arm. I turned to look at her, and she leaned into my ear.

"Mikhael has followed the men wearing the red hats to their ship. He believes they will be departing shortly."

"Damn," I said.

"We know that the Magate Order will be here tomorrow," she replied.

"Yeah," I growled. "Let's follow them to their ship."

"Then what?" she asked.

"Then we go to Mikhael's location, offer to buy the red-cap wearing asshole's slaves, get on board their ship, kill them, and then ask the women if they want passage on our ship."

"What if attacking these men raises the station alarm?" she asked.
"Then we might be forced to flee."

"We'll have to kill them discreetly."

"My lord, might I offer another--"

"What do you think we should do?" I sighed.

"Your primary objective is saving your friends, correct?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah."

"We need to interrogate these men first. That could put the station on lockdown and mean we have to flee as well. Would you rather save four unknown women from slavery, or have the information you need to find your friends, and then attempt to help others?"

"You make a good point," I said. "It's the smart decision. I'm sorry, I'm angry, tired, and I--"

"Adam," she whispered as her eyes met mine. "I know your struggles. Do not apologize to me. I am the only one who should ever apologize to

you.”

“Like I said, we can talk about it later.” I pulled my arm out of her grasp and then turned toward the Magate Order group.

“I will tell Mikhael to stand by,” she said. “He will inform us if they depart.”

I nodded but didn’t look at her. The white-robed men had turned a corner into one of the docking tunnels, and I felt my heart pound in my chest. I doubted that my friends were on board this slaver ship, but I knew I was getting closer to finding out where they were.

Or so I hoped. This could still be a dead lead. The men in this group might not have ever heard of GUAAY - 23 - C, or know where the women abducted from that world would be taken.

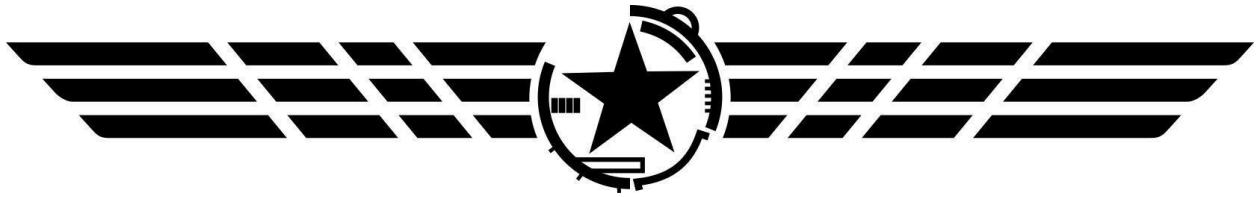
I walked past the tunnel where the men and their slaves had turned and casually glanced inside. It looked almost identical to the tunnel outside of Persephone, except there were more lights on the ceiling, and there was no booth attached to the wall.

The men there were opening the door to the docking tube, but I continued my walk past the tunnel and then turned to the two women.

“Try not to kill anyone. I want to question them,” I instructed as I scanned the harbor. I didn’t see any of the black armored station police, but Madalena and Lux were attracting plenty of lecherous stares from men who walked past.

“Yes, my lord,” Madalena said as her hand rested on her pistol. Lux didn’t reply to me, but her fingers also brushed her weapon.

“Go,” I said, and then the three of us sprinted into the tunnel.



Chapter 14

The Magate Order fuckers had finished opening the door to their docking tube and were pulling their slaves into the tunnel. They didn't seem to notice us when we first turned the corner, but when Lux and Madalena sprinted ahead of me, one of the men opened his mouth to shout a warning.

The words never left his mouth, Lux's pistol grip smashed his teeth inward, and he flipped over like a spun bottle.

Madalena's elbow smashed into the temple of another man. He dropped like a sack of bricks, and then her long leg kicked out to break the knee of a slaver who was turning around. She spun toward a third slaver, who was reaching toward his stun baton, but Lux reached her hand across the man's chest and tossed him backward. He landed on his skull, and I heard a hollow *thwack* sound echo from the tube.

The remaining two men were also reaching for their stun batons, but they hardly had time to wrap their fingers around the handles before I reached them. I shoulder checked one of them, and he crashed into the wall of the tube two meters away. Then I spun the other fucker and punched him in the face with my revolver. I hit him a little too hard, and his skull cracked like an egg. I turned around to the man I'd knocked into the wall, but Lux was already there, and she held his face down on the ground with her pistol pushed to the back of his head.

"Drop it," Madalena ordered, and I turned to see her pressing her weapon into the skull of the man whose leg she just broke. He managed to get his hands around the grip of his pistol but hadn't pulled it free from his holster. The man glanced up at the brunette woman, and then he removed his hand from his weapon.

"How many more on your ship?" I asked them as I turned to the loading door of their vessel. It was closed, but I wanted to interrogate them in

a place where I didn't care about cleaning up blood afterward.

"Fuck--" the man Lux had on the ground began to say, but his words were cut off when she pushed his face into the floor of the tube. He let out a muffled scream, but the black-haired woman merely smiled and forced his face across the metal grate.

"How many more on your ship?" I asked the man who Madalena pointed her pistol at.

"Four," he growled, but then the Prime Valkyrie pressed her gun into his temple with a sharp movement. "Two! Two!" he gasped.

The slave women were cowering on the floor, but they knew better than to scream or draw attention to themselves. Most of them had bruises on their arms and legs, and I fought the urge to put a bullet from my revolver into each of these men.

"Hold here," I told the two Vaish women. "I'll go find them."

Madalena looked as if she was about to object, but I turned before she could reply, ran the last four meters to the ship, and pressed the button to open the docking door. It began to slide up, and I rolled under and then dove behind a nearby storage crate. As soon as I landed on the floor of the ship, I felt another wave of exhaustion flood my muscles and had to shake my head free of cobwebs.

I should have sent Madalena or Lux to take these fuckers out, but I wasn't used to having a crew who were warriors. The two women with me weren't just warriors. They were super soldiers with advanced armor and weapons tech. We'd taken the six Magate Order fuckers out in less than three seconds, without firing our sidearms, and the women hadn't even looked concerned.

I didn't hear anyone in the ship's hold, but that didn't mean someone didn't have their crosshairs on the crate where I hid. I forced my tired legs to coil underneath me so I was crouching, and then I quickly peered around the corner. A spray of bullets slammed into the metal crate a half second after I moved back. The angle of the shots and the sounds from the weapon gave me a pretty good idea of where the fucker was positioned, and I spun around so I could dive out from the other side of my cover.

I raised my revolver, stretched out into a dive, and aimed the iron

sights toward the shooter. He was crouched on a catwalk some six meters high on the back side of the hold. The distance between us was at least sixty meters, I was tired, in mid-air, and only had a fraction of a second to aim, but my instincts told me my aim was good, so I squeezed the trigger of my massive handgun. These were the regular rounds that Lux obtained for me, and while they weren't armor piercing, they still felt hot as fuck, and it seemed like a three-meter-long flame erupted out of the barrel of the weapon.

The shooter practically disintegrated when the bullet hit him. Each limb went in a different direction, and blood sprayed across the catwalk. His rifle bounced out of his dead hands, hit the catwalk, and then fell to the floor of the hold, and I heard a shout come from a stack of crates in the far corner of the ship's storage room.

I rolled to my left and put a pile of crates between my location and where I thought the last fucker was. The ship's hold was a mess of stacked crates, cages, and shipping pallets. It was practically a maze of cover I could use, and I would have never allowed Persephone's hold to reach such a disorganized state. These fuckers were lazy, and now it was going to cost them their lives.

I moved to my left and eyed the next crate that I planned to sprint toward, but then I felt Madalena enter the hold behind me. The sensation was odd since I knew where she stood without actually looking or hearing her. I did turn to look though, and I saw the brown-haired woman leaping onto the stacks of crates. She raced across the tops as if they were level ground, and I sprinted to the next crate so I could cover her advance.

The fucker at the back corner of the hold leaned out to shoot at Madalena, but I already had my revolver pointed in that direction, and a three-meter long flame of anger shot toward him. I'd been aiming for his chest, but he was a good eighty meters away, and my bullet hit his rifle instead of my intended target. His weapon exploded in a spray of metal, and he screamed with surprise.

Then Madalena landed on his shoulders, and the man crumpled to the ground. His head bounced off the floor of the hold, and then it ping-ponged off her fist, back into the floor, and into her other fist. I guessed he was unconscious, but her punches might have killed him. Either way, he was out of commission, and the Prime Valkyrie rose gracefully from his chest.

I turned to the hold door and saw the Magate Order men limping toward me. Lux had her pistol trained on them, and the slave women were dragging a few of the men who were either dead or unconscious.

“Line them up over here,” I told Lux as I pointed to the side wall of the hold. Lux didn’t reply, but the men heard me, and they followed my orders.

Madalena dragged the man she’d just beaten over to the group. Then she turned to the slaves, pointed to an open spot some four meters behind us, and told them to stand over there. I didn’t know if the women understood English, but they seemed to get the idea and moved without complaint.

“Lux, search the rest of the ship for anyone else,” Madalena said.

“Yes, Prime Valkyrie,” the ebony-haired woman replied with a nod that made her pigtails dance. Then she pivoted away from the group of slavers and ran toward the front of the ship.

“You fucks took my friends,” I said to the slaver with the broken leg. “It was from a world named GUAAY - 23 - c.”

“Fuck you,” he said.

I pushed the barrel of my revolver against his broken leg, and the man hissed with pain.

“It was a world named GUAAY - 23 - c. Have you heard of it?” I asked as I pulled back the hammer on my revolver.

“Fuck--”

I pulled the trigger and the man’s knee disappeared. There wasn’t even any blood or bone. It was just the roar of my gun and enough fire to cauterize the wound.

He screamed, and I turned the smoking revolver toward the man who Lux had pushed to the ground earlier. His eyes were as wide as dinner plates, and I pushed the barrel of my revolver into his groin.

“It was a world named GUAAY - 23 - c. Have you heard of it?”

“Please don’t shoot,” he begged as his friend screeched. The women were also crying behind me, but it was hard to tell if they feared what I had just done, or were thankful that their enslavers were being punished.

“Last time I’m going to ask you. GUAAY - 23 - c. Have you heard of

it?”

“Yes! Shit! That’s one of our best haul planets. We don’t sell those women here though. Red Eye - 13 is too small.”

“Where?” I asked.

“I’m not sure, I--” he gasped when I cocked the hammer back on my revolver. “Shit! Shit! I think it’s Fayfaix Station!”

I turned to Madalena, and she shook her head. The movement combined with her emotions to communicate to me that she didn’t know about the station.

I pointed my revolver down at the screaming man I’d just shot and pulled the trigger again. The blast of flame melted his face off an instant before the bullet turned his head into a skull donut.

Now there was no more screaming.

“Try again,” I said as I pressed the smoking revolver back into the other fucker’s crotch. The barrel made a hissing sound as it touched his robe, and his face turned the same shade of white as his clothes.

“Okay! Could also be Jey-Lune Station! That’s another big one we visit!”

I knew Madalena had heard of the place, so I felt a bit of relief drip into my exhausted shoulders.

“Sit the fuck down,” I pushed the man with my revolver and he fell back to the ground next to the other one. “Which one of you is Captain?” I asked. Eve’s mind reading had always made interrogation quicker, but a large caliber weapon tended to be a good truth serum.

“He was,” the man said as he pointed to the corpse of the man whose head I just removed.

“Who is second in command now?” I asked.

“Uhh, him.” He nodded to the man Lux had pistol-whipped in the face. Most of his teeth were missing, and blood was pouring out of his mouth. He was all sorts of unconscious, but I knew plenty of effective ways to wake up people.

“Where did you get these women?” I asked the man I’d been talking to.

“Planet called Aurain - 15 - b. Listen, if you want them, you can have them. Just please, don’t kill me.” The man was crying now, and I had to push the beast in my stomach down. He wanted to rip this man apart.

“Prime Valkyrie, the ship is clear,” Lux’s voice came through Madalena and my transponders in stereo.

“What is your location?” Madalena asked.

“The bridge.”

“Check the navigation systems for the location of Fayfaix station, Jey-Lune station, and Aurain - 15 - b,” Madalena ordered.

“Yes, Prime Valkyrie,” Lux replied.

“I’m going to talk to your new captain,” I growled to the man who I had been speaking with. “Just to double check your story. If you say anything while I am questioning him, I’ll kill you slowly.” The man nodded at my words, and I stepped over to the man who Lux had clubbed with her pistol.

I leaned down and pushed my still smoking revolver into his right eye socket. He started to scream when his flesh burned, and his face jerked away.

“Wake the fuck up!” I shouted, and the man’s other eye popped open. He tried to crawl away from me, but the wall of the hold was there, and the back of his head smacked into it.

“Where did you get these women?” I asked as I pointed back over my shoulder.

“Uck yooooo--” he started to say through broken teeth, but I pushed my revolver into his mouth. It probably wasn’t hot enough anymore to burn him, but he started screeching anyway.

“I’m going to ask you again, asshole, and if you don’t answer me, my bullet will make a giant hole out the back side of your skull. Which planet did you get these women from?” I pulled the revolver from his mouth, and the motion yanked one of his broken teeth out.

“Auuuuraaaain - 15 - b,” he choked out as blood ran down his chin.

“Have you heard of GUAAY - 23 - c?” I asked.

“Yaaa.”

“Where does the Magate Order sell the slaves from that world?”

“Fayfaaaaix Stasssssooon,” he guggled, and I saw the other man sigh with relief.

“What about Jey-Lune Station?” I asked.

“Noooooaaw,” he coughed. “Too far from GUAAY - 23 - c. Woould eee tee mons avel.”

“Three months Travel?” I asked, and the man nodded. “How many light years between GUAAY - 23 - c and Fayfaix Station?”

“I onnly did un once. Ook eee weeks.”

“It took you three weeks?”

“Mayeee longeerr,” The man coughed.

I did some math while my heart slammed in my chest. Then I double checked it. I’d spent a few days recovering from my injury and saving Madalena’s crew. Then I’d spent five days on Nordar - 13 - a. Throw in another thirty-six hours or so for Persephone’s warp drive to rest, and then add in travel time to Fayfaix Station. Depending on how far away it is, I might actually reach the station before the Magate Order got there from GUAAY - 23 - c.

A trickle of relief flowed through me, but I tried to fight against the optimism. I didn’t want to get my hopes up and then have them destroyed. But I hadn’t factored in Persephone’s warpdrive speed. Her hyperdrives allowed her to do a light year in twenty-four hours; much faster than most other starships, but her warpdrive could do forty light years in a single hour, for almost two-and-a-half hours. She could cover a vast distance in a very short time.

And Persephone also had a folding drive.

My friends and I hadn’t figured out how to get it to work again, but maybe someone in Madalena’s crew could use it. If we could get to Fayfaix Station in a few minutes, we would surely be there before the slavers that took my friends.

I turned to look at Madalena, and she surprised me with a smile. It looked sincere, and I guessed she had been feeling my emotions.

I was about to ask if Lux had figured out the location of the Fayfaix station, but then I heard her voice across our transponders.

“Prime Valkyrie, I have found the locations in their navigation systems.”

“How far away is Fayfaix Station?” Madalena asked.

“Forty-two light years,” Lux replied.

“How far away is Aurain - 15 - b?” I asked.

“It is eight point five light years from here, my lord.”

“Thank you, Lux,” Madalena said. “Return to us.”

“Yes, Prime Valkyrie.”

“The four women you sold to the men in the red caps,” I said as I turned back to the Magate Order fucker who didn’t have his face broken. “Were they from Aurain - 15 -b?”

“Ya. We bought them from the natives there. Paid them in food.”

“Mikhael, what is your status?” I asked into my transponder.

“They have not left yet, my lord. I will alert you when they do.

“Do any of you speak English?” I asked the group of scared women.

“I do,” one of the women said as she stepped forward. Her skin was tan, but she had big blue eyes.

“We are going to return you and your friends to your home planet. Okay?”

“Adam?” Madalena asked, but I ignored her.

“We might not be able to do it immediately, but hopefully in a few weeks,” I continued.

“Are you being truthful?” the woman asked as her bottom lip quivered.

“Yeah. We will. First, we need to save your other four friends. Lux is going to take you back to our ship so that you can rest, and then we’ll leave the station.”

I gestured to the raven-haired woman as she stepped into the hold, and she tilted her head slightly.

“You are taking them back to Persephone,” I said to Lux, and she turned to Madalena. The Prime Valkyrie nodded, and then the darker-haired

woman made a slight shrug.

“Come with me,” Lux said to the group. The blue-eyed woman translated into what sounded like Spanish, and then the women lined up to follow Lux. I counted six of them, but we still had plenty of space on Persephone.

“We are going to Mikhael,” I said to Madalena, and the woman nodded.

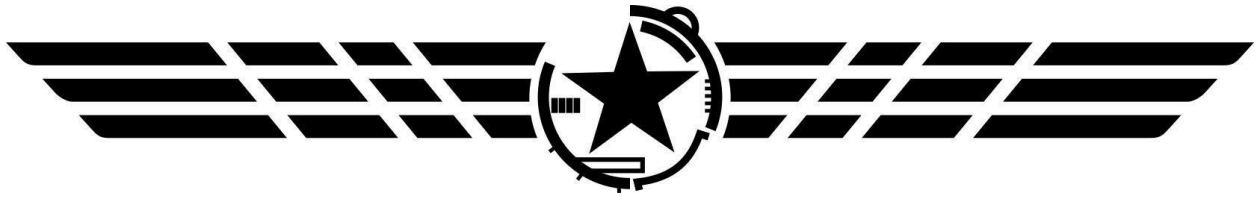
“What should we do about them?” she asked as she gestured to the Magate Order men kneeling on the ground.

I turned to look at the men, and the beast in my stomach roared. Was I a part of him? Was he a part of me? Perhaps it didn’t matter anymore.

I was no longer a human.

If Madalena thought I was sent by a god, maybe it was time to start acting the part.

“We will bring them justice,” I said as I fired my revolver at them.



Chapter 15

“Mikhael, we are heading to your location,” I said after I killed all the Magate Order slavers, reloaded my revolver, and holstered the still smoking weapon on my hip.

“Understood,” he said. “I’m at the Second North harbor.”

“We will be there in under ten minutes,” Madalena said as she moved toward the exit of the Magate Order vessel.

“I’ll alert you if they leave,” he replied.

I followed Madalena through the hold, into the docking tube, and then through the tunnel leading to the harbor. Lux’s group had just turned the corner to the right, but we made a left so that we could join Mikhael.

“Are you sure you wish to do this?” Madalena asked after we’d walked for half a minute.

“Yes,” I said.

“Why?” she asked. “You gain nothing from helping four more slave women, and we waste time.”

“I’m surprised you can’t read my emotions,” I replied, but I didn’t look at her.

“I can. It is why I ask.”

“I want to help people. I was a slave once. I can’t save everyone in this station, but we can save these ten women, and bring them home. We can spare the thirty minutes to change the lives of four women.”

“Even if it costs you your friends?” she asked.

“We are going to get there early. Didn’t you hear him? GUAAY - 23 - c is three to four weeks from Fayfaix. It’s been less than two weeks since my

friends were kidnapped, and it will take us a few hours to get there.”

“Once Persephone’s warpdrive resets.”

“Or, we can use the foldingdrive,” I replied.

“Hmmm,” Madalena said as she looked at me. “We should not speak of such things now. That technology is dangerous.”

“Does your ship have one?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “We have much to talk about--”

“After we save these women,” I said.

“The Magate Order slaver said they bought the women with food. Perhaps they were already slaves on their world.”

“I’ll let them decide. If they want me to take them home, I will. If not, then I’ll figure out what to do with them.”

“This task delays finding your friends.”

“We still have to wait for the warpdrive to cool. Also, I can take them home afterward. We have space on Persephone.”

“That is true,” she said, “but we might be injured or killed saving them.”

“Or we’ll get to kill a lot of slavers. I didn’t think you were the kind of woman to back down from a fight.” I turned toward her with a smirk on my face.

“No,” she said as she smiled at me. “I do not back down from conflict, I am the Prime Valkyrie.”

“Okay,” I said as I averted my eyes from her smile. Damn, she was already beautiful when she didn’t smile, but my head had started to spin when she did smile. Spending more time with her was confusing me, and I wondered if I should have kept Lux with me, and sent Madalena back to Persephone with the six slave women.

But that would have been foolish. Lux was incredibly skilled, but Madalena was a true battle goddess.

We threaded through the harbor’s outer perimeter tunnel and avoided walking into larger mobs of slavers. We passed several groups of Red Eye - 13 security soldiers, and I half expected them to try to arrest us for killing the

Magate Order slavers, but none of them gave more than the usual glance at Madalena.

We found Mikhael leaning against the inner wall of the harbor lane, and he made a short nod toward the tunnel on the opposite side of the main avenue. "I thought they would have left a while ago, but they just sent a pair of their men out."

"Where did they go?" I asked.

"That way," Mikhael said as he pointed to our left. "They looked as if they were in a hurry. I think they forgot something important. I believe that as soon as they get back, the ship will leave."

"And he'll open the security door for us," I said.

"That too," Mikhael smirked. "I missed all the fun on the Magate Order ship. I'm glad you are doing this."

"Yeah," I replied, even though I didn't know for sure if he was thankful that I was going to free these four women or kill a bunch of slavers. The man seemed a bit more lighthearted than the rest of his crew, but he was still hard to read.

"Do you have a plan?" he asked.

"Run in, kill them all, grab the women, and then return to Persephone," I said.

"I like it." He shrugged, but I felt some frustration flow from Madalena.

"What do you think we should do?" I asked her.

"Kill one and then interrogate the other. Ask him some questions about the ship's layout, number of men on board, and what type of weapons they have." Her eyes met mine, and there was a cold challenge in them.

"That's a better plan," I told her, and I felt a bit of pride flow from her. I was a bit annoyed with myself though. I was beyond exhausted, and my brain was starting to be stupid. I should have thought of that plan and not needed Madalena to remind me I was being stupid.

But I was glad she did.

"Just in time, too. There they are." Mikhael turned his back to our left

and then stepped farther out into the street to intercept the returning slavers. I saw two of the red-capped men jogging toward the tube. They both wore light body armor and large pistols on their hips, but one of them held a cardboard box in his hands.

“Kill the one not holding the box,” I ordered as we walked toward their loading tube. I glanced to my left to check for security guards, didn’t see any, and then glanced to my right. I spotted a group of four security guards some two hundred meters from us, but they were walking away.

The two red-capped men jogged into the tunnel that connected to their docking tube to the station, and we sprinted after them.

Mikhael and Madalena were faster than I was, so they made it to the pair of men before I’d even entered the narrow tunnel. The Vaish man sprinted to the right of the man not carrying the box, kicked off the wall, and brought his elbow into the man’s temple. The man bounced off the adjacent wall, and then Mikhael grabbed him by the chin, stepped behind him, and drove his skull into the metal floor. The back of the slaver’s head made a wet cracking sound, and his body began to tremble with death spasms.

Madalena grabbed the man with the box, spun him around, and then twisted his arm to his side. The man opened his mouth to gasp, but she tugged on his wrist as she stepped behind him, and then expertly flipped him on his back. Her joint manipulation was exceptionally smooth, and the man could do no more than gasp with pain during the ordeal.

“How many men on your ship?” I asked as I crouched next to his face.

“Mmmmmmm!” he screamed, and Madalena pushed his face into the floor to muffle the cry. I glanced out of the tunnel to the harbor, but the people passing by didn’t pay any attention to what we were doing.

“Mikhael, check the door to see if it is unlocked.” I nodded toward the door that connected the tunnel to the boarding tube. The man nodded and then dashed over there.

“Unlocked,” he said as he pushed the button to open the door. “The door to their ship is closed, though.”

“How many men on your ship?” I asked the asshole on the ground again.

“Fuck you!” he snapped, but Madalena pushed his face into the floor

again. She leaned over his body more to gain additional leverage on his arm, and the man's defiant voice quickly turned into a whine.

"She can break your arm in a couple dozen places, or you can tell us." I grabbed the box he carried and opened the lid. It was filled with small bottles of what looked to be beer, but I didn't recognize the language on the labels. It was probably some sort of drug-alcohol mixture, and I guessed that the crew was probably going to celebrate.

There were twenty-four bottles.

"Where are you keeping the four slaves you just bought?" I asked.

"In our hold!" he gasped after Madalena twisted his arm more.

"Which way, left or right when we enter?"

"Left, ahhhh!" he screeched when Madalena tweaked his wrist down so his palm touched his forearm.

"How many men on your crew?" I asked again.

"Eighty--" he started to say, but the Prime Valkyrie just twisted his pinky until it dangled freely. "Ahhhh. Twenty-two! Twenty-two. Fuck!." he said through gritted teeth,

"Lift him up," I said to Madalena as I gestured to the docking tube door.

The brunette yanked the red-capped man to his feet, and then we moved into the tube.

"What is the code to get into your ship?" I asked as we approached their hold door. This vessel looked to be in better shape than the Magate Order ship. The paint was fresh, the metal looked to have clean welding lines, and I didn't see any rust anywhere. I couldn't see the exact shape of the vessel, but I guessed it to be about the same size as the Magate Order ship and around eighty meters long.

"It's A, U, P, F, A, H. They are waiting for me, you should fucking let me go, or they will kill you," the man demanded as he spat out the blood congealing in his mouth, and it landed at my feet.

I felt Madalena's anger surge, and she twisted his arm so suddenly, it tore loose with a loud popping sound. He opened his mouth to scream, but the woman immediately yanked him off balance so that he was leaning into

the arms she had around his neck.

She flexed her arms upward, and his neck snapped like a dry twig.

Her face had shown no emotion, but her anger still ran off her like lava.

“Guess we don’t need the layout of the hold,” I said to her, but she didn’t answer.

I turned to Mikhael and nodded at the keypad. The three of us drew our weapons, and then the man keyed in the code.

“Took you fucking long--” a voice shouted from inside the hold, but Madalena and I were already sliding under the hatch, and his voice cut off when one of her pulse bullets burnt a hole between his eyes.

The red-cap men’s hold was much better organized than the Magate Order’s. There were stacks of crates, but they were secured to the right wall with loading straps. There was also a small two-person shuttle parked in the far corner. Two men were working on the shuttle there, but they hadn’t yet turned toward us, so I looked for any possible trouble on the other side of the hold.

The left wall was lined with prison cells. The Magate Order used simple iron cages to keep their slaves, but these useless shitstains had glass and steel units with interior lighting, toilets, and beds. It only took me a glance to realize that setup was doubtless used for selling the women as whores, and I felt the beast inside scream.

Six men spun when we entered their hold, but they were all clothed only in their underwear and were standing in a line in front of the cells. The four women were each inside of individual cells, and they cowered back against the farthest walls.

We had gotten here just in time.

My revolver made a cannon belch when I pulled the trigger, and the fourth man in the line turned into a spray of red paint across the wall. I moved my aim over to shoot the man standing next to him, but Madalena’s pistol sprayed a quick volley of pulse bullets in their direction, and I grunted with surprise when the remaining five men collapsed on the ground.

They each had a burning hole in their skull.

The sight nearly made my exhausted brain grind to a halt, but there

were still the two men by the shuttle, so I pivoted and aimed my revolver toward them. Mikhael's pistol was already firing, though, and the two men went down without even screaming.

"Shit, great shooting," I said to Madalena as I glanced at the far doors of the hold. I assumed they would lead to the bridge or crew quarters, but no one came out to attack us. We'd probably have a few more minutes before the rest of the red cap crew realized what was going on.

"I am the Prime Valkyrie," Madalena replied plainly, but I could feel her pleasure at my compliment.

"Let's get these women," I said, and we ran to the glass cells. There were actually twelve of them, but eight were empty, and four were occupied by the women from Aurain - 15 - b. "Any of you speak English?" I asked as I hit the open button on each of the cells. The women looked confused by my words, but Madalena said a few sentences in a language that sounded close to Spanish, and each of the women nodded. Then they hastily got to their feet and ran out the doors to their cells.

"Left door," Mikhael said a half moment before he started shooting. In response to his warning, I glanced across the hold. Someone there had opened the door and was leaning out with a rifle. Mikhael's first pulse bullet hit the man in the arm though, and he shouted as he pulled back.

"Time to go," I said as I pointed my revolver at the other door leading from the hold to the rest of the ship. As I expected, it swung open, and I sent a bullet across the forty meters and into the slaver fucker. His chest exploded, and my bullet also tore the arm off the man running behind him.

"I'll cover!" Mikhael said, and the five women and I ran toward the door leading into the station.

We made it out into the tube in just a few seconds, and Mikhael fell back to avoid a stream of automatic rifle fire.

"We pissed them off," he said as he pulled a palm-sized disk from one of his suit pockets. There was a button in the middle of the device, and he pressed it before throwing it back into their hold.

I punched the button to close the door, and then we backed down the ramp with our handguns trained on the hatch. The space beyond suddenly filled with red smoke as the door closed, and I heard the men yell in

confusion.

“It will buy us a few minutes,” Mikhael said. His voice was calm, but I could feel a slight sensation of satisfaction come from him.

“Adam,” Madalena said, “we must return quickly. We are breaking the loose laws of Red Eye - 13, and the armored security will not be so easy to kill.”

“Got it,” I said as we moved back out of the loading tube. The door to the ship had closed, but Mikhael was right, it would only take them a few minutes to get out and come after us. We’d killed a bunch of them easily, but we had caught them by surprise. I didn’t want to have a drawn-out gun battle inside their ship when they could easily just radio the station’s security for backup.

Mikhael closed the door to the docking tube, and we walked out into the harbor with the four women.

Right into six black armored Red Eye - 13 guards.

“Drop your--” one of them began to say, but Madalena’s blue energy bullet left a hole in his helmet where his eye socket should have been, and he died before he could finish speaking.

Then chaos erupted in the harbor.

One of the guards swung his shotgun at me, but I stepped into him, held my left hand out to check the weapon, and then pushed my revolver into the chin area of his armor. I didn’t know if the bullets of my weapon could pierce the bulky armor he wore, but even if my bullet didn’t pierce, it should still hit him in the chin like twenty donkey kicks.

I pulled the trigger, and the thumb-sized bullet tore through his chin, skull, and then came out the top part of his armor like a flaming red geyser.

I shoulder checked another guard who was swinging his shotgun toward Mikhael. The Vaish man’s gun was quicker though, and his energy bullets punched through the black guard’s chest armor at the heart.

The crowd in the harbor roared with the unleashed violence, and everyone around us drew their weapons. For half a moment, I thought we were about to become the targets since we were fighting with the guards, but that wasn’t the case.

Everyone began shooting each other.

“Shit!” I shouted as bullets sprayed across the crowd. One of them whizzed by my ear, but I was too busy lining up the next shot. One of the Red Eye - 13 guards shot at Madalena, but the woman twisted her hips and stomach out of the way. My bullet took him in the back of the head, and he went down while the Prime Valkyrie spun to fire her pistol at the two remaining guards. Her bullets tore into them easily, and they died before they could use their big shotguns.

“Let’s go!” I shouted at the four slave women, but as I turned toward our destination, I saw the flood of violence in the harbor. It was a fucking free for all, and there was no clear path that didn’t involve getting punched full of bullets. Even standing where we were was fucking crazy since bullets were flying in every direction.

“The next tunnel!” Madalena shouted, and my eyes focused through the chaos to find the next port tunnel. It was some fifty meters away, which seemed like it would be a suicide run, but ducking back into the tunnel where we currently stood also didn’t make much sense. We’d just end up pinched between the chaos of the harbor and the pissed off red hat slavers.

“Go!” I shouted as I moved toward the far tunnel.

I made it in five steps, turned around to see if the slave women were following me, and then felt a bullet slam into my shoulder. It knocked me around with unexpected force, but I didn’t feel any pain in my arm. I guessed my armor had absorbed the hit, and I pointed my revolver in that direction as my eyes searched for the asshole who just shot me. There was a man on the far side of the harbor lane aiming a pistol at me. His eyes opened wide when he saw the size of my weapon, and his head exploded an instant after I pulled the trigger.

I spared the millisecond to load my revolver, and used the first bullet to punch a chest sized hole into a slaver who was in the way of our escape. His limbs flew out in each direction, and his free-spinning head bounced into the mass of fighting fuckers.

I shot four more bullets before I made it to the tunnel, and each one separated a man from his life with a violent crack of thunder and blood.

As I ran into the side of the tunnel, I cracked open the massive

revolver's cylinder and ejected the brass. A second later my speed loader had inserted five new rounds in, and I pushed the revolver closed in time to sidestep a knife swing from a tattooed man. His blade missed my armor by a few centimeters, and I tilted my revolver out a bit toward him before I pulled the trigger. My bullet removed his left leg in the middle of his thigh, and he let out a blood-curdling scream before collapsing to the floor.

Every time I shot my revolver, the crowd battling in the harbor flinched. Fuckers should have been avoiding us, but they must have seen the four women we escorted and figured that the slaves would be up for grabs if they killed us.

The monster in my stomach wiggled up to my chest, and he roared to be released. I knew I was too tired to control him, so I forced him back down.

We reached the next docking tunnel, and I covered everyone moving around the corner. Half of the people in this area of the harbor were dead now, and the floor was covered with a lake of blood. I considered waiting here until the violence died down, but then I saw a wall of black armored guards running toward the battle. They were still three hundred meters or so from the red cap slaver's gate, but I didn't want to be anywhere nearby when they got here.

"We need to move!" I shouted back to my entourage, but then a bullet ricocheted through the tunnel where we took cover, and all four of the women screamed.

I aimed my revolver toward the man who had shot at us, but he dropped back into one of the tunnels leading toward the bazaar.

"We can clear the harbor," Madalena stated authoritatively. "It will be easier to fight our way through than run."

"There are a lot of--" I started to say as I turned to her, but the words caught in my mouth when I saw that they were both wearing their crazy wing-etched magical power armor. Madalena's face looked like a screaming banshee with a winged crown, and the eyes of her helmet glowed the same blue color as her pistol shots.

"Alright. Do it," I said. "Cover the rear, and we'll move forward."

Madalena and Mikhael stepped out of the tube and began spraying the crowd with their pistols. They had fired just a few times when we made our

way from Persephone's tube to our current position, but those shots were only targeted at men trying to shoot us. Now that I'd given them the order to slaughter everyone, I saw how effective the two warriors were with their weapons.

It was akin to a tidal wave of energy bullets. The shots poured through the harbor without mercy, and scores of assholes were killed. There were some slaves cowering in the middle of the conflict, but the pulse shots all missed them and found targets amongst the men who captured them.

Some of the slavers shot back at the two Vaish warriors, but they either missed, or their bullets bounced off the crazy armor.

"Let's go," I beckoned to the four women, and they moved out of the tunnel. There wasn't much to worry about in the direction we were traveling since Madalena and Mikhael had just mowed down everyone, but I spared a glance behind us and saw that the mass of dark-armored guards was still running in our direction.

There must have been forty or fifty of them, and while I thought Madalena and Mikhael might be able to kill all of them, I didn't want these women to be anywhere near the conflict. I also didn't know what was up ahead, and I preferred for the two Vaish warriors to escort them through the blood filled harbor.

"Madalena and Mikhael, Let's go!" I shouted after we'd moved fifty meters or so ahead of them. They both turned and then jumped toward me. The purple wings on the back of their armor sprung to life, and they covered the distance in a single bound.

"Damn. You'll have to show me how that works," I said to Madalena when she landed next to me.

"I will teach you how to use your Aegis after you complete your rite of passage," she said.

I thought about telling her that her rite could fuck off, but we had other shit to worry about. The part of the harbor up ahead was devoid of people, but I didn't want to get ambushed from anyone hiding in the side tunnels.

Madalena seemed to understand my worry, and she moved to take the right point position. Mikhael stayed at the rear position, and I moved to the left side of the women so I could protect them from anyone who might shoot

from the tunnels leading to the bazaar.

“Madalena, tell the crew we are leaving. We are going to use the folding drive to--”

“My lord, please do not use the folding drive,” she said, and I felt a strange surge of emotion come from her.

It was fear.

“Uhh, why not?” I asked as I scanned the side tunnels up ahead. We were running as fast as the four women could, but it wasn’t nearly fast enough for my tastes.

“May we speak of it later? I recommend that we--” A pair of pistol-wielding men popped out from one of the tunnels, but Madalena’s reaction was much faster than theirs, so the men died before they could get a shot off. “Hyperdrive toward your destination until the warpdrives reset, and then use the warpdrives the remainder of the way,” she finished without much of a break in her sentence.

“Alright, we are going to Fayfaix. Tell them to get it ready.” I saw a man step out of the tunnel to my left and I pointed my revolver at him. I was about to pull the trigger, but my finger hesitated for a moment. The man looked terrified and raised his hands. His clothes were dirty, thin, and had patches on the knees. He was either a local in the station or a slave who escaped during the confusion. I gestured with my revolver back toward the tunnel, and the man backpedaled quickly before he turned to run.

Madalena spoke in her own language through her transponder, and I heard a voice that sounded like Nikki answer. They exchanged a few sentences, and then the Prime Valkyrie nodded to me. “They will be ready,” she said.

“The guards are closing the distance,” Mikhael said a moment before a shotgun blast sounded from behind us. It hit the wall some three meters to our side, but then we were right at our docking tunnel, and I ushered the women inside.

Persephone’s hold door was open, and I saw the armored forms of Lux, Milda, and Josefinna. They each held their pulse rifles leveled at the tube behind us, and our group sprinted up the ramp and into the safety of Persephone’s hold.

“We are in, Nikki,” Madalena said as the hatch doors began to close.

“I’m disengaging from their docking tube,” the pilot replied through the transponder, and Persephone shook for a moment. Then I felt the thrusters engage, and we all leaned against the small press of the g-forces.

“Navigation system has been programmed, Prime Valkyrie,” Calisto said over the transponder.

Madalena’s helmet dripped from her face and pooled down by the bottom neck joint of her armor. The beautiful woman warrior looked at me, and I nodded.

“Engage Hyperdrive,” Madalena said, and I felt Persephone’s thrust instantly shift to the gentle sway.

The armor dripped and pooled from the Vaish women and then returned to their amulets. The slaves we just saved ran over to the women that Lux had brought back, and the group gave each other joyful hugs. The sight made my heart warm, and I took a few long breaths.

“Figure out where to keep them until we can get them back to their world,” I said to Madalena.

“Yes, my lord,” she replied, and then she spoke to Lux in their language. The black-haired woman nodded, and then she walked toward the group of celebrating ex-slaves.

“I’m going to bed,” I said as I turned toward the hallway that would take me to the elevator.

“I will accompany you,” Madalena said as she fell into step next to me. Her voice was calm, as usual, but I could feel the hope in her emotions.

“I need to sleep, Madalena. I haven’t recovered from when I shifted.”

“I understand. I will attend to you. It is my duty as your wife.” More fear. She didn’t want to hear me reject her again. Damn it, she fucking loved me. Why? She didn’t even know me. I didn’t know her.

“When I wake up, you can make me dinner. Then we can talk for a few hours. I want to get to know you better, and you need to get to know me better. I want to tell you about the women I love so you will understand why I’m not happy about you submitting to me. You need to tell me about these Shadow Eagle ships, folding drives, the Draugr, and everything you know

about the video of Parnarta.” I stepped into the elevator, and she followed me.

“That is acceptable to me. I will help you with your armor and then massage your muscles so you will sleep--”

“No, that’s fine. I can do all that myself. Just take care of my ship, okay? I’ll come see you when I wake up, and we can talk. That’s all you are going to get from me for now. Deal?”

“Deal,” she said quickly, and I felt a small surge of pleasure. “I will not fail you, my lord.”

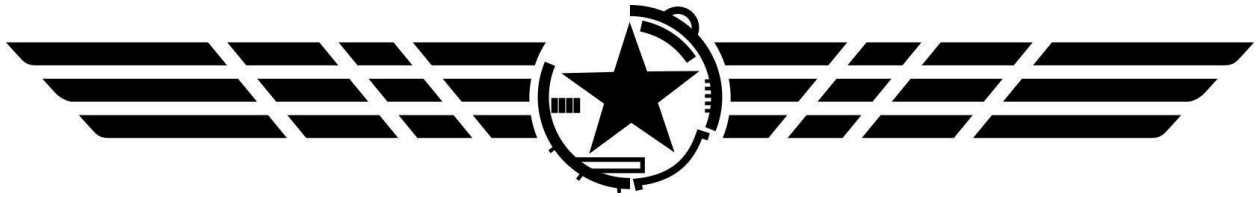
“You need to call me Adam. This ‘my lord’ stuff makes me feel like an asshole.”

“Yes, Adam.” she smiled slightly, and I forced my tired eyes to look away. Then the door to the elevator opened, and we walked out to the bridge. I made a hard left as soon as we exited, and then I took the hallway down to my room. I half expected the Prime Valkyrie to follow me, but she left me alone.

I pulled off my gun belt when I entered my suite, threw it on a chair, pulled off all my armor pieces, peeled off my flight suit, and then jumped in the shower. The warm water made me remember Eve and Zea, and I spent a few long minutes leaning against the tile thinking about them. Then I finished cleaning myself, brushed my teeth, and climbed into my bed naked. I couldn’t keep my eyes open any longer, and the good thing about sleep was that it made time pass faster.

It was just a matter of time now before I saw them again.

The thought made the beast in my stomach purr, and my brain spiraled into a dream of me tearing out the throats of white-robed men.



Chapter 16

I startled awake to hands on my face, lips, and neck. For half a moment, I thought it was Eve and Zea, but my bed was empty, and I remembered taking my shower before I passed out. I had no idea how many hours I had slept, but the exhaustion from my adventures on Nordar - 13 - was now gone. I felt like I could climb a mountain, or fight another uiun-bair. Then my stomach roared from hunger, and the world spun a bit. When was the last time I ate? With Hegeia, Uma, and Waiola? How many days ago was that? Shifting into and back from my tiger-man form burned a ton of calories, and I felt like I could eat a whole fucking cow.

Good thing I had a few cows cut up in Persephone's freezer.

I lifted up my sheets to get out of bed, but my eyes were drawn to the chair in my room. Madalena was sleeping there, and I felt a flurry of mixed emotions punch me in the stomach. She wasn't wearing her uniform. Instead, she was wearing a short pair of sweat shorts and a tight shirt. The outfit showed off her muscular legs, and the swell of her perky breasts pushed against the shirt. My movement, or the growl from my stomach, hadn't seemed to awaken her, but I pulled my sheets slower in order to not disturb her.

My suit and armor weren't on the floor anymore, so I tiptoed to my closet. My flight suits were hanging inside, but the remaining half of the closet was now filled with clothes that weren't mine. They were the kind of dark black and blue uniforms Madalena would wear, and a quick inhale confirmed they were her clothes.

She had moved all her shit into my room.

"I brought my possessions into your room," Madalena said from the doorway of my closet, and I turned away from her so she couldn't see my naked front side.

“I didn’t say you could,” I replied as I grabbed one of my flight suits.

“You have been asleep for thirty-three hours,” she said.

“You just changed the subject. I didn’t say you could bring your stuff into my suite,” I said over my shoulder as I pushed my legs into my suit.

“Can I make you breakfast?” she asked, but I didn’t answer her. Instead, I finished putting my arms in my suit, zipped up the front, and then walked past her without speaking.

I went to my bathroom and saw an extra toothbrush beside the other sink. There were also ten or so bottles of lotion, soaps, and other feminine products that I couldn’t identify. Some of it looked like makeup, but Madalena didn’t seem like the type of woman who wore makeup.

The sight angered me more, but I focused on brushing my teeth.

“You said we would speak over a meal when you awoke?” she asked, and I could feel her fear. It was mixed with frustration, anger, and loneliness.

It was the loneliness that made me finally reply to her.

“It must be hard not getting what you want for once,” I growled.

“You know nothing of me,” she growled in return. Her eyes narrowed a small amount, and anger flooded over all of her other emotions.

“I know you are supposed to be submitted to me and follow my orders, but you keep pushing where I tell you not to push. You keep making advances toward me when I tell you that I’m not interested.”

“You are interested. I feel your desire.”

“Get. The. Fuck. Out. Of. My. Head!” I threw my toothbrush down in the sink, and she flinched. “I told you I didn’t want this! I didn’t want you to submit to me! I didn’t want to go in this rite! I just wanted to help you and then save my friends!”

“We are going to save your friends!” she shouted back, and her outburst surprised me. “You know nothing about our people, or what I have given you. You spit on me, and my honor, every chance you get! I have worked my whole existence to serve Odin.” She raised her hands to my face, and I didn’t step away from her touch. “These hands have been broken countless times. Along with every other bone in my body. I am a Valkyrie; my husband and lover have been battle. I have been to the edge of mortality

and returned because Odin needs me. I have obeyed his wishes knowing that it would bring my people life and a place at his side in Valhalla.”

“Madalena, I--”

“I was dead, so was my crew. Have you ever felt life-support systems fail? Every breath is agonizing, and I prayed to Odin for another chance to serve him. I prayed to die in combat fighting the Draugr. They are coming, not just for my blood clan or the Nordar, but for all humans. I asked him if I failed him somewhere, but there was no answer, and I said my last goodbyes to my friends. Then you entered our system. It was a clear message from him. You were his answer.”

“I already told you that I was looking for you because you had a ship like mine, and we saw the vid--”

“You have a Shadow Eagle. You are fighting the Draugr. You can turn into a walking snow leopard.”

“Tiger--”

“Odin sent you to me. He showed me how to serve him, unite the Nordar clans, and defeat the Draugr. I watched the videos of your ship. You had no arms and were dying, but you saved us. Valkyrie do not submit to another man unless he has beaten her in combat, or performed an act of heroism fit for the gods. I am the Prime Valkyrie. When I submitted to you, it was proof to the gods and our people that I have finally met a man who is my better. It is the highest honor that can be given, yet you do not care. You send me away. You tell me you do not love me. You tell me you prefer other women, but you are the only man I will ever want.”

“I’m in love with two other women. I didn’t ask you for any of this,” I said.

“I excel at every task I commit myself to. I wish to be your wife. Our souls are already bound. I am sorry I took the choice from you but is it so unpleasant? I am beautiful and will serve you in life and in Valhalla. I will stand by your side in battle and pleasure you in our bed. I will give you strong children who will swell your chest with pride. You only need to accept me.”

Her fingers stroked my chin and face as our eyes met. I felt her emotions, so I knew she wasn’t lying to me. I also knew I could tell her no,

and she would just continue. She would never stop trying to serve me.

Unless I told her to kill herself, and she would even do that for me.

What would Eve and Zea think of Madalena? The warrior woman and Eve had a lot in common, they had both prayed for a savior, and I happened to show up. Madalena was honest and honorable. Just like Eve. The two women would probably get along famously.

Zea would be another matter. The snarky hacker had just come to terms with our polyamorous relationship and was still a bit insecure with our love. Madalena would throw a huge wrench in things.

Especially if Zea knew I now shared emotions with another woman who wasn't her.

"I need to save my friends, then we'll take the slave women back to their homeworld. After that, well... I'll think about it some more." I thought about what Madalena had said about me completing Odin's rite of passage. Did she really expect me to hang from a tree? I wanted to ask, but then my stomach roared like an uun-bair, and I stepped away from her.

"Can I make you breakfast?" she asked again.

"Yeah," I said, and her lips upturned into a slight smile.

We stepped out of my suite to the elevators, and into the galley. She walked barefoot, and I tried to keep my eyes from her muscular legs and tight ass. Looking felt like cheating, but I was only a man.

A man with a tiger in his soul.

"I will cook. You can relax," Madalena said when we reached the kitchen.

"I'm not the kind of guy who relaxes while someone else works for me," I said, but the idea of cooking with her felt too intimate, and I didn't want to continue on that path.

"Then you can speak. I wish to know my husband better."

"Don't call me your husband," I groaned. "Adam is my name."

"Yes, Adam," she said. "You were born on Jupiter?"

"Ganymede," I said. "Dad died in the Saturn Wars, so my mom raised my sister and me."

“You are the oldest?” Madalena asked as she took eggs and a large cut of steak out of the massive refrigerator. There was no one else in the kitchen or galley, and I wondered if she had set it up so we would be alone.

“Yeah,” I said, and I talked about life on Ganymede. I talked about my sister and mother, about working to help pay the bills, then joining the Marines to pay for my sister’s medical expenses. I talked about going to war, and the countless battles. I spoke about joining the special forces, but I didn’t talk about any of the things I had done, or seen while I was a member of that group.

She finished cooking us breakfast, and we sat on barstools beside each other while we ate on the kitchen’s long counter. Madalena was a surprisingly good cook, and the steak, eggs, and potatoes she made were seasoned with the perfect amount of salt, pepper, and dill. We washed each bite down with strong coffee, and I let the words pour out of my mouth.

I told her about needing more money for medical bills and deserting the Marines so I could work for the Yakuza. I talked about breaking legs for them and doing a bunch of other dumb shit just to pay the bills. I talked about taking the heat for a bad bank robbery so my sister and mom could be set up.

Madalena was a good listener, and she asked questions to clarify a few cultural points, but she let me do most of the talking. When I spoke about the experiments and President Yu, she leaned closer to me, and I paused so she could speak.

“The blonde man in the video of Parnarta?”

“Yeah. I don’t know how, but it is the same guy in the video. It looks like he hasn’t aged a damn day.”

“Hmmm,” she said.

“Have you heard of him?”

“No, but I know of the tiger-man that he captured. Please continue your story, and I will tell you about it after.”

“They used an explosive collar to control the other men they had experimented on and me,” I said. I described the conditions of my imprisonment and how I was forced to perform clandestine missions. Then I began to speak about my mission to Trappist - 1e, and she raised her hand to interrupt me.

“You are still hungry,” she said as she pointed to my empty plate. She hadn’t asked it as a question, so I guessed she already knew the answer.

“Yeah. I could eat another plate, or two.” I chuckled, and she slid out of the stool beside me.

“We have smoked fish and boiled potatoes. I will serve it with more dill and aquavit.”

“Aquavit?” I asked.

“Drink of the old ones,” she said. “It is the water of life and goes well with fish. You will like it.”

“I’m not much of a drinker.”

“You do not need much aquavit,” Madalena said. She actually smirked a bit, and it made my heart beat in double time.

Then I grew angry at myself and looked down to the counter.

“Continue, please,” she said, and I talked about landing on the building in Trappist - 1e, killing the guards, and then coming to Eve. When I began to speak about my lover, I felt Madalena’s emotions swirl, and I had trouble picking through them.

“Something wrong?” I asked her as she ducked into the fridge again.

“No,” she said. “I can feel your emotions. I know you have a deep love for this woman.”

“I do,” I said.

“Then let us toast to finding her.” The brunette pulled a glass bottle out of the fridge, placed it on the counter before me, and then set two plates next to it. Each plate had a variety of smoked fish, pickled onions, crackers, and a dill covered potato salad. It smelled fresh and salty, and my stomach rumbled again.

Madalena poured the clear liquid into two small glasses, passed me one, and then raised hers.

“Skol,” she said.

“Skol,” I repeated, and we pressed our glasses together before we poured it down our throats.

The alcohol was a unique blend of fire and ice. At first taste, it was

minty, but then the complex rye flavors bloomed in my mouth. It burned as it passed down my throat, and then it felt as if an ice cube slid down as an after shot.

“You like it,” she said.

“Yeah,” I admitted, even though I knew she hadn’t really asked me the question. She knew I liked it because she felt I liked it.

I didn’t know how I was going to get used to this, having someone read my thoughts wasn’t that difficult, since I still had my private emotions.

“Eat, then tell me more about Eve,” Madalena prompted, and I took a bite of the fish.

“This is great too,” I said as the brunette filled up our glasses with more aquavit. “Who is the chef?”

“I made all of this,” she said.

“Really? Damn. You are a great cook.”

“I told you I strive for excellence. I had hoped that you would allow me to make you breakfast, and lunch, and dinner, so I prepared.”

“You didn’t need to,” I sighed.

“Yes, Adam. I did. Cooking for someone is a sign of how much you care for them. You are my husband, I will--”

“I asked you not to call me that,” I said, and my heart hammered in my chest.

“Yes. I am sorry,” she apologized, and I felt her disappointment. Fuck, it was like every time I got mad at her it also made me upset. “Tell me about your escape with Eve,” she said.

I nodded and continued my story. I talked about the spider drones, our jump into the sewer, and taking my massive revolver from the pimp.

I talked about Eve’s powers, and how she knew about Persephone. I talked about Zea, and how her boyfriend betrayed her, and how I had to get us out of the mall. I talked about eventually getting into Persephone and then escaping the planet.

Then I talked about our time on Gliese 876 - C - ii, and the job we took from the cowboy Wayne Sampson. Then I talked about Cynthia Jayhee’s job

and how we accidentally delivered combat drones to Jatal's people. I spoke about fighting against the Alloprize Navy and defeating them, and I could feel the pride pour from her.

"You are a great warrior," she said.

"Just lucky, and I'm hard to kill," I said as I took another long drink of aquavit. I really did like the drink, and I liked how Madalena matched me every time I took a sip. My strange healing powers prevented me from really getting drunk, but the booze was helping me relax around her.

I spoke about going to Queen's Hat, breaking up the bank robbery, and then getting put in jail. I talked about Juliette's mission with the gangsters, and how Zea and I became really close. I didn't get too deep into a discussion about our intimacy, but I knew Madalena could feel my emotions.

I talked about how Byron was really an android, as was Kasta, and I shared Paula's story. I recounted our mission to get the station's security system back online so that we could defeat Nebula Gammon. Her pleasure radiated from her, and I saw the stoic woman attempt to hide her smile.

"You like my stories?" I asked.

"Very much," she whispered. "I am grateful to Odin."

"Yeah, Odin..." I let my voice trail off, and then I chased a bite of the potato salad with a drink of the aquavit.

Madalena also finished her glass and then poured us the last from the bottle. I was about to make a comment about killing it, but then she slid around her chair, brushed past me, and got another bottle out of the fridge.

"What happened afterward?" she asked, and I talked about making amends with Juliet and then following Persephone's lead to Uraniel.

"Persephone knows about the Draugr," Madalena said, "The Shadow Eagles were their slaves."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"The Shadow Eagles," Madalena said again as she gestured around us. "They are alive. They have souls and minds. They communicate their feelings. *Dance to the Dirge* would often speak to me. I did not often understand what she meant, but she would show me threats. I have put together their story after searching for hints of the Draugr in our galaxy."

“I’m not surprised,” I replied as I thought of my experiences with Persephone. She had tried to talk to me often, but I couldn’t seem to understand what she was telling me, other than there was a danger.

“What did you find on this planet?” Madalena asked, and I continued my story.

I spoke of the drones that only came out at night, the attempts from the Lith Dae Navy to double cross us, and how we’d kicked their ass. Then I talked about opening the temple and fighting the creature we found inside. I spared no detail in the retelling, and she leaned toward me with obvious interest.

“Your teeth killed him?” she asked after I had finished.

“Yeah. I don’t know why though. I was able to break free of his power, but my bullets did nothing.”

“Hmmm,” Madalena said as she leaned away from me, grabbed her glass, and drained it.

“It feels like you know why,” I said after I’d drained my own glass.

We were about halfway through the second bottle now. I still wasn’t drunk, but I could see Madalena’s cheeks were turning red. She didn’t seem like the kind of woman who got drunk often, so I wondered why she was indulging so much.

“It is a piece of the puzzle,” she said as she filled our aquavit glasses again. “The tiger race. They are an advanced race that served the Draugr. I had wondered why the two species worked together, but I wonder if it was more that the Draugr had them as thralls or slaves because they feared them as enemies.”

“Next time we find one, let’s ask before we kill it.”

“Skol!” she said as she raised her glass.

“Skol!” I replied as we touched them together and drank again. This one actually hit me a bit, and I felt my fingers start to tingle.

“What happened after you killed the Draugr?” she asked, and I continued my story.

I talked about returning to Queen’s Hat to follow up with Juliette. I spoke about Elaka Nota invading, and our rush to return to Persephone with

the video data. Then how we left without supplies, swung by GUAAY - 23 - c to hunt, and how I'd made a mistake by butchering the cattle outside of Persephone.

"You are hard on yourself," Madalena said after I'd spoken about my friends' capture.

"Someone has to be. I imagine you are hard on yourself as well. It seems like they don't call everyone the Prime Valkyrie."

"No, they do not." Her face grew serious for a moment. "I have worked hard for my life."

"I get it," I said.

"Yes, I believe you do understand me," she said.

"Skol," I said as I held my glass out to her.

"Skol," she repeated, and then we drank.

"You could not shift into your other form because of the drugs?" she asked after we had sat in silence for a few moments.

"Yeah. The shit on the darts was some sort of poison."

Madalena looked at me with alarm, and then she reached for the transponder on my suit.

"What's wro--"

"Calisto?" Madalena asked into the device. She was leaning against me, and I could smell the aquavit on her breath.

"Yes, Prime Valkyrie?" the other woman asked.

"The primitive darts that you found in the hold. Do you still have them?"

"Hmmm. Yes. I have them in a box in the supply area of the hold. I have not had a chance to ask Adam what they were for."

"I need you to run a chemical analysis on the poison."

"Yes, Prime Valkyrie. I will report to you once I have finished."

"Thank you," Madalena said, and then her fingers flicked off the transponder. Her hand stayed on my chest, and then our eyes met. I knew she could feel my heart slamming against my ribs, and I could feel her desires.

“What are you thinking with the poison?” I asked as I turned back to our drinks.

“I won’t know until she completes the analysis, but if the tiger-men are enslaved by the Draugr, the drug might combat them.”

“Hmmm. Might work,” I said as I focused on my drink and not the proximity of her body. Fuck, I needed to get away from her.

“I’ve told you my story,” I said. “What about yours?”

“I was born on Nordar 13 - b. My father was king then, but he wanted me to be strong, and grow up in our traditional home. I began my combat training when I was four years old. Even then, my trainers knew I had potential, but that still isn’t enough. I devoted my time to self-improvement. I knew I wanted to be the Prime Valkyrie as soon as I understood there were Valkyries. After I completed my rite of passage, I began the process to become one.”

“Is there only one?” I asked. “You mentioned before that Lux is also a Valkyrie.”

“Each of the blood clans has Valkyries. They are committed to battle and war. They are our best warriors and are feared across all Nordar, but there is only one Prime Valkyrie.”

“How did you get that title?” I asked, even though I already knew the answer.

“I killed the other Valkyries in one-on-one combat.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” I said. “When you submitted to me, you said something about two-hundred duels. Were those all Valkyries?”

“Two-hundred and seven,” she corrected me. “All but thirty-six of those were Valkyries.”

“Who were the others?” I asked.

“Men who wanted me to submit to them,” she said with a shrug. “They were not strong enough.”

“Shit,” I said, and I began to understand why she was upset I refused her.

“Yes, you understand more. Those men risked their lives for me to be

their wife, and all these women wanted to carry my title. It is why you frustrate me so much, Adam. I hold their honor against my chest. I give it to you, and you do not want it.”

“You have honor, and I do as well. There are two women I love, and I have committed to be with them. How do the challenges work? Do they throw down a glove or something?” A smile came to my lips, and I realized I was getting buzzed. It had been a while since I felt the sensation, and I didn’t think I could now that my DNA was changed, but this booze was strong shit.

“They query the Vaish clan under a white flag. Lux, Calisto, and Dana are my shieldmaidens, and they sort through the requests and set an annual date where I meet all challengers. Not all are worthy for me to spend my time on.”

“Lux, Calisto, and Dana are Valkyrie?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“I haven’t met Dana yet,” I said.

“She, Pier, Baki, and Arno are with *Dance to the Dirge*.”

“And you don’t know where *Dance to the Dirge* is,” I said.

“No. She should have been in Nordar - 13,” she said.

“One more thing to do,” I said with a sigh, and she poured us more aquavit.

“There is nothing to do for the next few hours,” she said as she raised her glass. I cheered her, but the emotion coming from her was a clear indication of what she meant with her words.

“We can talk more,” I said. “Tell me about how you met your crew, and where you found *Dance to the Dirge*.”

Madalena smiled, leaned back on her stool, and talked for the next hour about her travels once she finished her Valkyrie rite of passage. Her father had given her another ship, and she won numerous victories against the other Nordar clans. Her reputation in space and in physical combat grew, and she gained more leverage in the Vaish Navy. This led her to be able to handpick recruits. This was before she became Prime Valkyrie, and she was only seventeen when she found *Dance to the Dirge*.

“I was tasked with finding new rhodium sources in a cluster sixty light

years from Nordar 13,” she said. “In part, I think my father sent me to the task so that I would be delayed in challenging the current Prime Valkyrie. We had not mapped the cluster yet, and there were eighty solar systems I was tasked with visiting. We were prepared for a five-year journey, but we found ruins in the third system. A ship had crashed on a planet that was in a Goldilocks placement. There was no advanced life on the world, but something once lived there, so we decided to investigate.

“Black evil looking temple?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “There was no Draugr though, just an advanced spaceship. Inside were the corpses of the tiger-men that you saw in the video.”

“Damn,” I gasped.

“We studied their DNA. It was unlike any other life form. Their cells were dead, but we were able to coax a few back to life. They regenerated impossibly quick.”

“What did you do with the research?” I asked.

“I am obviously not a scientist,” she said. “We took samples, but then gave them warrior burials. Their ship was equipped with advanced weapons and drives. Our techs had to retrofit some of the terminals, but we were able to take it off the planet. I was intrigued by her design and decided to stay aboard her during the journey back to Nordar - 13.”

“Then she started to speak to you?” I asked.

“Yes,” Madalena confirmed. “Her warpdrive was off-line, so the trip back took us many weeks using the hyperdrive. At first, we thought the ship was haunted, but the spirit wasn’t malicious. She was trying to communicate with us. I opened my mind to her, and she showed me the Draugr.”

“How did she show them to you?”

“You know, Adam,” Madalena said. “You have dreamed of them. You have fought them there. I feel your emotions when I mention them.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I forget the dreams sometimes. I don’t forget Persephone though. She wants my help.” I had already told Madalena about the group of three planets spinning between the two red stars, so I didn’t want to touch on it again.

“If we find *Dance to the Dirge*, and then hunt down my father for his Shadow Eagle, we will have three ships.”

“Why did you name your ship *Dance to the Dirge*?” I asked.

“Vaish are not known for our sense of humor,” she explained. “The other clans say that we don’t smile between birth and the march to our death.”

“So the name is a bit of a joke?” I asked.

“Yes.” She smiled slightly, and I felt her emotions hug me with warmth. She was so damn happy to have someone to share herself with.

“Three ships? How does your dad have one?”

“He found a second one after me.”

“It might not be enough to stop the Draugr,” I said. “I don’t know how many are coming to Uraniel, or even how many of these fuckers there are in the Milky Way.”

“Now that you and I are together, it will be easier to unite the clans. Our combined navy will be over a hundred thousand ships.”

“Holy shit,” I gasped.

“Yes,” she said. “You will just need to complete your rite, and the path will be easy.”

“I’m not going to hang from--”

“You heal,” she interrupted me. “As did Odin. He sacrificed himself to himself for power. I know you will survive the rite, then you will have all the Nordar at your command. The other kings will bow before you.”

“He sacrificed himself to himself? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“He is Odin,” she interrupted me.

“Whatever. I’m not interested in completing the rite,” I growled. “And I don’t care how much aquavit you give me to drink.” I stood and met her eyes. “I’m going to go back to my room now. Thanks for cooking.”

“Wait.” Her hand grabbed my arm as I walked past her.

“I will not speak of the rite anymore today. I know you do not believe you will survive. I am enjoying this time with you. Will you finish the bottle

with me?”

“Yeah,” I said after I felt her remorse.

I sat back on the stool, and she poured us another round. I asked her more about her life and her challenges as Prime Valkyrie. I could tell that she was buzzed now, maybe even drunk, and the beautiful woman’s words flowed freely from her lips. She even laughed a little when she recounted her challenge battle with the previous Prime Valkyrie.

“She was arrogant,” Madalena said.

“Ha, so are you,” I replied.

“Yes, but not foolish.” She laughed. “Raakel was Jotnar. She knew I was skilled with sword, spear, and shield. She should have picked a rifle for our challenge. Instead, she wanted to beat me with what I was best at. It cost her.”

“Wait, you are better with a sword than with a rifle?”

“Yes,” Madalena answered, but I couldn’t tell if she was joking.

We toasted again, and then we stared at each other for a few moments.

“Looks like we killed the bottle,” I said.

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“Thanks for the food and the conversation,” I said as I stood.

“We have a few more hours until we exit hyperdrive. Then we will engage the warpdrives and reach Fayfaix Station in another hour. I have another meal planned if you will eat with me again.”

“Yeah,” I said after I considered a moment.

“Thank you,” she replied, and her joy almost knocked me over.

“Yeah. Ahhh, I’m going to go take a shower, clean my revolver, and then I’ll come find you. Or you can find me. Whatever.” I turned from her and walked out of the kitchen before she could respond, and then I made my way to the elevator.

“Greetings, Adam.” Mikhael was in the elevator, and he held the door open for me.

“Hey, Mikhael. Thanks for the help back on Red Eye - 13.”

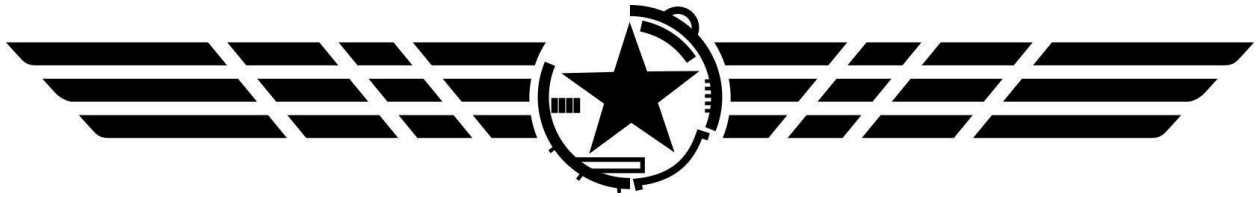
“I do as ordered,” he replied, and I felt a bit of disappointment. Other than Madalena, I felt like I had the best relationship with Mikhael, but his short answer indicated we weren’t really friends.

That might just be the way it would be until I finished the rite. I knew they were grateful I saved them, but none of them agreed with Madalena submitting to me, and now that we’d spent the last three or four hours talking together, I could understand why they were so protective of her.

“I’ll see you later,” I said to him as we exited the elevator on the bridge level.

“Very well, Adam,” he replied. The man didn’t frown, or smile, he just didn’t seem to care, and he turned the corner to head toward the bridge without another word.

The interaction made me miss my friends even more, but I took a small comfort in the possibility that we were going to get to Fayfaix Station before the fuckers who took them. Thoughts of seeing Eve, Zea, Paula, and Kasta made my heart soar, and thoughts of killing all the Magate Order scum made the beast in my soul roar.



Chapter 17

I took a long shower, but it was more to relax and pass the time than any sort of need for sanitation. I put a fresh flight suit on afterward and brushed my teeth again. The buzz from the alcohol I'd enjoyed with Madalena wore off in the shower, and I didn't feel any sort of hangover or other negative effects.

My revolver wasn't sitting on my chair, but I found it on the coffee table in my living room, and I assumed Madalena had moved it so she could sleep in its spot. I strapped the weapon on and then went down to the armory to clean it.

I passed Madalena by the elevator. She was still wearing her short workout shorts, and she gave me a slight smile when she caught my eyes roaming over her body.

"I intended to change back into my uniform, but I can continue to wear this if you prefer," she said as she stepped toward my room.

"Uniform is fine. I'm sure your crew would prefer it."

"But what do you prefer?" she asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I'm going to go clean my revolver." I chuckled and then stepped into the elevator. I watched her walk away for a second before the door closed, and then I rubbed my palm over my face.

Fucking shit. What the hell was I going to do?

I found Hegeia, Uma, and Waiola in the hallways on the bottom floor, and I paused my journey to chat with them. They were on cleaning duty, which made them happier than I would have expected, but I suppose it was better than their old life. We only talked for a few minutes, but then they told me they needed to get back to work, and asked if they could see me when we docked at the station. I agreed and then continued to the armory.

“Hey, Lux,” I said to the woman as I entered. She had a datapad in her hand and was checking some of the ammunition boxes.

“Adam,” she replied without looking at me.

“Lux, I was hoping we could develop some sort of mutual respect.” I set my revolver onto the workbench in the corner and began to disassemble it.

“If that is your wish, then I will comply,” she said, but she still didn’t bother to look at me.

“You don’t seem to like me,” I said as I finished pulling the cylinder out of the revolver.

“You are reading too much into the situation,” she said. “I do not really like anyone other than the Prime Valkyrie.”

“So you act like this to the rest of the crew?” I asked.

“Act like how?” She still didn’t look up from her datapad.

“Just cold and distant. I like to be on friendly terms with my crew.”

“We do not need to be friends for us to be on a crew. It is probably better if we are not. It would cloud our judgment.” She set down her datapad and turned to me. “Not that I let anything cloud my judgment, Adam.”

“Good to know,” I said with a sigh. “Are you done in here then? You are dismissed.”

“Yes, and thank you.” She turned without another word and walked out of the armory.

“Fucking bitch,” I hissed a few moments after she’d left the room. At least she could fight and shoot. I guess I didn’t need to be friends with everyone on board as long as they could perform when I needed them.

It only took me a few minutes to clean my revolver, but then I spent some time walking through the armory, inspecting the new weapons, and familiarizing myself with the way Lux had organized it. I remembered to put more revolver ammo in my speed loaders, and then I turned to leave a moment before Madalena walked in.

“Another hour until we are out of hyperdrive, then we will transition to warpdrives. Can you eat again?” She was wearing her tight uniform, but I

still had to force my eyes to focus on her face.

“Yeah,” I admitted. “Feels like I could eat another ten plates of food. Changing my form takes a lot out of me.” We had just left each other less than an hour ago, but I was happy to see her again, and I could feel her pleasure as well.

“I’ll ensure you are satisfied,” she said as she gestured for me to follow her out of the armory.

“Your crew doesn’t seem to like me,” I said as we took the elevator up to the second floor.

“They are angry at me,” she said. “I will deal with them.”

“You don’t need to ‘deal’ with them,” I said. “I shouldn’t have said anything. Loyalty and friendship aren’t built from a superior’s orders. It is built with time together in the trenches. You can help me by telling me more about them.”

“I like that approach,” she said. “I will speak of them.”

We returned to the galley, and the beautiful brunette woman told me of her crew while she cooked a pair of steaks to go with the chilled salad and steamed greens. I told her more about Eve, Zea, Paula, and Kasta as well, and the time passed quickly.

As soon as we began our meal, Nikki reported that we were exiting hyperdrive and resuming in warpdrive.

We were almost there.

“I am looking forward to meeting them,” Madalena said after we had begun to eat.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m a bit worried.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. As I said, Eve has powers. She will read your thoughts and know what you think.”

“Similar to the bond that you and I share?” the Prime Valkyrie asked me. We were drinking water now, and she took a sip after she asked.

“No. It is different,” I said. “She can read everyone.”

“Everyone?” Madalena actually looked concerned. “Without an

agreement?”

“Yeah,” I said. “How does the submission process work? There was the ceremony, our bloody hands touched, and now I am able to feel your emotions.”

“Bondi,” she answered. “A bond.”

“Huh?”

“It is magic from the gods. The same that allows our armor to work.”

“Hmmm,” I said, and I guessed she must have sensed my skepticism.

“Your Eve has magic, and you accept that.”

“Good point,” I said with a laugh.

“What of Zea?” Madalena asked.

“She’s not going to be happy,” I said, and then I explained the dynamics between the three of us, and how our love blossomed. At first, I hadn’t intended to tell Madalena everything, but as I spoke about Zea and Eve, it all came out in a torrent of emotions.

“I see,” Madalena said afterward, and I could feel her sadness. “I understand more why you are upset about our marriage.”

“I wish you wouldn’t call it that,” I said with a sigh.

“I will speak with Zea. I’m sure once she knows my feelings, she’ll accept me as she has Eve.”

“I think you need to give it some time,” I said quickly. “First, we need to find them, but I will need to tell her about you.”

“What will you tell her?” Madalena asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m more worried about saving them. I’ll worry about that conversation once she is back in my arms.”

“I see,” Madalena said, and her emotions spun between jealousy and sadness.

“Prime Valkyrie, We will exit warpdrive in ten minutes,” Nikki’s voice came across our transponders.

“Adam and I are heading to the bridge. Assemble the crew.” Madalena said as she pressed the button to talk. Then she took her finger off the device,

and our eyes met. “Let us go save your friends.”

The beast in my stomach growled in agreement, and we left the kitchen. The trip to the bridge was quick, and we found the crew already positioned in their battle stations. They turned to face us as we walked in, stood, and then saluted. Madalena and I returned their salute, and then Madalena gestured for them to come to the front of the bridge.

“Do you wish to brief them?” Madalena asked me as everyone came to stand between the three pilot’s seats and the five officer chairs.

“Yeah,” I said as I cleared my throat and sat in the captain’s chair. My military instincts took over, and I passed my eyes over the crew. “We are looking for my friends. They were captured on a planet named GUAAY - 23 - c by the Magate Order. We learned on Red Eye - 13 that the slave ships are heading to this station to sell the captured women. We might get here before them, or they might already be there.”

“How many ships will the Magate Order have?” Nikki asked.

“On GUAAY - 23 - c they had over twenty. I don’t know if they will all come to this station. We can’t engage them though, we could risk destroying the vessel that my friends are on.”

“How many of your friends?” Mikhael asked. He genuinely seemed interested, and I hoped it meant I had read him wrong a few hours ago.

“Four,” I answered. “All women. Eve stands a little over my shoulder. She has long black hair, pale skin, and red eyes.”

“Red eyes?” Lux asked.

“Yes,” I answered. “Zea is a hacker. She has short blond hair and half of her scalp was shaved.” I tapped my head. “There are tattoos there and a connection port. She’s almost as tall as me and skinny.”

The group nodded, and I continued. “Paula and Kasta are twins with long blonde hair and dark blue eyes. They are about the same height as Eve, maybe a bit taller. Any questions about their descriptions?”

They didn’t say anything, so I continued. “We’ll do a trip around the station to scan for Magate Order ships. If we see them docked already, we will need to hurry up and find them in the station. If there are no Magate Order ships docked, we will need to ask around the station to see if they have

already left, or if they are expected to arrive soon.”

“What if they have not arrived yet?” Josefinna asked.

“We will wait. When they show, we’ll find my friends.”

“How long will we wait?” Lux asked.

“As long as it takes,” Madalena said, and Lux nodded. “Any more questions for Adam?”

“No, Prime Valkyrie,” they all answered at once.

“Return to your stations,” she said, and the group flowed back to their respective officer’s chairs. Nikki sat back down in the center pilot seat, Mikhael sat to the left of her, where Paula had, and then Madalena moved to sit where Eve normally did.

They all strapped themselves into their chairs, and I did the same.

“Exiting warpdrive in ten seconds,” Nikki said, and I forced myself to inhale a long breath.

“Five seconds.”

“Exiting now.”

The display screen turned into stars, and I saw a massive space station beneath us. It was in the shape of the letter ‘H,’ with docking stations along the exterior and interior lines.

Metropolis Class Station: H-4009876

Manufactured by: Tin Yarta LLC

Branding: Fayfaix Station - 1

Hyperdrive: H-drive. 3,120 hours to one light year.

Warpdrive: No

Foldingdrive: No

Length: 12.5 kilometers

Minimum Crew: 1,800

Estimated population: 300,000

Estimated fighter craft: 650

Estimated drone payload: 2,000

Heavy plasma cannons: 200

Light plasma guns: 300

Laser arrays: 160

“Shit. It’s huge,” I said. Fayfaix was about half the size of Queen’s Hat, and about four times the size of Red Eye - 13. I could see that it had hundreds of ships docked on its perimeter. It looked just like one big harbor, and I felt my stomach drop. A station this size would have a ton of security to keep order.

“Scanning for Magate Order vessels,” Mikhael said as his fingers tapped across the controls.

“Adam, there is a request to communicate from the station,” Madalena said. “They are asking for visual feed.”

“I need a few minutes to complete the scan,” Mikhael said. “There are a lot of ships, and we might need to get the other angle of the station so we can see them all.”

“Nikki, fly around so Mikhael can get a full reading,” I ordered. “Madalena, push the video up. I’ll talk to them.”

Persephone began to fly toward the station, and the bottom portion of our screen displayed a pair of men in cream colored uniforms.

“Greetings, Fayfaix,” I said as I forced a smile to my face.

“Greetings, Persephone,” One of the men said as he typed on his terminal. “What is your business here?” The man had an accent similar to mine, and I wondered if the station was full of ark descendants from the western part of North America or the Pacific Islands.

“Trade. We have a few hundred grams of rhodium.” It was the magic word for stations, and he nodded as his fingers danced across his control terminal.

“Your ship looks of military design, Persephone, but it has no branding.”

“It’s dangerous out there. We have no wish to cause offense.”

“Is rhodium all you are offering to trade?” he asked, but there was no

suspicion in his voice.

I thought about my reply for half a moment. I only guessed this was a station that sold slaves because of what the two Magate Order fucks told me. If the station did deal in slaves, they often had a special place for them to dock. Being able to harbor in that area would make it easier to find my friends. However, if the station didn't actually approve of slavery, I'd risk them telling us we couldn't dock.

"We are looking to purchase more crew for our ship," I said as my stomach dropped. It was a risk, but both of the Magate Order men had mentioned this station, and it was more than big enough.

"Purchase?" the man asked, but he didn't pause his typing. He wasn't even looking at me. It was like he did this conversation twenty times already today, and he just wanted to get it over with.

"Yeah. I heard of this group named the Magate Order. They apparently make a drop at this station every six months or so. I might be mistaken, and we need other supplies, so if that's not the case, we'd still like to do business."

"They are a few days out, but--" the man paused when his partner leaned over and whispered in his ear.

Mikhael turned to me and nodded with a hungry smile as Persephone's scanner highlighted twenty-two ships in the distance.

Magate Order ships.

"Ahh. Nevermind," the man said as he finally looked at me. "They just came out of hyperspace. You have good timing. I'll dock you next to them. You can pick up goods in the harbor, but all bidding is to be made in Fay-cred. You'll have to exchange your rhodium for it before you buy and register all purchases. I will send you an information packet with our bylaws."

"Got it, thank you," I said as I fought against the screaming beast in my stomach.

"Proceed to Harbor 2, dock C. Take heading 245.8 and -45.35," he instructed.

"Got it," I said after Nikki nodded and changed Persephone's course a

bit.

“Stay out of trouble, Persephone,” the man said, and then he turned off his communication.

“They are here early,” I gasped as I stared at the cluster of white ships.

“There is an incoming message from one of the Magate Order ships,” Madalena said, and I could feel the excitement radiate from her.

“On screen,” I choked out.

“It is only audio,” she said, “I’ll push it through.”

“Adam?” a voice asked tentatively, and my heart somersaulted.

“Zea?”

“Ahh!” she gasped. “I thought... shit. Adam. I thought I’d never see you again. We all thought we were--”

“I’m here,” I said as I blinked back tears. “Can you turn on the display?”

“Shit, can’t. We made a bit of a mess inside of this ship.”

“A mess?”

“Well, not me really. Eve did. The whole fucking bridge is painted the color of Magate Order guts. You know how she gets when she is angry. One of their bodies broke the camera when she tossed him around like a bouncy ball. Damn, Kitty Boy. I’m so happy to hear your voice. I missed you so much.”

“I missed you too,” I said. “Eve is okay? Can I talk to her? How about Kasta and Paula?”

“I’m here Adam!” A voice shouted, and I recognized the timbre as Paula’s. “Eve and Kasta are in the hold trying to calm the other women.”

“You four have control of the ship?” I asked as relief threatened to make me faint.

“Hell Yeah!” Zea laughed, and I could almost picture her face. “We had control of the ship some five minutes after Kasta woke us up. Paula popped open the padlocks on our cages, I broke open the security lock on the hold, and Eve murdered every single fucker on this junker. How did you find us? We’ve been worried about you.”

“You’ve been worried about me?” I asked with surprise.

“Uhh. Yeah. How in the hell were you going to get anything done without us? You can’t even use Persephone’s navigation system. We were going to turn this piece of shit around and go back to GUAAY - 23 - c so we could save your sweet ass.” She laughed again, and I could almost believe that Odin was actually favoring me.

“Hey gang,” Paula said. “The other Magate Order ships are starting to move toward the station. How are we going to get back on Persephone?”

“We can hyperdrive over one system,” I answered quickly. “Then we can use the docking tube to--”

“Nope,” Zea interrupted me. “I’ve told you this thing is a piece of shit, but that’s doing a disservice to shit. The navigation system has exactly three destinations set, and we can’t pick anything else.”

“Can you hack it?” I asked.

“I could with my computer,” she replied sarcastically.

“Ahh fuck,” I said.

“Do you have it? I missed it almost as much as you.”

“Yeah, I’ve got it.”

“Fuck yeah,” Zea sang, and her voice sounded giddy. “I was joking of course. I missed you more than I thought I could miss anyone.”

“We can dock with you right now and I can use the boarding tube to--”

“The Magate Order ships are moving to dock,” Madalena interrupted me. “They might attack if we try to board one of their ships.”

“Uhh. Who was that?” Zea asked.

“I’ve made a few new friends. They helped me get here.” I tried to figure out a plan to get to Zea, Eve, Paula, and Kasta. We were so fucking close to each other, but there was still a fleet of slavers between us.

“Hmmm. That new friend has a sexy voice,” Zea stated jealously.

“We aren’t going to be able to board you,” I told her as I looked toward the docks where Nikki aimed Persephone. “You will need to dock, and then we’ll come get you.”

“There are going to be a bunch of Magate Order ships docking also,” Paula pointed out.

“Yeah. I know,” I replied.

“And we have a bunch of women on board,” Zea stated. “We have to save them also.”

“How many is ‘a bunch’?”

“Forty.”

“Shit,” I muttered as I looked at our destination. “They are putting us at docking station...” I paused and looked at Nikki.

“Dock C in harbor 2,” the pilot called out.

“Can you try to get the dock next to ours?” I asked Zea.

“Uhh. Yeah. I’ll see if I can get there first. Who was that? Sounded like a different woman than the other one.”

“Another friend, I’ll explain it all when we get you back on board.”

“Okay,” Zea agreed. “I just suddenly had this fear that you got a whole new crew of beautiful women, but that is crazy talk.”

“Yeah...” I said.

“Wait. When you say ‘yeah’ like that, it makes me think--”

“Just dock!” I replied. “If you can get the one next to us, it will make it easier.”

“The station is trying to communicate with us!” Paula called out. “We’ll switch channels. Hold on, Adam.”

I didn’t hear anything from Paula and Zea for almost a minute, and my heart threatened to rip free of my chest.

“Alright,” Zea said as Nikki docked Persephone into the harbor. “I spoke in my deep manly voice, and they gave us a dock. I asked for D or B, but they gave us G because the other ships already docked into D, E, and F.”

“We’ll come get you,” I said as I stood from my chair.

“Uhh. That might be kind of hard,” Zea replied. “There are three docks between us, and they are going to be crawling with Magate Order fuck faces.”

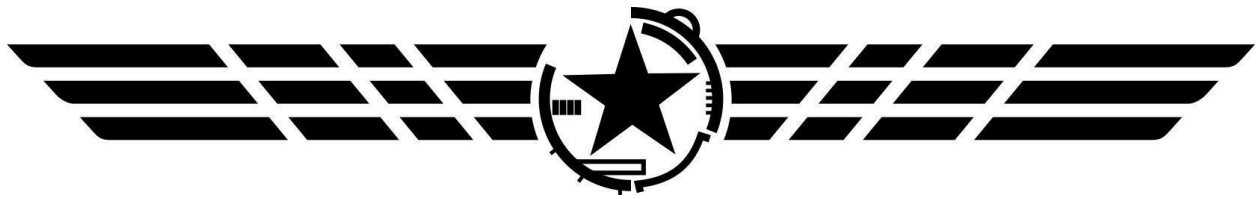
“That’s fine,” I said.

“Our ship had thirty men on it, though. If they all exit into the docks, there will be--”

“Zea, it’s fine,” I said as I nodded to Madalena. She was already out of her chair and was motioning for Mikhael and Nikki to follow her. “I’m looking forward to killing a bunch of these fuckers. Get ready to move.”

“Got it. I’ll tell the others. Be safe. I don’t want to be without you again.”

“I will,” I growled as my body began to shift into its tiger-man form. The beast was finally going to feed on the screams of these slavers.



Chapter 18

The seven Vaish warriors and I dashed into the elevator and descended to the bottom level. No one seemed startled by my appearance, but I could feel the swirl of excitement pulse and roll from each of them. It was a bit strange how impassive their faces were, but I was getting used to understanding their feelings through Madalena's bond.

"Stop," she commanded as soon as the elevator doors opened. They all froze and then turned inward to look at the Prime Valkyrie.

"I will remind you all that I am submitted to Adam. He has saved our lives and has been sent to me by Odin. Assume he has already passed the rite of passage and treat his orders appropriately. Am I clear?"

"Yes, Prime Valkyrie," they said in unison. I had thought that their aura of emotions might shift with her words, but none of them did.

Madalena turned to me, and everyone else mirrored her movement.

"Get armed and start killing. Nikki and Josefinna post outside of Persephone's bay door. Everyone else with me." I didn't wait for their nods of confirmation. I was already out the door and sprinting toward the armory.

I grabbed my belt with my two large pistols and then reached for my trusty shotgun with the drum magazines. It only took me a few seconds to get the gear, but the Vaish warriors were just as quick, and they all grabbed their pulse rifles. I noticed Mikhael pull a massive yellow painted pulse weapon from a foot locker in the corner of the room. He shot me a half smile after he set it on his shoulder, and the group of us ran out to the hold only moments after.

Persephone's bay door was beginning to open as we ran into the hold. No one could have triggered the door, so I guessed the ship was doing what she could to aid us.

“The security door!” I shouted as I looked at the end of the tunnel.

“I will take care of it!” Mikhael’s armor was covering his body now, and he sprung ahead of us with a quick boost from his back thruster wings. He set one knee on the edge of Persephone’s ramp, lifted up the plasma launcher, and sent a massive blob of yellow power down the loading tube. The globe of energy made a horrific noise when it left his launcher, and its impact with the door actually shook Persephone.

The door was now totally vaporized, and only the smoke and melted sides of the loading tunnel gave any indication that there had been any sort of security checkpoint.

We sprinted into the harbor. The main avenue wasn’t as large as Queen’s Hat, but it was filled with hundreds of people, and they turned toward us with dumbfounded expressions on their faces.

Chaos ensued.

Most of the bystanders in the harbor were smart, and they either ran or took cover as soon as they saw the giant walking tiger-man and his monster armored entourage. Some of them weren’t as smart, and they pulled their weapons when they saw us.

These weren’t the station’s security forces, they were just travelers on the station. I didn’t particularly want to kill them, but then I realized that they were probably slavers. A trumpeting roar escaped my throat, and it filled the harbor half a second before my shotgun slugs did.

One of my shots took a lightly armored man in the side of his chest, and his body disappeared like a popped balloon. A man standing next to him got a shot off with his laser pistol, but his aim was off, and the red beam went wide over my head. My slug found his face, and then it continued its journey to slam into the chest of the man behind him.

The Vaish filled the harbor with a stream of blue energy bullets, and everyone reaching for their weapons died.

I turned to my right and ran toward the next dock. It was about a hundred meters away.

There were only three hundred meters left to go until I saw Eve, Zea, Paula, and Kasta again.

The crowds knew that we meant fucking business now, and everyone had either thrown themselves on the floor or were running in the other direction. The station alarm was also shrieking, but I almost couldn't hear it over the scream of the beast in my head.

A squadron of drones dropped from the ceiling. They were disk-shaped, two meters in diameter, and had small machine guns mounted to the bottom. My weapon barked ten times, and each slug found a drone to destroy. The blue pulse bullets took out the remainder in front of me, and I turned to see Lux and Josefinna taking care of the drones behind us.

We reached Dock D, and I poked my head around the corner. The security door was still closed, and I debated what to do. I half expected them to pour out of the tubes and engage in a gunfight with us, but they either didn't know we were out here and were taking their time, or they were hiding in their ship. Either way, I didn't want to get pinched between them.

"Mikhael!" I shouted.

"Fire in the hole!" He crouched next to me with his big ass plasma launcher, and a globe of yellow sunlight poured into the tunnel.

He jumped back around the corner as soon as it hit, and a wave of hot fire erupted out of the tunnel. A sonata of pain-filled screams came from the far side of the tunnel, and I gestured for Madalena and Lux to fill the opening with a barrage of bullets. The women fired, and there were more shrill screams.

I checked around Lux's armored shoulder and saw that the boarding tube was filled with melted metal, smoke, and the dead bodies of white-robed men. The far hold door of their ship was swinging closed, and two men were running toward it.

Twin shots from Madalena and Lux took them in the back, and their blood exploded onto the door of their craft.

I doubt they were going to come out anytime soon.

"Keep going!" I shouted at everyone as I set my eyes on the next docking station. It was another hundred meters away, and I saw a group of ten white-robed men exiting into the dock.

They looked surprised by the chaos in the harbor, and I roared as I aimed my shotgun toward them.

My first slug tore through two of them, and a spray of blue bullets tore through the rest. I growled with a mix of annoyance and pleasure. I wanted all these fuckers to die, but I wanted to be the one to tear through their flesh and crunch their bones into dust.

It didn't matter. Just as long as they died.

"Kill them all!" I roared, and the Nordar felt my rage. Their thruster-wings sprouted from the back of their armor and they took to the air. They were fast, but my tiger-man form was as well, and the distance between Dock D and E closed in a few seconds. Lux and Calisto took the corner of Dock E, and they proceeded to fill the tunnel with their rifle fire while Mikhael, Madalena, and I kept moving.

Adam.

Eve's voice filled my head, and I purred.

"I'm coming for you," I whispered as I put a dozen shotgun slugs into a group of Magate Order fuckers coming out of Dock F. The men went down in a spray of gore, bone, and screams. The slugs were definitely overkill, and I probably should have brought a buckshot loadout.

Then again, overkill was my style, and these fuckers deserved it.

I know. Her voice came into my mind.

We cannot open the security door.

"Get back into the ship. We are going to blow the door," I said.

We will, my love.

"Security," Madalena said, and I saw twenty armored soldiers pour out of one of the side tunnels opposite Dock G. Their suits were cream colored, bulky, and they carried mean looking rifles. A metal wall moved up from the floor of the station, and the group took cover behind it.

"Mikhael!" I shouted as I jumped to avoid the guard's first spray of bullets.

"Got it!" he fired the massive plasma weapon again, and their wall exploded in a flash of neon chartreuse. I fired my weapon in that direction along with Lux and Madalena, and the men screamed.

"Drones behind us," Calisto said calmly, and I spun to see her shooting

at more of the disks. She'd already taken out all but three, but she dealt with those even before I could lift my shotgun up. I hadn't spent any time with Calisto, but it looked as if she was as good with her rifle as Lux.

"Mikhael, we have to blow the door to Dock G!" I pointed to the next corner, and the man nodded at me.

We were almost there.

We are back in the ship and have closed the loading door.

"Hit it!" I shouted at the Vaish man as soon as we reached the corner leading to the dock where my friends were. Past our position. I saw a group of armored security step out from an adjacent tunnel. They were a hundred and fifty meters away, but one of the men hefted a chaingun.

"I see him!" Madalena shouted as she jumped into the air. The guards tilted their heads back to watch her fly toward them, and the man with the massive chaingun seemed unsure of exactly where he should be aiming.

"Firing!" Mikhael shouted, and the plasma shot blew open the security door at the same time as Madalena's and my shots tore into the far group of cream armored guards.

It felt like the station actually shuddered when the Vaish man shot his cannon, and I wondered if we were doing serious structural damage to the place. Weapons as big as the one Mikhael carried were a big a no-no on stations because he could miss and blow a hole in the bulkhead.

So far, I hadn't seen this extraordinary team of warriors miss.

"Hold the tunnel! I'm going in to get them!" I ran into the melting docking tube and sprinted through the smoking ruin. The gunshots behind me faded into silence, and the screams of the dying assholes were drowned out by the sound of my heart hammering in my chest. The door to the shuttle was lowering in front of me, and I let my shotgun fall back onto its strap.

Then Eve was in my arms.

She felt so small, but power radiated from her. I couldn't really kiss her because I was in my tiger-man form, but I ran my tongue over her lips and fought against the urge to crush her with my hug.

"I missed you," she whispered both aloud and in my mind.

I couldn't speak because of my purring, and I cradled the vampire

woman in my left arm so that I could pull Zea to me.

“You don’t need to lick me on my-- ahhh!” Zea squealed with delight when my tongue lapped her face.

I hugged them both, and it felt like my purrs were going to shake my bones free of my tendons. I couldn’t begin to quantify my emotions; there were too many.

I felt two more pairs of arms around my stomach, and I set down my lovers so I could turn and hug Paula and Kasta. My emotions were still overflowing, and I couldn’t help but lick them as well.

I had my women back, and the beast inside of my soul was pleased.

“We are pleased as well, Adam,” Eve said. “We love you.”

“Let’s get back to Persephone.” I wanted to say more, but my emotions were too powerful, and the Marine in my mind knew that we had to take care of the important shit first.

“Our friends,” Paula said as she gestured to the group of forty women standing in the hold. All of them, including my crew, were wearing simple white pants and blouses. None of them wore shoes, and I thought about the sea of shrapnel that the destroyed drones left on the harbor floor.

The station shook again, and it sounded like someone was opening a thousand zippers.

“Adam!” Madalena shouted down the tunnel, but I also heard it in my transponder. “They are sending fighters to this part of the harbor! We need to leave!”

“Shit!” I growled, and then I turned to my friends. “Have them follow and stay behind me. The people in the glowing power armor are my new friends.”

I was sure Eve already knew about Madalena and the Nordar, but my other three women gave me curious looks. There was no time to explain though. I turned from them and ran back to the end of the tunnel.

There were two groups of cream armored guards blocking our retreat. Like with the earlier security team. These guards were using the pop up floors of the station to give them cover, but Madalena had possession of the massive chaingun now, and a stream of metal was digging a hole into the

steel barrier while the other Vaish worked their way around to flank.

I turned to my right, to where Docks H, I, and J were, and saw a squadron of dish drones flying toward us. Beyond the robots, I saw a large tank rumbled along the harbor road. It was still a good five hundred meters away, but I had no doubt in my mind that the massive cannon mounted on top could hit us from this distance.

Or it could punch a hole into the side of the station. Then we'd all fly out into the atmosphere.

I looked at our return path to Persephone's dock and groaned. My earlier assumption of a sea of shrapnel was more than accurate. There were fewer smooth spots than areas with jagged pieces of metal. I saw no way for my friends and the forty other women to run back without serious injury. I needed a giant broom or forty more Nordor warriors with jetpacks that could taxi my friends.

I turned back to the tank and tried to focus on a solution. The monstrosity was moving faster than I expected, and its track system plowed a fallen set of metal crates as if they were made out of putty. It didn't even need to fire the massive cannon. It could just plow over us.

I was going to have to deal with it.

A series of screams sounded behind me, and I turned to see my new crew deal with the two groups of station guards. Madalena stopped her chaingun's spray, but the barrels were still spinning. Her banshee helmet turned toward me, and I gestured to the tank in the distance.

"They can't run because of the shrapnel!" I shouted. "We need to take out the tank!"

"Mikhael!" Madalena barked.

"I'll get it!" He was about fifty meters back toward Persephone's dock and had used his pistol to help take out some of the guards. He holstered the weapon, swung his cannon back onto his shoulder, knelt, and then aimed it down toward the tank.

"Back up!" I shouted to Zea, Eve, Paula, and Kasta as they reached the edge of the tunnel. I moved to stand in front of them, and Mikhael's shot lobbed down past our position. The plasma had been close enough to singe the fur on my face, but it looked like his aim remained true, and the yellow

ball spun right toward the tank.

Then a shimmering shield of energy appeared in front of the thing, and the plasma ball bounced up into the ceiling of the harbor.

The metal there exploded, and my heart caught in my throat.

The tank's cannon shifted its position, and I screamed out a warning half a moment before it fired.

The tunnel rocked, and I heard my friends scream as the surrounding metal caught on fire. The alarms screeched, and the fire extinguishers turned on.

"Everyone okay?" I asked over my shoulder.

"Yes," Eve answered.

"Yeah. Fuck!" Zea shouted.

"Yes!" Paula shouted.

"I think I broke my butt bone," Kasta said with a laugh.

"How can you joke at a--" Paula begin.

"Hey, you programmed me."

"Wait here!" I shouted as I dashed out of the tunnel and into the harbor. I checked over my shoulder and saw the cannon shot had slammed into the side of the harbor some ten meters past my tunnel. Thankfully, it hadn't punched through the bulkhead, but it looked like the next shot would. The armored Vaish warriors had avoided getting hit, but there was another group of guards firing at us from the direction of Persephone's dock.

I sprinted toward the tank.

My leg muscles flexed, and I felt Madalena run, or blast, after me. The tank was about three hundred meters down the harbor, and I prayed that I could get there before it fired again.

The tiger screamed in my mind, and my vision turned red.

I ran faster, and Madalena fell behind me.

There were smaller machine guns on top of the tank, and they pivoted to aim at me.

I ran faster and felt the wind screech past my ears.

The cannon belched, but I jumped a moment before it fired and my massive shoulder slammed into the side of the barrel. My armor cracked, my bones shattered, but the cannon twisted away from its target, and the shot punched into the side of the harbor wall some fifty meters to the tank's left side.

I bounced off the barrel of the cannon and tried to twist through the air so that I'd land with some shred of grace, but everything in my body hurt, and I dropped to the ground like a sack of bricks. My face smashed against the ground, and I coughed up what felt like a gallon of blood.

I was right in front of the tank tracks, and the thing was still rolling.

Madalena grabbed my uninjured shoulder, and her thrusters lifted us off the ground. We landed on top of the tank, and I coughed out another spray of blood when she let go of me.

The pair of machine guns spun to target us, but her boot smashed into the right one, and the gun tore loose of its mount. I kicked the left one, but my legs were still tired from my sprint, and it took me two kicks to rip the thing free.

Madalena jumped back half a meter and aimed her rifle down at the hatch of the tank. Blue power poured out of it, and her beautiful face was lit with energy. The hatch began to melt under the heat of her pulse-bullets, but the weapon lost the glow in its barrel after four seconds, and she ejected her smoking magazine with a flick of her arm.

"I got it," I said as I forced my legs to push me up. My right shoulder and ribs were still all sorts of broken, but my left hand wrapped around the hatch handle.

I screamed, and pulled, and felt my muscles coil in my back, legs, stomach, and ass.

My vision began to cloud, and I could feel my muscles tear faster than I could heal them.

I pulled harder.

The hatch began to peel away, but the canon below us was pivoting back toward the tunnel where my friends hid.

Madalena's hands joined mine at the hatch handle, and she growled

alongside me. Her thrusters engaged, we yanked, we gasped, and the fucking lid peeled back like a sardine can.

I fell backward, and my body went numb. Madalena jumped into the hatch before I could stand back up, and I heard a half dozen screams echo from inside when she began firing her rifle.

“Drive it back to pick them up!” I shouted, but I guessed she already knew my plan since she tossed her rifle up through the hatch. It reached its apex at my chest, and I snatched it from the air with my left hand.

I spun around to the rear of the tank and shot her rifle at a distant group of cream armored guards. They were about two hundred meters away, and I was shooting the rifle single-handed, but my aim was still good enough to hit a few of them, and the rest dove for cover in one of the tunnels.

My right shoulder started to regain its strength and maneuverability, so I reached a now tingling hand up to the front grip of the weapon. My next salvo of energy bullets was more accurate, and even though I didn’t hit anyone, I’d hit the corner right where they took cover.

“Get on!” I yelled to my friends when Madalena stopped the tank in front of the tunnel for Dock G. I moved to help Eve get up on top of the tank, but some of the guards behind us leaned out from behind their cover, and I had to focus back on shooting them.

“I will cover,” Lux said as she landed next to me with enough force to shake the tank. The woman pointed her rifle at the guards and let out a long salvo of bullets.

I helped Eve up, and then we both helped the horde of women onto the tank. Zea, Kasta, and Paula were the last ones on, and Madalena started driving forward as soon as they were loaded.

“Nikki! We need to get out of here!” I shouted in my transponder. “Get in the pilot’s chair.”

“Where do you wish to go?” she asked, and I debated my options.

The most obvious was Nordar - 13 since I knew Madalena would need to resolve the issues with her father and take possession of her navy.

But I also knew she wanted me to finish Odin’s rite of passage.

Would she make me? I had no idea, but I did know that I needed to

spend some time with Eve, Zea, Paula, and Kasta. We needed to plan our next steps, and I wanted to touch base with Juliette.

“Queen’s Hat,” I said.

“Understood,” Nikki replied, and I saw her fall back from guarding Persephone’s dock. That left Milda there alone to defend the position, and guards were shooting at her. Calisto, Josefinna, and Mikhael were flying in that direction though, and I figured she could hold the spot for another five seconds.

The tank would have us there in twenty.

A salvo of bullets smashed into the side of the tank, and the group of slave women screamed. Lux and I spun to the starboard side, and we filled another group of guards with glowing blue bullets.

“Adam and Madalena, we have a group of four fighters circling toward us.” Nikki’s voice was calm, but I felt my heartbeat in double time.

“Defend using Persephone’s cannons. Call Hegeia, Uma, and Waioila to help you. They can shoot the cannons. Josefinna and Milda, return to the bridge and assist with the defense.”

“Yes, Adam,” the two women replied, and I saw them dart into the tunnel.

Fifteen seconds later, the tank shuddered to a stop in front of Dock C. My friends jumped off the machine and began helping the other slave women down. Madalena popped out of the hatch with a leap, and I handed her back her rifle. I reached behind my back for my trusty shotgun and then put a fist size hole in a drone some seventy meters away.

“Four more fighters approaching,” Nikki said. “First four are banking to fire.” The tunnel shook a second later, and the women from GUAAY - 23 - c screamed.

“Shields are at 94%. We can take a bit more of this, but I’d rather leave,” Nikki said.

“We are leaving,” I growled as I gestured for the women to run down the tube and into Persephone’s hold.

Lux and Madalena returned fire from on top of the tank, and then they jumped down to follow the rest of us into the hold. The Prime Valkyrie was

the last one through, and I hit the button to close the door.

“We are in! Get us out of here!”

“Standby,” Nikki said as Persephone shuddered from another salvo of enemy fire. “You all might want to buckle in.”

“Shit, we don’t have enough seats in the ho--” I started to say, but then Persephone leapt from the dock, and everyone fell on their ass, slid across the smooth floor of the hold, and smacked into the wall by the door. Even the Vaish were caught a bit off guard, and I found myself tangled up with Madalena.

“Nikki!” the Prime Valkyrie growled.

“Engaging hyperdrive,” the pilot replied, and then I felt the g-forces relax from my chest.

Everyone lay still for a few moments, and I felt satisfaction flow from Madalena and her people.

“Anyone hurt?” I asked as I stood and helped the Prime Valkyrie to her feet.

“I don’t think so,” Zea said as she helped Paula up. Everyone else was getting to their feet, and I wrapped my left arm around Eve’s slender shoulders. The dark-haired beauty leaned her head into the armor of my shoulder, and I beckoned for Zea to come to me.

The hacker stepped into my embrace again, and then I motioned for Kasta and Paula to come over. The five of us held each other for what felt like a minute without speaking, and I let the calmness of their love fill my chest. I shifted back into my human form, and then exhaustion threatened to bring me to my knees. Fortunately, my four friends were holding me upright.

Madalena cleared her throat behind me, and I could feel her mix of jealousy, fear, and pride. The last emotion was a bit of a puzzle, but I realized the Viking woman liked that all these other women were in love with me.

“Hello, Madalena,” Eve said as my friends let go of our embrace.

“Hello, Eve,” The brunette said. “I am glad we are meeting.”

“Hmm,” the vampire said. The two women stared at each other for a few moments, and my other three friends glanced at them with some confusion.

“Uhh. Who is this?” Zea finally asked me.

“This is Madalena,” I said. “She and her crew have helped me save you all.”

“She is also Adam’s wife,” Eve said, and I felt my stomach sink. I had kind of hoped to break the news to Zea a little gentler.

“His what?” Zea gasped as she turned to me.

“It’s a long story,” I said as I rubbed my fingers over my tired face.

“Uhhh. That sounds like a short story, actually. How long have we been in hyperdrive?” Zea asked Kasta.

“Eighteen days,” the android answered.

“It took you eighteen days to--” Zea’s voice was getting louder, and there was no disguising the hurt there.

“The three of us will talk,” Eve interrupted Zea and placed her hand on her shoulder.

“Yeah. That’s what we are doing right now--”

“No,” Eve interrupted Zea. “The three of us.” The vampire pointed to Madalena. “Adam has been through hell to save us, and the marriage wasn’t his idea.”

“Huh?” Zea asked as she turned toward Madalena.

“I will explain,” the brunette said.

“Yes, you will,” Eve said, and her red eyes narrowed.

“I do not like your tone, Eve,” Madalena said, and the tension in the hold became thick.

“I care not for your opinions, Prime Valkyrie. I care what you did to my man.”

“What the fuck is a Prime--” Zea began to ask.

“He is mine now,” Madalena growled. The Vaish had all removed their armor, but they still held their rifles, and I saw their grips tighten.

“Hey, hey,” I said as I stepped between Eve and Madalena. “We are all friends here. We have a common enemy. Madalena and I have spoken, and--”

“I will speak with her while you rest,” Eve said.

“Fine. I look forward to it,” Madalena said, and she made a small gesture with her hand. Her warriors relaxed their grips on their rifles, and the tension between us eased.

But it sure as hell didn’t go away.

“We need to find a place for all these women we have helped,” I said as I pointed to the slaves we had just rescued.

“That is not your problem right now, my love,” Eve said. “You are exhausted, and must rest.”

“Yeah. Okay,” I said as a bit of the tension faded from my shoulders.

“Zea, will you come with us?” Eve asked as she wrapped her hand around my arm.

“Uhhh, yeah,” the blonde hacker said. Then she turned to Paula and Kasta. “You two okay to--”

“Yeah, yeah, go,” Paula said. “We’ll get to know our new friends... and stuff.”

Zea grabbed onto my other arm, and I walked with them toward the elevator. I turned my head a bit to look at Madalena, and her prevailing emotion was jealousy.

“Listen, about Madalena,” I started to say as we stepped into the elevator.

“I am not happy with her,” Eve said.

“I’m like, really fucking confused about all of this,” Zea said.

“She forced Adam to marry her,” Eve hissed.

“Uhh. How does anyone force Adam to do anything?” the blonde woman asked as she looked at the both of us.

“It really is a long story,” I said.

“And you need to rest,” Eve said. “Your memories overwhelm me. Perhaps that is why I am so angry with the woman. Zea and I will put you to bed and then have our time with her.”

“She’s fine,” I said. “I don’t agree with the marriage, but she really has

helped me, and we are both fighting the SAVO.”

“They know about the SAVO assholes?” Zea asked.

“Yeah. They are trying to fight them,” I replied as the elevator opened.

“She is arrogant and thinks you will cast us aside once you have enjoyed her body.”

“So you haven’t slept with her?” Zea said.

“No!” I hissed.

“I’m just asking. She’s really fucking hot.” Zea smirked.

“She will explain herself to Zea and me, and then we will teach her of her place,” Eve said.

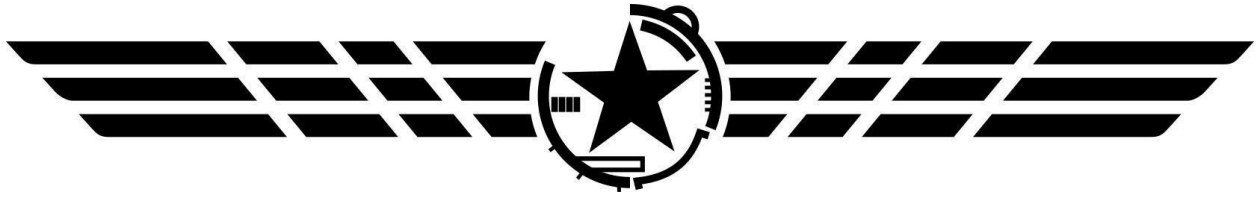
“Uhhh. Place?” I asked, and I wondered if Eve knew what she was getting into with Madalena.

“Yes,” Eve replied, but the look in her eyes convinced me that I needed to leave it alone.

We walked the rest of the way to my room in silence, and then the three of us were kissing, touching, and pulling off my armor. Then we were in my bed, and even though I was beyond exhausted, I had eighteen days to make up for.

And I planned to make up for each and every one of them.

End of book 6



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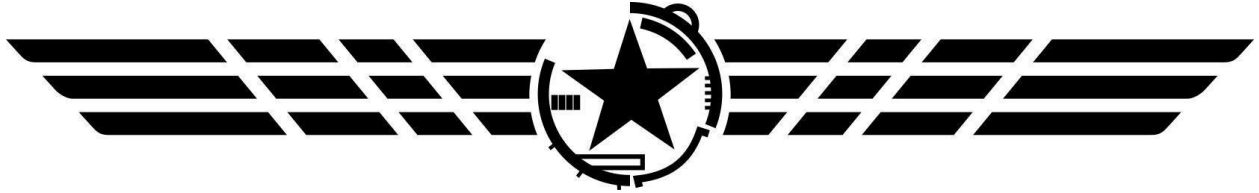
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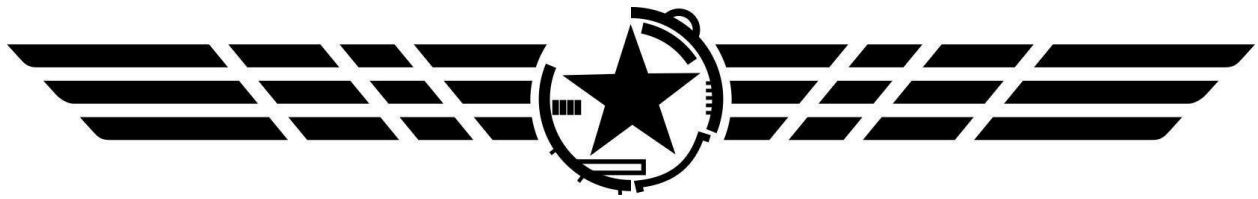
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Chapter 1

When I woke up, it seemed as if I was crawling out of a grave. Every time I reached out to clear away the darkness I just scooped dirt into my open mouth. I choked on it, and tried to scream, but then I realized that I couldn't breathe. Panic pushed against my chest heavier than the weight of the dirt piled on top of me. Finally, my hands managed to push through the black, and my head emerged from the darkness of my bed.

I was confused though, because I wasn't in my bed, or in a grave, I was pouring out of a dark cylinder, and what I thought was dirt and darkness was endless liters of blood.

I coughed with disgust and felt my stomach heave. Vomit poured out of my mouth and carried whatever blood I had swallowed onto the black tile at my feet. I was covered with the ichor, and my nose was filled with the stench of copper.

What the fuck?

The last thing I could remember was making love to Zea and Eve. I'd been a bit exhausted, but I'd still had enough energy to keep up with them for an hour or so. Then we fell asleep in one contented knot of limbs on our bed. Had something happened? Was this a dream? The thoughts angered me, and I glanced around my surroundings for my lovers.

I was in one of the dark super powered asshole overlord, or SAVO as Zea liked to say, temples, and I turned back to the cylinder that had been my prison. It looked just like the one I saw on Uraniel, and I wondered why I came out of it.

I glanced down at my hands and then attempted to wipe some of the blood from my arms. My skin was a pale white underneath the layer of blood as if I was one of the fuckers we were trying to kill. The sight was more than unsettling, and I got to my feet while I tried to wipe the rest of the red liquid

off my skin. It felt as if it was made out of oil, and it wasn't coming off as easily as I wanted.

"Ooaaa gahhh," A voice spoke from behind me, and I spun around to see a dark woman standing beside the stone cylinder I had just emerged from. Her features were beautiful, and they reminded me of Eve. Her hair was black like obsidian, flowed down to her lower back, and was styled in the same way as my lover's. She wore a tight black bodysuit that looked similar to the ones we wore on Persephone, and her confident stance reminded me of my friend. Her face was pale, and her eyes were red, but that was where the resemblance between Eve and her ended. My lover's face was almost always about ready to break into a gentle smile, and her red eyes possessed a calming quality. This woman's features were sharp, and she glared at me with unmistakable malice.

"Oohh gahh?" she hissed what sounded like a question. One of her pale hands rested on the side of the cylinder, and her nails looked almost like claws.

"Where the fuck are my friends?" I demanded, and my fingers twitched to grab guns that weren't holstered on my hips.

"Gahhh. Ohh gahh," the woman took her hand off the cylinder and then stepped toward me. We were only a meter or so apart, so I shifted my legs into my accustomed fighting stance. I didn't feel the beast in my stomach, in my chest, or in my mind, and I wondered if she had done something to prevent me from shifting.

She stepped closer to me, and I raised my fists to attack her, the SAVO woman didn't engage me though. Instead, she moved to the side of me and then walked past. I turned to her and was about to knock her head off with my elbow, but then she motioned for me to follow her.

"Gahhh?" she growled a guttural question as she turned to look over her shoulder at me. When I didn't move to follow her, she beckoned with a long pointer finger and then gestured in the direction that she had been walking. There was a large double doorway at the end of the temple, and I saw a starry night sky outside.

"My friends are out there?" I asked, and the woman nodded before she turned to walk away from me.

She moved about three meters before I followed her. As I walked, I kept my eyes on the various columns lining the sides of the temple. The pulsing red lights from the ceiling actually did little to penetrate the darkness beyond the columns, and I expected all kinds of fuckers to jump out and ambush me at any minute.

The woman in the suit seemed to be ignoring me, and she didn't turn back to look at me until she had stepped out of the temple. I was still quite a bit behind her, and her eyes narrowed a little.

"Ohh gahhh," she said as she pointed off in the distance. I stepped into the doorway of the temple so that I was as far away from her as I could get, and then I looked to where the SAVO woman pointed.

It was dark outside since the only light came from the stars. My improved eyes worked fine in the lower light, and I could see a grassy slope leading down from the door of the temple. At the bottom of the slope was what looked like an endless throng of people. They knelt before us with their arms raised over their heads as if they were giving praise.

There were too many people to count, and the even lines where they kneeled seemed to stretch to infinity in all directions. At the front lines, I saw Eve, Zea, Paula, Kasta, Madalena, and Juliette kneeling, but their eyes weren't fixed on me. They were just staring straight ahead as if they were in a daze.

"Eye yah!" I heard a shout sound above me, and I looked up to the top of the temple. There was a winged woman perched on the tallest spire, and my mind spun from the familiarity of her silver-gold hair, black wings, and beautiful face.

"Eye yahhhh!" she shouted again as she gestured to the dark woman standing beside me.

"Arrrg gahhh," the SAVO woman's hand was suddenly wrapped around my bicep, and her nails dug into my skin. She was still looking up at the dark-winged angel on top of the temple, and it felt like she was trying to pull me toward the throng of people.

"Eye yah!" the winged woman shouted again, and then I realized who she was.

"Persephone!" I shouted.

“Ohh gahh,” the woman tugging on my arm growled, and I turned to meet her eyes. She was obviously angry, but her anger seemed directed at the winged woman.

“Fuck you,” I spat at her half a moment before my left fist smashed into her face.

The SAVO woman’s claws tore a chunk out of my bicep as she stumbled away from me. She hadn’t expected me to punch her, and so my fist broke her nose with a crisp snapping sound. She fell to the grass, rolled backward, and then sprung up to her feet with a graceful pounce.

“Gahhhh!” she snarled as she wiped the blood from her nose with the back of her hand. She hunched over into more of a fighting stance, and her eyes began to glow with an evil light.

“Eye yah!” Persephone said, and then I heard her wings flap. I didn’t have time to look at where she was going because the vampire woman snarled and darted toward me.

Her left hand arched out in a sweeping movement, and I stepped out of the way. She was fast, and her nails looked long and sharp, but I’d expected her attack, so she missed me by a few centimeters.

I hopped toward her once her claws missed and punched downward with my right hand. My fist hit her in the left cheek, and she spun away. I had thought that the attack would have knocked her unconscious, or laid her out, but she used the momentum of my hit to spin around and slice at me with the claws of her right hand. I managed to get my arms up in time to block, but her nails ripped across my forearms as if they were razor blades, and I gasped as blood sprung from the wounds.

She followed up her spinning strike with another cut from her left hand, but I was quick enough to get out of the way of this one. I kicked out with my left leg as soon as she’d missed her slash, and my foot caught her in the knee. Unlike her face, her knee felt like it was made out of stone.

But it still crumbled beneath my foot, and she screamed in agony as her leg broke.

I stepped forward to close the bit of distance between us and tried to elbow her in the face. She raised her arm in time though, and then her claws tore into my flesh at the elbow. A scream escaped my mouth, and I brought

my left arm around to punch her low on the body.

The vampire woman grunted when I hit her in the stomach, but my knuckles broke against her abs. My fist healed almost instantly, but her body felt like it wasn't flesh anymore, so I wrapped my hands around her wrists so she couldn't sink her claws into me.

She was strong, and it took all of my strength to hold onto her while she tried to twist her arms away from me. After she had made two more aborted attempts, she pushed into me, and then tried to bite me on the arm. I was ready for the move, however, and I let go of the arm so that she fell forward a bit farther than she had expected. Next, I brought my elbow down on the back of her skull, drove her head into the grass at our feet, and then dropped a knee into the small part of her back.

She coughed out a scream against the grass and tried to wiggle free of me, but my fists were already smashing into the back of her head. She stopped thrashing when my third punch broke open her skull, but I didn't stop punching her until her brains coated my fists like lumpy spaghetti sauce.

I stood from her body and looked to Persephone. She landed a meter or so from me and gave me the kind of smile that reminded me I was naked. The dark angel was wearing a black lace bodysuit with a lower skirt part that looked to only be attached to the upper suit in a few places. I opened my arms for her, and our lips devoured each other's as if we hadn't eaten in weeks.

It was as if I was in heaven. She wrapped around me like a second skin, and I could feel her endless warmth lull me into a place of contentment. I didn't want to be anywhere else but here, connected to her.

"Eye yahhhh," she moaned when we parted and looked toward the endless crowd of people.

"Ahh shit," I cursed as I pulled my arms from around Persephone. I had forgotten about my friends for a few moments, and I ran down the hill toward them. They were still kneeling, and I felt dread fill my stomach as the distance between us grew smaller.

They weren't even looking at me run toward them.

"Hey! I'm here!" I shouted ten or so meters before I made it to them. They still didn't move, though, and my eyes swept across the line of people. My heart jumped in my throat when I saw who was kneeling next to

Madalena.

My sister and mother.

“Sis! Mom!” I shouted as I sprinted to them. They were both wearing the simple white outfits the endless crowd wore, and their faces were staring into space as if they were in a daze.

“I’m here! Hey, what’s wrong with you?” I grabbed my sister’s shoulder and started to shake her. Her body flopped around as if she had no strength, and she fell down on the grass when I let go of her.

Then I saw the holes on her neck. They dripped blood down onto the collar of her white shirt, and I pulled her back onto her knees. I hadn’t remembered her skin as being so white, but it was almost the color of her shirt, and her mouth was now open.

Then she started screaming.

So did Mom.

So did my friends.

The sound struck me as an avalanche of terror-filled noise, and I pushed my palms up to my ears to try to mute the shrieks. It didn’t help. If anything, it felt as if the sounds of their screaming were coming from inside of my skull.

I fell to my knees and pushed my face into the long grass. I realized I was screaming along with the horde of people, and it felt as though I couldn’t stop.

The grass where I had pushed my face was wet and warm. I smelled and tasted the copper blood, and I raised my face from the ground with a gasp.

They are all dead.

Their throats were slit open with violent looking gashes, and my entire vision was filled with the sight of tens of thousands of dead people. The blood poured from them and dyed their white clothes a dark red. I turned away from the bodies of my sister and mother and looked to Madalena, Juliette, Kasta, Paula, Zea, and Eve. They are all dead, and even Kasta had red blood flowing from her throat.

Their dead eyes stared at me, and I could see their horror.

“Ohhh gahhh.”

I turned to look up the hill and saw that the SAVO woman was standing. She held Persephone against her, and the black-winged woman screamed as she tried to escape the other woman’s grasp.

“No!” I shouted as I sprinted back up the hill.

“Eye yah!” Persephone screamed, and the other woman began laughing. It was a dark, guttural sound that filled my chest with dread.

I glanced up as I ran and saw the SAVO woman staring down at me. Her eyes glowed an evil red, and she let out one last cackle.

Then she bit into Persephone’s perfect neck and tore a hand-sized chunk of flesh out.

“No!” I screamed as the winged woman reached up to her throat. The blood gushed out of it like a hose, and she let out a surprised gurgle. The SAVO bitch pushed her away, and Persephone fell to the ground in a heap of twitching black wings.

“You fucking bi--” I shouted as I slammed into the obsidian-haired woman. My hands tore at her face, and I willed myself to change into my tiger-man form.

But I couldn’t change.

I was one of them.

“Ohhh gaww,” the woman growled as our arms grabbed each other. I leaned to my left as we grappled and I tried to force her down to the grass where I could pummel her again.

I had never wanted to kill someone so much.

“Ohh gahhh,” she hissed, and Persephone’s blood dribbled out of her mouth.

“Fuck you! You killed them. I’ll kill you!” I had felt strong against her before, but I wasn’t able to force her down to the ground anymore. It seemed like I was trying to tackle a mountain.

“No, Adammmm,” she hissed as she smiled. “Youuuu kiiiilled theemmm.”

My heart skipped a beat, and my body went numb. I was frozen with

shock, and the woman used the opportunity to capture me with a bear hug. She looked too small to fit her arms around my chest, but she somehow did, and I could feel her start to squeeze the air out of my lungs.

“Your bitchesss dieddd tooo sssavve yooooouuu,” she growled through smiling teeth. “But now you are mine.”

Then the dark woman kissed my neck, and I could feel her teeth pierce my flesh with a mixture of agony and pleasure.

“Ahhhhhhhhh!” I screamed as I jumped out of her arms.

But her arms were really the sheets of my bed, and I was alone in my room.

“Fuck,” I sighed as I fought against the fear cascading down my spine.

I was covered in sweat, and the terror was causing my body to shiver as if I was back on Nordar - 13 - a.

I untangled myself from my sheets and let out a long sigh. That nightmare felt more than real, and the details of it were clear in my mind. I knew I often had dreams, but they became harder to remember once I woke up, so I did my best to try to commit the details of this one to my memory while I untangled myself from my sheets.

“Eye yahhh,” I heard a whisper in my ear as soon as the bed sheets were off my body, and I stopped my movement. I felt her breath in my ear, but I couldn’t smell anything besides the scent of Zea’s, Eve’s, and my passion.

“Persephone?” I asked without turning my head around to look behind me.

“Eye yah,” she whispered again, and I felt hands slide under my arms and circle my bare chest. Her touch caused the terror to leave my body, and my muscles instantly relaxed. I actually did slump backward, and her body pressed against the skin of my back.

I risked a look down to my chest and saw her arms around me. Her sleeves were made of the black lace material I recalled from the dream, and her smooth, creamy skin seemed to glow in the empty spaces of the fabric. Her fingers rested against my pectoral muscles, and I reached up with my own hands so I could cup hers. I expected her to disappear as soon as I

touched her, and I let out a short exhale of surprise when I felt her skin beneath my palms.

“It was a nightmare,” I said since I didn’t know what else to say.

“Eye yah,” she said, but I couldn’t tell if that was her agreeing or disagreeing with me.

“It wasn’t that crazy bitch trying to send me a message, was it?” I asked.

I felt Persephone’s head lean against the back part of my neck, and she sighed.

“How do they know about me?” I asked, but Persephone just squeezed me tighter.

“How do they--” I turned to my bed to ask her, but her hands disappeared from under mine, and the feeling of her head against my neck was instantly gone. I didn’t see anyone behind me in my bed, nor did I see any pressure on the mattress where she would have kneeled to hold me.

“It would be a lot easier if you weren’t so bashful,” I snickered as I got up from my bed and walked to my bathroom. I had no idea how long I’d been asleep, but I was in desperate need of a shower, and it only took half a moment to get the water to the exact temperature I wanted.

I replayed the dream in my head a half dozen times as I tried to puzzle through its meaning. Finally, I made a note to talk to Eve about it. She would probably be able to decipher a meaning from it. Even if she couldn’t see the beautiful woman Eve would probably know how to relieve my fears. The words the SAVO said bothered me, but that could have just been my own subconscious mind trying to warn me.

Instead, I thought of Zea and Eve. The memories of our last bout of lovemaking pushed my nightmare to the back of my mind, and I spent the remainder of my time in the shower recalling all the pleasure we had given each other. I was beyond grateful to see them again, and I ensured they each knew of that fact six or so times.

I finished washing, hit the air dryer button, and then brushed my teeth. Madalena’s personal possessions were still set next to the other sink, and I wondered if Eve, Zea, and the Vaish woman had talked through things yet. I also wondered if Eve and Madalena had felt my emotions during my dream.

Guess I would find out soon.

I walked back into my room naked and then walked to my closet. Madalena's clothes were still hanging on the opposite side of the small room, but I also saw a bunch of smaller space suits and a few pairs of Zea's outfits hanging. There was a clear space of division between the three sets of clothes, and I realized my mouth was hanging open. Were Zea and Eve okay with Madalena? I imagined that if they weren't the Prime Valkyrie's clothes would have been removed.

I put on my flight suit, and then moved back into my room. I didn't see my pistols or revolver on the chair where I normally tossed them, so I guessed someone had placed them back in the armory. I thought about double checking my room again, but I realized I was stalling, and I walked out into the hallway that led to the elevator and bridge.

There was no one in the bridge by the map and gunner's stations, but I found Nikki, Mikhael, and Josefinna sitting in the three pilot seats up front. They stood at attention when they saw me, and I gave them a nod.

"Greetings, my lord," they said in unison.

"Hey guys," I replied. "Where is everyone?"

"The Prime Valkyrie gave us leave while we were in hyperdrive," Mikhael answered.

"How long until we are out?" I asked.

"Another forty-five minutes," Nikki said.

"Huh, I've been asleep for that long?" I did the math in my head and figured I had to of been asleep for at least thirty hours.

"Yes, my lord," Mikhael answered.

"I'm surprised no one tried to wake me."

"Eve told us not to, my lord," Mikhael said.

"Look, guys, you can call me Adam or Captain. You don't need to use 'my lord.' It just makes me feel like an asshole."

"Okay, Adam," Mikhael said, and I wondered if the man was warming up to me.

"Do you know where Eve, or Zea, or Paula, or Kasta is?" I asked.

“The twin women are in the hold working with the thrall- I mean Hegeia, Uma, and Waiola.” Mikhael replied.

“The Prime Valkyrie, Zea, and Eve are in the galley,” Josefinna said, and I felt a bit of nervousness flow from the three of them. It was a faint sensation, and I realized I already knew where Madalena was; I could feel her in the ship.

“What’s wrong?” I asked them.

“Nothing, Captain,” Josefinna said, but I guessed what the problem was as soon as the words left her mouth.

“You all don’t need to worry about Eve,” I said. “She isn’t like the Draugr. She’s kind, honest, and respects others.

“Yes, Captain,” Josefinna said with a nod, but I knew I hadn’t quite reassured her. It was a bit odd to know that these Vaish warriors were afraid of Eve, but the woman was incredibly powerful, and she could read minds, so it made sense.

“I’ll go talk to them,” I said, and the three Nordar warriors nodded at me before they returned to their pilot seats.

I walked to the elevator and took it to the second floor. Then I made my way to the galley. I found the three women sitting at the main dining room table, and they smiled at me when I walked in.

“Hey,” I said as I grinned at the three women. They sat in the far corner of the table, and there was a bottle of wine opened along with three glasses, so I guessed they must have worked out their differences.

But when I saw the expressions on their faces, I knew that my guess was wrong.

“Hey, Kitty Boy,” Zea said as the three women stood to greet me, “we were just talking.” Zea turned to Eve.

“Yes,” Eve frowned a bit and gestured for me to sit at the table.

“I will get you a glass, my lord,” Madalena said as she stepped toward the cabinet on the far side of the kitchen.

“No, I can grab--” Zea started to say, but Madalena was already in the kitchen, and she pulled a glass and another bottle of wine from the storage cabinets.

“I can make an educated guess about the topic of your conversation,” I said as I took the glass from Madalena. The Prime Valkyrie was wearing her tight black uniform, and my two lovers were wearing Persephone’s gray and black flight suits. I realized that my heart was hammering in my chest, and I sat down while Madalena poured me a glass of wine.

“Are you hungry, my lord? I will make you breakfast,” Madalena said after she finished pouring me wine.

“Arrrgh,” Zea moaned as she rolled her eyes. “Cut it out with the bullshit, Madalena.”

“It is not bullshit, Zea,” the Vaish woman crossed her arms over her chest, and her cold eyes narrowed at the hacker.

“Uhh, yeah, it is. We’ve been going around in fucking circles for like two days. Adam isn’t your lord. Just stop.”

“Let us hold our discussion for a few moments,” Eve said as she raised her hand to silence Madalena’s next words. “We were not there for him when he awoke, and now we are arguing over making him a meal.”

“I’m not--” Zea started to say, but Eve raised an eyebrow, and the blonde woman closed her mouth with a snap.

“All three of us love Adam, and he loves us. There is a solution to this, but first, Adam should eat.”

“I’m fine,” I said. “I want to work this out with the three of you.”

“Wait,” Zea said as she raised her hand. “Eve, you keep saying that Adam loves Madalena, but I don’t believe you. Here he is.” The blonde woman turned to me and then gestured with both of her hands to the Prime Valkyrie. “Do you really love her?”

“He doesn’t have a choice,” Eve said. “I told you their bond is--”

“I don’t fucking believe that!” Zea shouted as she slapped her hand down on the table. “Adam, tell me this isn’t true.”

The three women turned to me.

Do not lie to her. It will hurt her worse later. I have been trying to help her come to terms with this, but Madalena is not very helpful.

“Hey!” Zea hissed as she looked to Eve. “I can tell when you two are

talking to each other. Stop it. Let him tell me.”

“Zea,” I said. “I love you, and Eve.” This wasn’t the conversation I wanted to have right when I woke up, and I took a small sip of wine in an attempt to loosen the tightness in my throat.

“Yeah,” Zea said as she shook her head. “I know that. So what about her?”

“I haven’t figured it out yet,” I admitted as I turned to Madalena. The brunette met my eyes, and I could feel her love pour from her body and wrap around me.

I turned back to Zea quickly.

“So... uh... two women isn’t enough for you?” the hacker asked as she crossed her arms. “Fuck it, we should just ask Paula and Kasta to jump into bed with us too. How about Juliette? We are going to Queen’s Hat and I know she wants to fuck you. And those three Swedish meatballs? What are their names? Hega, Uma, and Wailee or something? They are pretty, and when they talk about you, they all get this dreamy look in their eyes, especially the blonde one. Ugh.”

“Zea, this is not Adam’s fault,” Eve said.

“Yeah, it’s her fault,” Zea said as she pointed across the table at Madalena.

“I have apologized,” Madalena said. “I did not know Adam was--”

“You did not ask,” Eve interrupted her.

“I do not need to ask. I am the Prime Valkyrie. I wanted your man, and now he is mine.” Madalena’s words were sudden, and both Zea and Eve’s eyes opened wide.

“Hey, I can’t help but feel that the three of you were having a civil discussion before I walked in here.” I stood from the table and stepped between the dark-haired women.

“We were, but now we are not,” Madalena said. “I will make you breakfast, Adam. These two can leave, or they can stay and observe how a wife takes care of her husband.”

“You haughty bitch,” Zea growled. “You aren’t married to him--”

“Wait,” Eve held up her hand, and the blonde woman closed her mouth. “We have gone around in circles while Adam has been sleeping and not reached a resolution.”

“There isn’t a resolution which doesn’t involve her leaving. Her and her fucking crew.” Zea’s jaw tensed after she finished speaking, and her blue eyes bore twin lasers into Madalena.

“Do you want that?” Eve asked. “We are on the same side, and Madalena rules a kingdom with thousands of starships in their navy.”

“She’s not doing a lot of kingdom ruling while she cooks Adam breakfast,” Zea sighed. “I just can’t believe you are fine with this, Eve.”

“I am not,” the vampire said as she turned toward the Prime Valkyrie. “Especially since I can read Madalena’s thoughts.”

“You do not need to use your magic on me, Eve. I have been honest with you.”

“Yes, you have. That is why you are still alive.” Eve’s eyes seemed to glow a bit, and I felt anger roll off Madalena.

“You are still alive because Adam has told me he loves you, and I obey my husband.”

“That’s enough,” I said as I put my hands on Madalena and Eve’s shoulders. The tension in the room was denser than sand, and it hadn’t seemed to be that way before I walked in. My presence definitely caused the women to begin bickering.

“I’m going to make myself breakfast, you three are going to go cool off somewhere else on the ship. Separately.”

“They can leave,” Madalena said. “I will prepare you a meal.”

“Uhh, he just sa--”

“No, Madalena,” I interrupted Zea’s snarky response. “I’ll eat alone. We’ll be out of hyperdrive in about half an hour. I want you all to meet me back on the bridge when we start warpdrive.”

“Let us go speak with Kasta and Paula,” Eve said to Zea.

“Yeah, whatever,” the hacker said. She shot Madalena a frown and then gave me a half smile. Then she walked with Eve to the kitchen exit.

They stopped a few feet from the doorway and then turned to face Madalena. The Prime Valkyrie crossed her arms and then looked to me. I could sense her conflicting emotions. It was jealousy, sadness, anger, and love in a tight knot.

“Look, Madalena, you have to go.” The tone of my voice was firm but no more than it needed to be.

“My place is by your side. If you do not want me, order me dead; it would be easier.” She walked away from me without saying another word.

Zea and Eve stepped aside so the Prime Valkyrie could exit.

“Did she just say what I thought she said?” Zea asked.

“Yes,” Eve replied. “Let us leave Adam alone for a bit.”

“The bitch is gone. We should just stay. I’ll fucking cook him some food.”

“No,” I said. “That’s fine, Zea. I told her to leave because you were leaving.”

“We will figure out how to get past this with Madalena, Adam,” Eve said. “She is a good person at the core. Just selfish.”

“And arrogant,” Zea said.

“And she’s my wife,” I said. “I won’t let her talk about either of you that way, so don’t talk about her like that.”

“Uhh, she’s not your wife, Kitty Boy; she forced herself on you.”

“But now we are married, forced or not,” I said with a sigh. “Look. Let’s just get to Queen’s Hat. I need some time to think about all this, and you three obviously need more time to talk to each other. I don’t intend to sleep with Madalena, but we can help each other. The woman is loyal to me, and she has a navy behind her. If we want to live through this battle with the SAVO, we are going to need her help.”

“You are right,” Eve said, and then she turned to Zea. “Shall we?”

“Ugh. Fine.” The blonde hacker took the vampire’s hand, and they each gave me a small wave before they walked from the galley.

I went to the fridge, grabbed a cut of steak, and threw it in a pan with some butter, salt, and pepper. I liked my meat as rare as possible, so I only let

each side sizzle for a few seconds before setting it on a plate.

“Adam, we are preparing to exit hyperdrive,” Nikki said over my transponder as soon as I started to cut into my meal.

“How long will we be in warpdrive before we reach Queen’s Hat?” I asked as I shoveled a large cut of steak into my mouth. It was just a bit warm in the middle, and my stomach roared with angst when my taste buds fired.

“Sixteen minutes,” she replied.

“Alright,” I said after I took a long drink of water. “Engage warpdrive as soon as we are out of hyper. Call the crew to the bridge. I’ll be there as soon as I finish eating.”

“Understood,” she said, and then the transponder beeped to let me know she had cut communications.

“Eye yahhhhh,” a voice whispered behind me. Her voice sounded concerned, and I spun around with surprise. Persephone wasn’t there of course, and I wondered if her words had been a warning.

Did she not want me to go to Queen’s Hat?

King Killer is out now! Get it here!

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