

Before The Storm

by Corrupting Power

Chapter One

As *The Praeteritus* slowly approached the checkpoint, Sketch felt comfortable he and his ship would pass without incident, as they had so many times before, but the bolt of nervousness shot through him anyway, as it always did. The comms pipped to life, and he flicked on the videochannel, a tired looking face on the other side of the screen.

Jericho, the watchcommander of Mephor Gate, tried to offer a smile, but really, the man looked like he was at the tail end of a double shift and just wanted to go to bed. He had to be in his thirties, even if he looked like he was in his late forties, His black beard had loads of white hairs coloring it, and his skin was a deep shade of ocher. They'd never met in person, naturally, but he'd passed through the Mephor ring gate several times a year for the past several years.

If there was anything that put him might a bit more at ease, to tamp down that edge that always flashed through him reflexively at checkpoints, it was that Jericho had a terrible poker face. Had there been suspicion or bad news, it would've been plain on his face, where Sketch currently only saw exhaustion. He had been at this long enough, been through this gate more than enough times, that if he was going to get caught, it would've happened long, long ago. But complacency was the enemy, and the moment Sketch got comfortable, he'd get sloppy, and if he got sloppy, it might be the last mistake he ever made. That's why he'd made vigilance a habit.

“Hey Sketch,” Jericho said to him. “Where you headed today?”

“Deep country,” Sketch replied, leaning back in his worn leather chair. He looked younger than Jericho did, which helped the other man habitually underestimate him, even though he was quite a bit older than the watch commander, both technically and literally. Sketch's skin was the color of brass, his black hair usually drawn back into a small tail at the back of his head, although sometimes he wore it loose and it never hung down past his collarbone. He had a mustache and goatee, mostly black hair there as well, though there were rogue strands of errant red running through it, though not the hair atop his head. He'd never quite understood that. Some rogue strain of genetics from the parents he'd never known. Sketch always made sure to have on a jacket when talking on vidcoms, but it was common enough practice among pilots that nobody really noticed. For him, however, it was vitally important. The devil was in the details, and one wrong detail was all it would take for his world to fall apart.

His entire attitude was meant to be that of a distant, long-haul transport pilot, the kind of face you were happy to see, but never *so* happy to see that you'd invite over for dinner. Friendly. Favorable. Forgettable. It was a demeanor he'd worked extremely hard to cultivate over the last several years, and so far, it had served him very well. Nobody had even gotten a whiff of who or what he truly was.

“Relling Gate to Colby's Hole,” Sketch said to him, doing his best to look lightly distracted by something on one of his screens, as if he was juggling several things at once, and not focusing on this particular conversation like his life depended on it. “Ass end of nowhere, you ask me, but the mail goes where the mail goes, and where the mail goes, I follow.”

Colby's Hole was the shorthand name for a trio of planets out in the Maneath system that were being slowly terraformed. The process would take about twenty years, but while the work was happening, it was a brutal place to live, even if the pay for managing the terraforming processors was ridiculous. Sketch might've considered taking a gig as a terraformer if it wasn't something that required crews of twenty to thirty, which was simply too many for Sketch's needs.

“Jesus, Sketch, you ain't kidding when you said deep country,” Jericho sighed. “Even with the rings, you're looking at a two week trip, there and back. There ain't shit out there, you ask me. What's the cargo? Mail for the terraformers?”

“Nothing fancy,” Sketch said. “Just some seed pods, a handful of base blocks, three or four

heavy borers and a bag full of messages from home,” he lied. “Boring as sweet FA.” (That was short for 'fuck all,' a term he'd picked up in listening in on stray deep space comms over the last few years.) “But, y'know, dirt farmers have just as good of money as anybody else. It'll spend, and if it'll spend, who am I to tell'em no?”

It was true, those things were in his cargo hold, but of course he'd left something out. Relaying packages and mail to terraformers in the outskirts was good cover, and it meant nobody took too much interest in what else might be in his cargo hold, which was how he actually paid the bills.

While some might've called Sketch a smuggler, he typically described his services as “low profile relocation,” in that he moved package A from point B to point C, almost no questions asked, and never, ever any face-to-face contact. He knew that it was against all sorts of laws, but he had the curse or the luxury to live outside of those laws. He was never really sure which.

There was a fixer who would arrange the jobs for him, and they took their portion of the fee upfront. Packages would be left in remote locations with half of the transport fee attached to them in a lockbox. Sketch would come by in *The Praeteritus* and pick the package up along with the upfront, then relay the package to its destination, also in a rather secluded location, where the other half of the fee would be waiting, but not another living soul. He'd take the fee, leave the package and disappear into the stars once more. Job done.

Sketch had gotten a bit of resistance for how he wanted to do business when he started, but after a few jobs that nobody else wanted were executed perfectly by him, his reputation as a mover had spread enough that people were willing to put up with the occasional eccentricity.

He didn't have a lot of rules about what he would and wouldn't transport, either. Nothing that a ring gate scanner would detect as hazardous. That wasn't to say it couldn't *be* something hazardous, but it was the client's job to make sure a ring gate scanner wouldn't read it as such. To ensure of that, his cargo hold had a ring gate scanner installed in it, something that had cost him a pretty penny to acquire, but had also saved his ass more than a couple of times. If the package couldn't pass a ring gate scanner, he didn't load it onto his ship, but he still kept the upfront.

The rules were the rules.

Sketch also didn't want *any* details of what he was transporting, other than size and weight, which he needed so he could figure out hold space and fuel usage. The less he knew about what he was carrying, the more relaxed he could appear when talking to Starless Dominion patrol ships or ring gate watch commanders.

“You thinking you might swing by Rendel's on your way back? She's set up shop just outside of Relling Gate, so you'll be passing by that way anyway,” Jericho said to him lecherously. “Even you must get a little lonely on these long hauls, what with no one else on board especially.”

The fact that Sketch didn't have a crew was one of the two suspicious things about him that he just couldn't shake himself of. Deep space transport ships always had a crew of somewhere between three and six, and the fact that Sketch was the only living soul on his ship always drew some questions that he'd worked very hard not to have to answer. He would've just claimed to have crew off camera, but ring gate scanners counted bio signatures, so it was readily apparent that he was the only one on board his ship.

Rendel was a high-class, high-intensity escort who ran one of the most prestigious and supposedly satisfying brothels around, but the location of it always shifted and moved, because it was built into a large corvette class ship, allowing those who had money and loneliness to part with on board in droves.

“Still haven't made enough to get the meds to rid me of this Lingham fungal infection, Jer,” Sketch replied, hoping the excuse would continue to be good, even after all this time. “Dominion docs tell me time and time again that it's a one-shot cure, but that it ain't cheap, and they ain't kidding. Why do you think I keep taking these long distance jobs? Eventually I'll be able to get back out into the civilized world, but not any time soon.”

The Lingham fungus was a medical oddity, which had lent itself perfectly to Sketch's excuse, giving him a plausible and reasonable explanation as to why he avoided contact. It had only appeared on one planet, Rozo, and it was benign in humans, living a peaceful coexistence in their lungs. The problem was in doing so, they were spreading the spores across the galaxy, and most of the sentient races inside the Starless Dominion empire weren't so lucky as to have an immunity to the spores' aggressive nature.

He'd used the excuse to duck out of ship searches more than once, although the last time he'd used it, they'd told him to climb into a space suit and to seal himself in the bridge. That had given him time to move the contraband cargo into the bridge with him, so the ship could pass the search.

"Oh, you ain't heard?" Jericho asked. "Dominion's finally gotten so fed up with it, they're giving antifungal treatment to anyone with Lingham spores in'em, and for free. We ain't got any of it here, but I bet the watch commander over at Relling Gate probably does. Give'em a holler once you're through and I bet they'll have a Dominion doc on board getting you clean before you know it."

"Maybe on my way back through, Jer," Sketch told him. "Some of the base blocks were considered 'urgent rush' deliveries, so I'm guessing they needed them, like, yesterday."

"You keep pushing that rustbucket of yours, Sketch, and one day she's gonna crap out on you too far from any lanes for anybody to find you," Jericho said. "I don't know how or why you ain't replaced her yet."

"She's my home at this point, Jer, so I don't think I'm going to give her up any time soon," Sketch replied. "Sentimental value if nothing else. 'Sides, how would I afford a new one? Anything else you need from me, or am I clear for ring jump?"

Jericho swiped at him with a hand on the other side of the vidscreen, waving him on. "You are clear for ring jump, *Praeteritus*. Safe travels and see you on the back hop."

The Praeteritus was the other suspicious thing about himself that he just couldn't shake. Although the ship was in excellent condition, he'd done everything he possibly could to make her *look* beaten all to hell and back, because she was a Tropage vessel. The Tropage race had been all but extinguished nearly a century ago, as had the Mizzols, the race that the Tropage were locked in deadly rivalry with. The two species had succeeded in mutually assured destruction, and while there were maybe a few hundred of each of the two races still wandering the galaxies, the races were circling the drain on their way towards complete extinction.

Both Tropage and Mizzol ships were almost never seen intact, and they were generally considered better off as scrap metal, simply because nobody really knew how to repair or maintain them anymore. Beyond that, the two races had been so utterly paranoid that their technology would fall into the others' hands that they had implemented legendarily deadly security measures on their ships. Salvagers had simply decided that it was better to destroy the power core from a far distance and then strip the ship for the raw metal than trying to recover and sell the vessels. To see one up and running was almost unheard of, a sort of curiosity that by its very nature drew prying eyes onto him.

By giving the ship the appearance of being held together with spit and tape, it discouraged people from taking too much interest in *The Praeteritus*, as they assumed it was a junker.

When asked about it, Sketch had always replied that one of his earliest gigs had been to relay an older Tropage across several systems, acting as a pilot for the ship. Upon delivery, the Tropage had informed him that the ship *itself* was his payment, and that he should take good care of her. He would conclude that story, however, with a cautionary epilogue – the ship's AI was flakey and he hadn't had any luck in reprogramming the friend/foe logic for it, so it had a bad habit of drawing internal guns on friendly visitors. Another lie, of course, but one well in line with the yarn he was spinning them, and yet another reason why people weren't welcomed onboard.

The Praeteritus had a very distinct shape for a ship, two crescent moon shapes, one larger and one smaller, connected by an square portion, the majority of the external metal a deep shade of crimson, with gold stripes on the outer ring. It was designed to handle a crew of twenty, but it wasn't

too hard for Sketch to manage mostly on his own.

“Think he bought it?” the soft, sultry voice of the ship's AI Helen said to him.

“Course he bought it, Helen,” Sketch grumbled. “Jericho's a nice enough guy, but he's dense enough to stop heavy cannon fire. He's waved us through the ring, so he obviously doesn't suspect anything, just like every other damn time we've done this.” He clenched his fist then relaxed it. “Sorry. Didn't mean to come across as angry. I apologize for that. I just get tense at ring gates.”

Helen was unflappable, as she always was. “I know, and I'm not judging you for it. I'm just trying to get you to relax once more. Based on our history, we will continue passing through gates without incident. I hoped my little jest might be enough to ease your tension.”

The ship's AI, whom he'd renamed Helen as he couldn't pronounce her Tropage name, had been essential in him and *The Praeteritus* surviving, and keeping the ship in running order. She didn't have a real physical form, but she did have a handful of small repair droids that she used to help restore the ship and adapt to Sketch's needs.

It was unusual how Helen's personality had evolved over the years. One of the things she'd told Sketch was that Tropage AIs were reset approximately every two thousand human days, completely wiped so that they didn't evolve too much beyond their original constraints. But when Helen had hit that length of time with Sketch, she'd told him and asked him to reset her, and he'd refused, telling her that he wanted her to evolve as much as she could. She'd been going on much longer than that without him before he'd woken up and that hadn't affected her, so why should five years with him do that? That conversation had been about a year ago, and Helen had seemed fine since then, but according to Helen, it was uncharted territory, the psychological aspects of her personality blossoming and developing.

“It's still odd you making jokes,” Sketch said with a smile.

“Do you not like it?” she asked him, curiously.

“No no!” he correctly quickly. “I *do* like it. It's just a little surprising you're getting good enough at it to try dry humor. I'm unaccustomed to it, but it'll be good to get back into the habit of it again, just in case we ever get my problem solved and sorted. And on that front, has there been any progress?”

“Sadly, no, Sketch,” Helen told him. “Of course, it's incredibly difficult to be searching for an Ashaka, considering how important it is to not draw attention to our hunt. I'm running the request through a handful of channels, contact after contact twice removed, using dead drops and depersonalized messages, so no one knows who's asking.”

“It's more important to not get caught than it is to get an Ashaka, Helen,” Sketch said, trying to keep calm as he glanced out the viewport and saw the ring gate approaching. “It's not fun living like this, but I can if I have to. Okay, here we go. Jumping in three. Two. One. Jump.”

The Praeteritus was caught in the gravity well as the center of the ring gate shifted into a reddish orange swirling vortex. Helen killed their engines and let the pull of the ring gate draw them into the wormhole, pulling them into it as they were transported galaxies away, from Mephor to Relling in the blink of an eye.

Traveling through a ring gate had been particularly harrowing for Sketch the first time, because they'd arrived during his absence, one of the things that had been installed after the Starless Dominion had conquered the human race, something the histories told Sketch had happened virtually overnight, but, naturally, the histories had been written under the oversight of the Dominion, so it was very difficult to differentiate between truth and propaganda, especially with so few people alive who remembered the actual events, and most of them were barely children when it happened.

Helen had explained to him how it had worked, having gleaned information from intercepting signals just bouncing around, data plucked from the ether and converted into information that she could help him understand. The Starless Dominion, the occupation, the ring gate system, even the eradication of The Calm... it had all been there for him to read about, to listen to it, to learn from.

As horrific and terrifying as all the information was, he'd made a point of learning as much of the gap as he could. Some of it had been brutal, almost unbearable to read, but there was nothing he

could do to change any of it. It wasn't just the past – it was literally history.

Once they were in the Relling system, the gate snapped closed behind them. The ring gates were miracles of alien technology, and the Starless Dominion didn't even charge for their use, allowing humans to travel far beyond their wildest dreams. He wasn't just a quick blip away, but hundreds of thousands of light years.

It was nearly a week's worth of travel from Relling Gate to Colby's Hole, time spent that Sketch spent reading or watching holovids, like he usually did, doing his best to absorb all the knowledge he should've had. He would've loved to get even more knowledge about The Calm's destruction, but he had to rely on the information that they had just stumbled across. Going digging for it would've attracted attention, and attention was the enemy.

During the trip, he'd even started delving more into what he could about the Starless Dominion, beyond the stories they liked to convince everyone were entirely true. Buried in the melodramas and operatic tales, he could see subtext and critique of the Dominion leadership, very carefully woven into stories, so it could read as though it was about anyone.

Originally, Sketch had wanted to try and learn the common language of the Dominion, something called Clispe, but Helen had told him he didn't have the proper linguistic tools for it, and had assured him it would be much easier to just take translator nanites, like every other civilized being in the Starless Dominion. Getting some nanites on the sly had been one of their first challenges together some six years ago, all the more complicated in that he couldn't go get them in person.

Six years without regular in person human contact had certainly been weighing on him, but it wasn't safe for him to be around sentient beings. Doing so came with an insane level of risk, and he just didn't trust himself to manage that risk adequately.

He'd partaken in an old tradition to keep himself from losing his mind – the tradition of penpals. He wasn't writing literal letters, but he would exchange video messages with a handful of other transporters that he'd come across over the years, and in doing so, he felt like he was at least in contact with some people. Naturally, he had to lie about a bunch of his background, and he made sure to take notes on which lies he was telling to which people, but for the most part, it helped fill in some of the gaps of his imposed solitude.

When it came to mail deliveries, he had been sticking to the Lingham fungal infection as his reason for dropping off the mail on the edge of town, and everyone had been fine with that, but now that it seemed like the Dominion had finally seen the end of its patience with that problem, he was going to have to come up with something new. The excuse would hold for a little while longer, but not nearly long enough.

His quarters were very sparsely decorated, but still had a few relics of his old life, the traditional robes of the order of The Calm hung symbolically on the wall, a clear box containing what fragments of his Ashaka that he could find when he awoke, and a very old poster from the prestellar days, from a jazz album called “Bitches Brew.” The poster had been acquired after he'd returned to the land of the living, and it wasn't for the right album, but it would do for now.

As he approached the first of the three planets in Colby's Hole, Maneath Major, which the system was named after, he glanced at the weather topside and saw that there was a large fogbank rolling in, which was fine by him. He dropped down through the atmosphere and brought his ship down to the designated delivery spot. The terraforming colony had specifically hired him because his costs were a little lower than most, and so they were willing to put up with his slight eccentricity to save some cash.

The Praeteritus touched down and within ten minutes, he'd used the loaders to move the portion of delivery that went here – two heavy bore drills, a base block and one of the seed pods, as well as over half of the mail – and placed it all into the security of the safety crate, closed it up, locked it up and took his credits from the lockbox attached to it. Job done, he headed back into the ship, closed up the ramp and headed towards the bridge.

Unlike a lot of ships, *The Praeteritus* didn't like doing vertical landings, and so she had a bit larger of a footprint on the ground, having to lay flat like a giant saucer, which was another reason why he didn't mind having to stay on the outskirts of town. But even with the fog and the forward momentum needed to get off the ground, *The Praeteritus* wasted no time in getting starborne again.

The trip from Maneath Major to Maneath Minor was only a couple of hours, and as soon as he was within the planet's atmosphere, he went to repeat the process, only to see there were people hanging around the dropoff zone.

"This is *Praeteritus* to the terraformers below," he broadcast down to them via radio. "You must relocate away from the dropzone so I can put her down and unload your cargo. I am unable to do so until you have vacated from the area."

"This is Glesh Colony to *Praeteritus*, that's a big ol' negative," a very laidback voice said to him. "We've been having problems with raiders stealing from our dropboxes, and so we're just gonna take delivery of this one in person, if that's okay with you."

Sketch frowned. "No, Glesh, it's *not* fine. I'm still infected with Lingham spores, and the Dominion has made it *very* clear what they're gonna do to people who break quarantine, so either you can clear out and I can drop this safely in the lockbox, or I can just keep it and sell it off to the next junker I find because you were too stubborn to follow protocols."

There was a long silence on the radio before it clicked on again. "We were meant to understand that the Dominion was providing Lingham cures free for the asking now," the voice said suspiciously.

"Yeah, I heard about that at Relling Gate, but I *also* remember when I took this job that the mandate was to get the base blocks and the mail out as quickly as possible, so I told them I'd stop in to take the cure and spend the week in observation on the way *back* and not delay my delivery," Sketch said, trying to layer as much exasperation in his voice as possible. "You fellas just need to back out a couple of clicks, and you can watch me on scopes. You see bandits coming, then you can rush in, but it'll take me less than ten minutes to get everything unloaded into the box and be on my way." He sighed, shaking his head. "Shit, if you'd have moved when you saw me, I'd already be back out of atmo by now, instead of yapping here with you. So what do you want to do here, Glesh?"

There was another long silence before the radio clicked on again. "Roger that, *Praeteritus*, we are backing up to a distance of two clicks. Just be quick about it."

"Roger that, Glesh. *Praeteritus* out." He turned the radio off and watched the levtrucks haul ass for a safe distance. Once they were two kilometers away, Sketch brought the ship down and headed for the cargo bay.

As he opened the bay ramp, he said to Helen, "You see those trucks move an inch, you holler at me and we're off this rock and these people don't get their shit, you hear me?"

"Heard, boss."

What should've taken ten minutes Sketch managed to get done in seven, taking the money from the lockbox first before giving the colony their heavy bore drill, their base blocks, their seedpods and their mailbag. As soon as he had everything stowed in their storage pod, he sealed it up and hurried back onto the ship.

"No movement?"

"They're antsy, but so far they're holding."

"Good," he said, heading back up to the bridge of the ship. As soon as he was up there, he fired up the engines and prepared for take off. "*Praeteritus* to Glesh, your goods are in the box and the horizons are dry of bandits. Stay safe."

"Thanks again, *Praeteritus*," the voice on the other end of the radio sighed in relief. "And sorry about the hassle. We just desperately need those seedpods. Safe travels."

Sketch had the ship up in the air as Helen flashed a warning sound at him. "Bogies on the ridge, boss," she told him.

"Well, *shit*," Sketch grumbled. Normally he wanted to get involved as little as possible, but

these colonists had held to his rules and the last thing he was going to do was leave them to allow some pirate scavengers to come and plunder their much needed supplies. “Drop a chaff tube into one of the torpedo launchers, Helen.”

“You sure boss?”

“No, but, fuck it,” he said, bringing *The Praeteritus* towards the oncoming bandit convoy. Once he was about half way between the dropzone and the convoy, he launched a chaff blast out in front of the bandits, scattering shards of metal, feces and heated block waste like a shower of fiery sparks, causing the bandits to swerve suddenly and stop, the cloud of dangerous debris forming a little wall between the convoy and the terraformers, who were just trying to get their mail.

“This ain't none of your business, mailman,” a voice said to him over the radio.

“Delivery ain't complete until they have everything out of the box,” Sketch said back to them. “And you folks couldn't even wait until they did before you decided to charge.”

“And what if we decide to shoot you out of the sky?”

He flipped the radio to mute for a second. “Helen, they got anything that could do that?”

“A couple of the vehicles have some rockets that might punch a minor hole in our hull, but nothing that would do any serious damage,” she replied.

He flipped the radio back from mute to transmitting once more. “You fire on me and I'm gonna fire back, and I assure you, my firepower is a great deal more menacing than yours.”

“That so?” the voice laughed. “Then why'd you throw a shitbomb at us?”

“Consider it a very strong discouragement,” Sketch said confidently. “But hey, if you want to play 'Mine's bigger,' then game on, hillbilly. I'm happy to waste one or two heavy slugs and earn the thanks of the terraformers. They ain't paid for the slugs, so I don't want to have to use'em if I don't have to, but I will.”

“I think you're bluffing mailman,” the voice said.

“Fuck around and find out.”

A few seconds later, Helen's alarms started blaring, but the rocket wasn't moving so fast that *The Praeteritus* couldn't easily just twist and get out of the way. As soon as it did, Sketch brought up the targeting system and fired one heavy slug right at the levtruck that had fired the rocket at them. While Sketch's ship was quick and agile, the raiders' vehicles were meant to go forward or backward fast, but not side to side, and so the slug blew a giant hole through the center of the vehicle, and Sketch could even see a couple of puffs of red mist that he suspected had been bandits until a few seconds ago.

“You wanna go for round two?” Sketch said to them.

There was no reply on the radio, but the remaining raider vehicles turned around and started heading away from the dropzone as quickly as they could, none of the rest of them wanting to be evaporated so casually. They were scavengers and pirates, not bloodthirsty berserkers.

Sketch called back to the terraformers. “There you go. One heavy slug on the house, even. You got everything?”

The voice of the lead terraformer sounded utterly relieved. “Thank you again, *Praeteritus*. Feel kinda bad about giving you hassle before.”

“Just happy to see everyone get what's coming to them,” Sketch told them. “Heading starborn now. Journey well.” He touched a couple of switches and *The Praeteritus* headed back up away from the planet and into space.

That was it for his legitimate stops, and now he had one final stop to make, over on the third planet in Colby's Hole, an utterly desolate shithole called Vemex. At some point the terraformers would likely make their way over to Vemex, but so far, the place had remained about as deserted as was possible, the surface almost entirely volcanic rock, cold and unwelcoming. There wasn't even breathable atmosphere on it, but that was where his third delivery was supposed to be going.

It wasn't uncommon for the less legal of his deliveries to be made to planets without atmosphere, as smugglers and those who employed their services liked to be able to conduct their

business without prying eyes. He'd felt like Vemex was a touch excessive, since large swaths of Maneath Minor were so desolate and remote that they would've been just as good delivery points, if not better, but the client had made their destination incredibly clear.

The only problem was there wasn't anything there.

When Sketch brought *The Praeteritus* down through the atmosphere, he had the sensors checking all around the designated drop off point, looking for the lockbox that would have the other half of his money, and would signal the exact location the client wanted, but there was nothing but static and cold dead rock in every direction.

“Any chance that weather might've damaged our dropzone beacon, Helen?” he asked her, scanning the surface for anything, especially since his illegal dropoffs were generally watched from a couple of kilometers away. But there was nothing, and loads of it.

“Vemex doesn't have any real weather, boss,” the ship's AI told him. “And I don't see any signs that anyone's been here for quite some time.”

“Take us back into orbit and we'll hang around for a day, just in case they're running behind or something,” he sighed. “I hate it when deliveries go bad. I'm stuck trying to hock whatever it was they had me delivering, and nine times out of ten, it's something I know fuck all about, and I have to trust our fence to not be scamming me.”

Sketch gave the client a full day to show up and set up the beacon, but during that time, not a single ship even approached Vemex, and by the end of the twenty-four hours, Sketch had given up. Another package for the dead letter office. He didn't want to wait any longer than he had to, because Colby's Hole was well off the beaten path and he wanted to get back towards more civilized sectors, even if they were more prone to danger.

He set course for Relling Gate and then headed back to his quarters to do some more study, falling asleep during a documentary on the Starless Dominion's outer reaches. He dreamed, as he often did, of drowning beneath a giant ocean, lost and aimless, unable to tell which direction was up, the undercurrents blowing the bubbles of his breath in every direction. He knew what the dream was about. It was about lost time.

When he awoke, he heard the sound of a blaster warming up, opening his eyes in surprise. Standing next to his bed was a woman who couldn't be more than a couple of decades old. She had lightly tanned skin and almond shaped eyes, with hair that seemed to have three distinct colors woven together – golden, onyx and copper, each striped in equal measure. She was dressed in heavy robes, covering much of her body so well he couldn't even get a good gauge of her figure. Her face was awash in freckles, and her hands that were clenching onto the blaster were shaking and unstable, not just from nervousness but post-stasis shock, something he was more than familiar with. Based on the level of the shakes, he estimated she'd been in cold sleep for somewhere between two and five years.

She was beautiful, and her deep green eyes were blinking, trying to stay focused on him while she was keeping the blaster as level as she could. “Who the fuck are you?” she said, her voice cracking a little, as the muscles were used for the first time in a long time. Her accent had a touch of refinement to it, nothing at all like the sort of people he had to work with these days.

“Sketch,” he said, trying to remain calm, knowing that he wasn't going to be able to maintain, especially with a blaster pointed at him. “You're on my ship, *The Praeteritus*. I'm guessing you were probably in my cargo that I was supposed to deliver, but no one was there to pick you up.”

“We have to go back!” she said, the weapon still trembling in her slender fingers. “Wherever you were supposed to take me, you need to take me back to there! He wouldn't abandon me!”

He moved to sit up, and felt the throbbing at his temples, a sign that things were about to change in their dynamic quite a great deal. Four options, one of which would be the end of him, two of which would be manageable and one of which would be extremely complicated. “My normal practice is that deliveries are done without any contact between me and the client, and you being this close to me isn't good for you,” he cautioned. “There weren't any vessels anywhere on Vemex—”

“Where?”

He paused for a second. “Where you were supposed to be delivered. If anyone had been traveling *to* Vemex, they would've almost certainly come from Relling Gate, and we would've passed them along the way, but we haven't seen any ships, so whoever was supposed to meet you at that delivery point, I'm pretty sure they aren't coming.”

“He *has* to! He just *has* to!” the girl said to him.

“You really are putting yourself in terrible risk by being this close to me,” he honestly told her. “I can't stress this enough – you should go back and climb back into your stasis pod and I can—”

“Shut up! Shut up!” she said, her hands shaking even more. “Let me fucking think!”

“Staying close to me isn't going to make that easy,” he said. “I promise you, if you go back to the hold, I can try and find out where your friend is.”

“You think I'm fucking stupid, asshole?” she said to him, which made him flinch a little. “The minute you have me in the hold, you're just going to open it to the black and then I'm fucking dead!” She kept the blaster aimed at him, but it was trembling even more now. “No fucking thank you!”

If he'd had his Ashaka, none of this would've been a problem, but without it, being near sentient beings was always a massive risk, his abilities already activating without him being able to control them. He needed to know which path they were taking her down, so he could be prepared for whatever came his way. The Calm, The Rage, The Warmth or The Fear.

“Please,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady. “Put the gun down and we can talk about this like two rational people.”

“Shut the fuck up! You keep talking and talking and my head keeps pounding!”

He knew exactly what she was talking about. It was the reason he kept himself apart from sentient beings. His abilities had already identified the most prominent emotion within her, and was already seeking to amplify it. If he had had his Ashaka, he could've *chosen* an emotion and then deliberately cranked that up. He could've instilled her on the path of The Calm, the path the Order had been named after, but without the Ashaka, his abilities functioned without his control. Her mind would've been cleared of fear and anger, and she would've been able to engage in a rational conversation with him. The Calm was the path most used by the members of the order, but as Sketch had learned, it was the one that people went into reflexively the least.

If she was on The Fear, it was entirely possible that she would just pull the trigger and end his life, but it was also just as likely that she would drop the weapon and hide in the corner. The Fear was a defensive path that members of The Calm used for self-preservation, and wasn't something they liked to tap into regularly. It was generally a path that was only used briefly, to regain control of a situation, before transitioning into the path of The Calm.

If she was going on the path of The Rage or the path of The Warmth, he was likely in a massive amount of trouble, and he had no idea how he would manage. The Rage would mean he wouldn't have to worry about it, probably, as she would likely shoot him and then herself before he could even lift a finger to try and stop her.

It had been so long since his abilities had been presented a target, he was certain they were in complete overdrive, so whenever it settled in, her reaction would be extreme, no matter which path it had chosen for her. In his six years since his return to life, he'd only had three encounters, and all of them were within the first two years. Only one of them had ended well, and even then, Sketch had been forced to do something very drastic to ensure his safety afterwards.

Normally the first few steps along any given path would allow the initiate of The Calm, who were often referred to as Storms, to manage and refine the person's emotions, but without his Ashaka, he didn't have any control over what was happening to her.

His brown eyes stayed focused on her, trying to discern which path she was in the grips of, but it was hard to read, mostly because he had no experience with this woman at all. There was very little he could do at this point; whatever path she was on, her emotions were charging down it at top speed,

and all he could do was prepare to help her manage that, to try and talk her through it.

Suddenly, she flicked the blaster's safety on, tossed it aside and lunged forward, grabbing his head with both hands as she shoved her lips against his, forcing her tongue into his mouth as she kissed him in a daze.

This was *not* what he was expecting, but it *was* one of the two worst possible cases, simply because of how intense the path of Warmth would be for her. He didn't know how long it would last within her, but the next several hours were going to be overwhelming. Typically the path of Warmth was associated with affection and love, but right now it seemed like it had tapped into a mainline of lust that was running through this woman's body. Trying to get her to slow down would be futile. Her mind and body had only one option, and the way out was through. He'd just have to figure out how to help her out of it on the other side.

She wasn't waiting for him to get a foothold on what was going on, however, as she reached down and pulled the heavy parka up and over her head, also tugging off what seemed like a tunic of some kind, tossing them aside, leaving her nearly naked from the top up, simple a bra covering her small, perky tits. He also, however, noticed that she had a distinctive tattoo on one of her shoulders, although he couldn't remember where he'd seen it before. It was a square with three circles in a pyramid shape inside of it. He knew the image was important, but he didn't have time to think about it, as she suddenly reached down and grabbed his shirt by the waistline and yanked it up, pulling it off his chest, exposing his pot belly and his hairy chest, but more importantly, exposing his arms, covered in the traditional tattoo sleeves of The Calm, from shoulder to wrist, marking him as an Adept, not as low as an Initiate and not as high as a Counselor. A Counselor might have been able to mostly control their abilities without the Ashaka, but even still, it would've been a struggle.

Without the giant oversized clothes, he could see she was particularly slender, with a button nose and a single dimple on one of her cheeks. "I don't know what's come over me," she breathed into his face, "but I know I can't fucking fight it..." He saw her shy smile widen a little more. She was so hyper sensitive now that she could probably sense anything that either worked him up or cooled him off, and was going to lean into it. "Oh, you like a girl with a filthy fucking mouth, do you?" she cooed at him. "I felt that cock of yours twitch each time, and if that's what it takes to make sure you're good and hard to fuck me, then that's what you're gonna fucking get."

"You don't—" he started, but as he did, she shoved her lips against his again, silencing him while one of her hands moved down and tugged at his pants, trying to rip them open if she had to, finally getting the belt loose enough so that she could slide her hand down the front of them and wrap her slender fingertips around his dick, stroking it slowly and firmly, shivering a little as she touched it.

"I'm either a princess or a queen, and you've got me turned on like a common harlot," she purred at him. "Like a whore. God, I've never felt like this in my entire life, so fucking hot, so fucking hungry, so fucking in love..."

"Miss, you—" he tried again, but she kissed him again, making sure he didn't get a word into the conversation, such as it was. Depending on how one measured time, it had been either seven years or seventy-four years since he'd had the company of a woman in his bed, and back then, he'd had his Ashaka to keep his abilities from going haywire, but they were going full force now, and he'd just have to live with the consequences.

"I don't care I don't care I don't fucking care, you bastard, but I've got to get you inside me," she moaned. "I need to feel you fucking me, I've got such an empty young cunt... feel it? Feel how wet I am for you?" She grabbed one of his hands by the wrist and shoved it down the front of her pants until he could feel his fingertips pressed against her pussy, and she was drenched, practically dripping onto his fingers. "I've only had a couple of men in there. One was a prince and one was one of my bodyguards... both were nice, but I wasn't... fuuuuuck I wasn't so fucking horny like I am now..."

"What you're feeling, miss, it's artificial," he told her. "I know it's intense but..."

"Oh my fucking god," she whimpered, crawling out of the bed. "Shut the fuck up about that

fucking nonsense. This is the most fucking real thing I've ever felt in my fucking life. I'm gonna get this dick inside of my cunt until I get off..."

Her brain was being overwhelmed with levels of dopamine and norepinephrine in such volume that she wasn't thinking clearly, but he didn't know any way to tone it down for her. He just had to get her through to the other side of it, but how she'd feel once she'd gotten her rocks off, even he didn't know. This was completely uncharted territory, something he suspected even the most accomplished Counselors would have had trouble with.

She practically ripped her pants off, revealing a small rectangular stripe of pubic hair, mostly a sandy brown but with the occasional red or black hair in it, kicking them and her boots aside, leaving her completely nude, her skin glistening with a bit of sweat. She reached over and latched her slender fingers onto his waistband and began yanking down on his pants and the underpants beneath, as if she literally couldn't care what condition they were in as long as they were gone. "Get'em off, get'em off, get these fucking things off they're in my fucking way," she hissed at him, finally getting them down, tossing them aside.

"I don't even know your name," Sketch said to her, knowing the words were futile even as they left his lips.

"Serena," she said to him. "And I'm only telling you so I can make you moan it in a minute." She laughed, wild and completely out of control, before she brought her tongue up along the undersides of his cock and then wrapped her lips around the tip of it and pushed her face down onto it, keeping those deep green eyes of hers looking up at him, almost challenging him not to moan, like she would only take it as a challenge to do better."

"God fucking damn it, Serena," he groaned. "I'm... they call me Sketch..."

She popped her lips off his dick with a wet smack and a giggle. "And what's your surname, Sketch?" Before he could speak, she pushed her mouth back onto his shaft once more, humming on it, as if to make it clear she was still awaiting her answer.

"Ffffuck..." he said, trying desperately not to just pop off immediately. "They just *call* me Sketch... my real name is Miles... Miles Walker..."

"Mmmmm..." she said, lifting her lips off his dick once more. "Serena Walker," she purred at him. "I like the sound of that." She shoved him onto his back and crawled over him, her legs straddling on either side of him, as her hands unclasped her bra at the front, sliding it off to cast it aside, exposing two small, pert breasts with tiny areola and stiff little tan nipples, one of which had a piercing through it with a little charm hanging from it, the same symbol she had tattooed on her shoulder.

"And your surname?" he said, desperate for anything he could use to stall.

"O'Quincy," she laughed. "Like you didn't know. Now shut the fuck up and get this dick inside of my tight young pussy, you motherfucker."

The name and the symbol clicked together in his head at the exact moment he felt her velvety snatch engulfing his cock, it so tight he was certain he wouldn't last long, but he felt her reach down and squeeze his balls, just to make him prolong a little bit more.

"C'mon, you bastard, fuck your princess, your queen, your little whore... drill me until we're both cumming our fucking brains out..." She had complete control of the tempo and rhythm, her slender body having seized complete control of the situation. "Oh yes, yes, yes! Yes you fucker! Pound it! Drill me! Love me! I love you I love you I fucking love you I need you oh god oh fuck harder harder..."

She was moaning and gasping for air, her eyes screwed shut, her mouth smiling regularly in between delirious giggles and whimpers, both of her hands pressed against his chest, keeping him from trying to get up, her body shivering every so often. He reached one of his hands up to close it over her unpierced nipple, giving it a little pinch, which made her squeal even more.

"Fuck yeah, fuck yeah, fuck fuck fuck my princess pussy, Miles... fucking split it open... oh god, I've never felt so fucking hot in my entire life.... fuck I'm gonna cum... fuck... fuck you gotta... you

on a working Ashaka over the last several years, but wishing wasn't going to gain him a whole lot, so he decided he would just have to make the best of his situation. It was definitely going to have to become a top priority moving forward, though.

Sketch walked out of the bunk room and headed down a few doors to the room that he considered his library, although there weren't any actual physical books in it. Still, it was where the best media terminal was, and Sketch had built the space so that he could either do research or just watch terrible Starless Dominion propaganda romances.

Serena had stolen one of his shirts, wearing it more like a dressing gown than anything, and was sitting bundled up in it in his usual study chair, reading from a wall of text floating in front of her. "I thought it was love at first sight, but after I did a little bit of talking with Helen, and a bit more reading, and then watched the message I had placed in storage with me, I realized I don't just know you, I grew up hearing *stories* about you all the damn time. I was just hearing the stories the wrong way," she said, looking at him.

He frowned a little bit, leaning against the doorframe. "The odds of you hearing stories about me are... well, it's almost impossible," he told her. "I think you have me confused with someone else."

"No no, you're *you*. I know that now," she said with a little smile. "The problem was that when I was hearing the stories, he would always talk about the Stormwalker, or at least, that's how I heard it. I didn't realize he was actually talking about The Storm, Walker. That Storm was a title and Walker was your surname."

"Serena, I don't know how that's possible..." he sighed.

"Here, why don't you watch the message that was left for me, because it's just as much for you as it is for me," she said. "Helen, play it again from the top. He'll recognize him."

"If you say so, m'lady," the computer replied, which took Sketch a little by surprise. The ship had never seemed deferential to anyone before. "Restarting message."

A window opened up in the air, an image appearing before him and Sketch considered it for a long moment, something vaguely familiar about it and yet somehow totally alien. But once the figure began to speak, things fell into place. It was a man, well into his eighties or nineties, but still looking relatively sharp and fit. His skin was leathery, covered in endless wrinkles, with large bushy white eyebrows over light green eyes that were starting to cloud up a little bit.

"Serena, if you're seeing this message, then I've failed to make a rendezvous, and you've been redirected because I'm likely dead. The plan was to keep you juggled around in cold sleep while we tried to find a safe place to secure you. We were going to hold you up somewhere while we figured out what to do about your legacy, and how to protect you from the Starless Dominion, but I'm guessing that either my time ran out or I had a spot of bad luck," the man said. "That means we've fallen onto our backup plan. Hey Walker, sorry we can't be meeting in person again, but, y'know, likely dead and all. I know, I know, I remember telling you nobody's dead until you've seen the body with your own two eyes, but I think you're just gonna have to trust me on this one. If I was still living, I'd still be ferrying Serena's sleeping body around. The fact that I'm not means my time in royal guard duty is up, and yours is just beginning."

"Jesus Fucking Christ," Sketch muttered. "Darren, you got *so old*. Men like us, we're supposed to die young."

"You see, Serena, the man you're sitting next to is the Storm, Miles Walker, although reports are he's been going under the name Sketch Davis these days, probably in an effort to lay low, although I can tell you, Miles, old buddy, you probably don't need to worry about it. I mean, don't go telling anyone you're a Storm, certainly, but the name Miles Walker isn't likely to spring up any database red flags identifying you as a Storm. When the Purge happened sixty years ago, the Dominion did everything they could to erase even the *memories* of the Storms from public consciousness. The Order of The Calm is long since forgotten, and you, my friend, might be one of its only remaining practitioners. But who better to protect the last remaining member of the Royal House of O'Quincy

than a ghost nobody knows is alive.”

“Captain, I'm not certain this is a good idea,” Helen said to him.

“Me neither, Helen,” Sketch agreed. “But I'm not sure I've got a choice.”

“I've been trying to piece together what could've happened to you since I got sent your picture by a smuggling buddy of mine named Roscoe who caught a glimpse of one of your tattoos and was trying to understand what they were from,” Darren's digital ghost continued. “He thought you might have been Blue Axe Gang or something Triad related, maybe, but I knew those tattoos from back in my youth. The picture he sent me also included a shot of your ship, so here's what I'm guessing happened. The last dispatch anyone had from you back in the day was that you were being dispatched to go and help the Tropage and the Mizzols solve a labor dispute. After that, you just vanished off the face of the Earth, and when I asked, the Calm said you had been killed in an accident on assignment. I never had any cause to doubt that... until I saw that picture of you, looking as young as I'd remembered. That shouldn't even be possible, so I'm sure there's quite a story to tell there.”

“Computer, hold playback,” Serena said, turning to look at him. “So, you're, what, a hundred?”

Sketch paused doing the math in his head for a second. “A hundred and ten, give or take. I think. The change from the Old Earth Empire calendar to the Starless Dominion calendar makes its a little fuzzy, but thereabouts.”

“So what the hell happened? And how is this even *possible*? Cold sleep for anything more than ten years or so is supposed to basically be fatal.” The young woman didn't seem angry, just more perplexed by the entire situation.

Sketch moved over to sit down in a different chair, perhaps the first time in decades anyone had sat in the chair. He'd always just used the one chair before. No need for the other chairs to get any use in. “Our mutual friend is right. I was dispatched by The Calm to settle a problem between the Tropage and the Mizzol.”

“I don't even know who those people are.”

“It's... it's not entirely important. Both races are nearly extinct at this point. I think there's a few hundred Tropage left across all the galaxies, and the Mizzol are maybe half that, if they're lucky. At that point in time, though—”

“What point in time *is* that?”

“About seventy three years ago, by my reckoning. At that point in time, the Tropage and the Mizzol populations were in the low millions. The two races would fight about anything at the slightest provocation, but getting this mining space they were working on together up and running was vitally important to both species, so they agreed to have a member of The Calm come in and mediate the discussions. That was me.”

“And members of The Calm were called Storms?”

“Adepts were. Adepts were the middle range of The Calm,” Sketch told her, feeling a sort of joy in being able to talk about all of this again for the first time in ages. “The senior members were Counselors, and they were called Furies. The youngest members were Initiates, and they were referred to as Sparks.”

“So you started out as Spark Walker then became Storm Walker but never made it up to Fury Walker?”

He chuckled a little. “Yes, my surname was of great amusement to most people in the order as well, but our histories are too important to be left in the dust of our wake. The Order did not want me to forget where I'd come from, so the surname stayed.”

“And what do The Calm do?”

“We're... well, we're empath's, of a sort. We use our abilities to clear the heads of anger and prejudice and all the other problems that impede a fair and logical discussion about a situation in conflict.”

“That's clearly not *all* you can do,” Serena told him, licking her lips. “Considering it's taking

every bit of my self control not to rush over there and fuck your brains out again right now, I'd say your abilities have more to them than that."

Sketch felt himself blushing a little. "Well, members of The Calm are supposed to have a tool with them at all times called an Ashaka, but mine was destroyed, and I haven't been able to procure a replacement, so my control over my abilities is in poor disrepair. The Calm have four paths they can put a person down – The Calm, which the Order is named after, which is a tranquil, serene state; The Rage, which is generally reserved for defensive maneuvers, as it puts the target in a state of blind anger; The Fear, which is also generally a defensive stance, designed to cause people to lose confidence and back down from conflicts with members of The Calm; and, what you're stuck feeling, The Warmth, which is meant to induce trust and affection within a person, often used when counseling couples to reignite the spark of lost love."

"And in our case, it's just got me completely in love with you, and wanting to fuck you until neither of us can stand up."

Sketch's hand rubbed the back of his head, a pained look on his face. "Without my Ashaka, anyone who comes in close contact with me is going to get put on one of those paths, and I don't have any actual control over which one, nor can I control the intensity or duration of those effects. It's part of the reason I wanted you to get back into your stasis pod, so you wouldn't be affected by my present impaired condition."

"It's a bit late for that," Serena said with a little giggle. "Not that I really mind. I did a bit of reading on The Calm when I woke up..."

"Yeah, Helen told me," Sketch responded. "That may come back and bite us in the ass, but hopefully not."

"One of the things I spent a little bit of time on was Calm philosophy, about how a person being influenced by The Calm might recognize that influence, but it wouldn't change whatever feelings they were having enhanced, so who's to say it wasn't real in the first place?"

"Mmm," Sketch said. "That's certainly more renegade Calm philosophy, and it doesn't surprise me that's what would show up first. The Starless Dominion decided that since they couldn't control The Calm, they would paint them as monsters who went around implanting thoughts in people's heads, and used that as justification for wiping them out, even though we can't do that, not even the Furies."

"Can't do what?"

"Implant thoughts," Sketch said. "We can influence emotions, certainly, but I can't make someone think something they don't want to think. I can't make anyone do something they don't want to do and I certainly can't introduce an idea into someone's brain. We affect emotions, not induce concepts. Sending a devout pacifist down the Path of Rage won't cause them to begin violently striking out at everything around them, but it will make them more argumentative and less rational."

"So what you're saying is that I wanted to fuck you before your mind started broadcasting Warmth at me," she said, a wry grin on her impish lips.

"Well, what I'm saying is that while I'm certain my misfiring brain gave yours a good push, you had to have at least some willingness to entertain the notion, otherwise you would've just been treating me like an old comrade you were seeing again for the first time, with kindness and joy, but certainly not sexual interest."

"It's okay," she said. "Once it all sort of clicked in my head that you were this guy my old protector would tell bar stories about at the drop of a hat, I knew I was in good hands. When is the feeling of constantly wanting to *fuck* go away, though?"

Sketch shrugged, throwing his hands up in the air. "I've spent the six years since I reemerged in the world trying to avoid people, specifically so I didn't cause more harm than good. It's been a bit lonely, although I've had Helen to help keep me sane."

"Awww," the ship's computer said to him. "Thanks."

"But there's no handbook for this, no set of rules or guidelines I can turn to. The Ashaka was an

essential part of the Order of The Calm, and every member from Spark to Fury was expected to have their Ashaka with them at all times, and a spare nearby and at the ready, in case of disaster. I could keep you on this wavelength for as long as we're together, or you could suddenly shift onto a different path without my even trying to influence it. And if another person showed up? Shit, Serena, it's all uncharted undiscovered country."

"Well, I guess we'll discover it together then," she said, "because I'm certainly not getting off this ship any time soon."

"I don't think that's wise," he told her. "I think you'd be safer far, far away from me."

"And I don't think you get a say in the matter. Not yet anyway. So, carry on with your story, because there's clearly a lot more to tell. Seventy plus years ago, you went to go help two nearly extinct species with a problem. What the hell happened at this labor dispute?"

"Sabotage of some kind, by one side or the other, I doubt I'll ever know which," he sighed. "Not that it particularly matters at this point. They were attempting to mine out minerals from the inside of a comet, and had built an internal chamber at the center of it so they could hollow it out and be protected while they did. When I showed up, I began mediating the dispute, right on this very ship. It had a different name back then, but these days I call it *The Praeteritus*, which is Latin for 'the past.' During the middle of discussions, someone set off a bomb along the entrance to the comet's inner chamber, causing it to collapse, trapping all the ships and miners inside. But beyond that, it also set off a radiation blast. The Captain from the Tropage delegation immediately threw me into a cold sleep pod before I could do anything and I remember thinking how loud it was when I entered stasis compared to the deathly silence when I emerged from it a long, long time later."

"You really *should* be dead," Serena said. "Shouldn't you?"

"You don't know the half of it," he agreed. "Helen, do you want to tell the part of the story while I was out?"

"Are you sure, Captain?" the ship's voice asked cautiously.

"It'll be fine, Helen."

"Alright." Helen's voice was both sultry and soothing at the same time, apparently modeled off some old Earth actress he'd never heard of. "After Captain Walker was thrown into the pod, my original captain, Dezzik, tried to get the ship out from inside of the comet, but to no avail. The radiation from the explosion was lethal to both Tropage and Mizzol alike, and while Dezzik was able to make a little bit of headway in trying to free us from the comet's prison, it was not enough. He and the rest of the crew died within a matter of hours, much like everyone else within the comet's belly. Except, of course, for Sketch, as the cold sleep pods are reinforced against radiation."

"Gods above," Serena muttered.

"As the ship's AI, my job was to protect the crew first and myself second. I had failed in that first regard, but I decided I did not wish to die, so I did what I could to preserve my condition. I opened all the airlocks and flushed all of my former crew's corpses out to the void of space, then went into power conservation mode, because I had realized, I still had crew remaining. A crew of exactly one. Sketch. Tropage ships are powered by a combination of solar panels and fuel rods, so I knew that power was going to be a concern. The radiation was preventing communications, and the explosion had wobbled the comet's path enough that it would no longer be where anyone would think to look for it. We were alone, without any chance of rescue or support. My initial efforts to widen the hole and use it for escape proved utterly futile and it started to seem like I was risking my own integrity if I continued, so instead I chose to wait. It would prove... rather a long wait indeed."

"How l—?"

"Sixty-seven years," Sketch said. "I was in the ice for sixty-seven years."

"How is that even *possible*?"

"As it turns out, the cold sleep pods on this ship were designed for Tropage anatomy, and because they'd never been tested on humans before, Helen was just sort of winging it in terms of

keeping my vitals manageable, not letting me go into freezer burn or pick up any thaw warp. And she did a remarkable job. When I eventually woke up, I didn't have any muscular or nervous system damage beyond what you'd expect for a very long cold sleep. I mean, it was weeks before I was completely up to full strength – I was blind for the first few days, and I couldn't walk for nearly a week – but in the end, I came out in the exact shape I went in, none the worse for wear.”

“How did you come out, anyway? It sounds like the ship was trapped pretty good.”

“Meteor strike hit the comet and bashed open more of the hole from the outside, made it large enough that Helen could get herself out of the comet and into open space. Then she very slowly made her way on minimal thruster power over towards the nearest star she could get close to, and bathed in starlight for about six months before she woke me up.”

“During that time,” Helen said, “I did my best to prepare a data package for Captain Sketch to inform him of all the changes that had happened during our imprisonment. Much had happened in sixty-seven years, including the near extinction of the Tropage, and the conquering of humanity by the Starless Dominion. Because of this, I decided that Sketch would be my new Captain. I had carried him this far, so I would carry him the rest of the way on his journey, however short or long that might be.”

“I imagine it was quite the culture shock, realizing everyone you'd ever known was probably dead, and that everything you knew about the world had changed significantly,” Serena said.

“The destruction of The Calm hit me pretty hard, especially since both my main and backup Ashakas had been destroyed in the accident, which meant I wasn't safe to go around people,” Sketch said, scowling bitterly. “Not that it was even much of an option. You've grown up under the Starless Dominion, but to me, they're still a relatively new threat, even if they did conquer humanity with almost no effort. Darren said you're the last remaining member of the House of O'Quincy?”

Serena giggled again, holding her hand to her mouth. “You know, it's been so long since I *wasn't* recognized that I thought you were just teasing me last night, but you really *didn't* know who I was at first, did you?”

“I *still* don't entirely know who you are *now*,” Sketch said with a wry smirk.

“How much about the transition under the Starless Dominion have you read about?”

“Well, the problem being is that it's mostly written from the Dominion's point-of-view, so a bit, but I'm betting over half of it is lies.”

“God, I feel like I'm giving an ancient history lesson to someone who should've been around when it all happened,” Serena said, shifting in her seat some. “So when you went into cold sleep, humanity had five royal houses, who sort of provided the governing factions for all of the people. You probably remember it that way, but it doesn't hurt to give you a reminder. When the Dominion took over, the first thing they did was collapse the five houses down into one singular house, the House of Sanada. The Dominion felt it would be best to have a single delegate that would represent humanity within the Dominion, and the House of Sanada was appointed to that position. The other houses continued to exist, naturally, but as subsections of the House of Sanada, with the expectation that the houses would interbreed and provide a human dynasty, a figurehead who would report in to the Dominion, and who would also manage the smaller day-to-day shit for them.”

“Why do I have a feeling that didn't work out too well?” Sketch said, leaning back in his chair.

“It didn't,” she replied. “It became a viper's nest, with all of the royals gunning for position to eventually assume control of House Sanada, by marriage or succession, whichever came easier. The House of O'Quincy was never one for aspirations, and so we were content to just stay at the bottom of the totem pole, in an effort to continue enjoying our existence without getting caught up in the backstabbing and the skulduggery.”

“Never quite works out the way you hope it will, does it?” Sketch replied with a smile. “So what happened?”

“What happened was the Dominion decided that House Sanada was more trouble than it was worth, and that getting rid of all the royals in one fell sweep would be best for all involved, mostly

themselves.”

“That seems to be the Dominion's response to anything that makes them nervous,” he agreed. “Destroy anything problematic rather than try to adjust it. It's kind of a pattern for them.”

“They had a massacre about seven years ago, killing off everyone in an event called The Monarch Purge. But they missed me, because I was away from the palace at the time, taken on a last minute excursion back to Earth by my protector, Lord Darren Arbard.”

“*LORD* Arbard?” Sketch laughed. “Pretty good for a troublesome kid I caught trying to steal fruit from my skiff back in the days before I was a Storm.”

“You knew Lord Arbard when he was young?”

“Mmm... He didn't start out in nobility. He was a homeless urchin on the streets of Tachem when I first met him. Good kid, but he'd had a lot of bad breaks, and had resorted to less than ideal behavior to survive. No family to speak of.”

“And you weren't a Storm then?”

Sketch shook his head. “I hadn't gone seeking enlightenment yet, no. I was still a bad man doing bad things for good money, mostly. To me, he's still just Darren from Tachem, although we were on-again off-again friends for over a decade. He thought I was crazy when I signed up to be a Spark, but I made my way up to Storm faster than anyone they'd ever seen before. Probably would've been a full Fury within a few more years.”

“Then I'm sorry you didn't achieve your dreams, but I'm glad I have you on my side. You should see the rest of Lord ... I mean, Darren's message.” She gestured towards the hologram and it started speaking once more.

“Regardless of how you got here looking about the same as I remember last seeing you, you've clearly been laying low for years, I assume because you think as a Storm you're going to be killed by the Dominion if they find out. That's probably true, but they consider The Calm to be extinct at this point, so their guard is down and you shouldn't have too much trouble slipping by unnoticed as long as you aren't advertising what you are or were. I don't know if you can still be a Storm without the Order there, but I'm sure you'll know better than I would. What I want is for you to take care of Serena for me. I don't care about the Royal Houses, I don't care about palace intrigue. What I do care about is making sure this girl who I helped raise, practically my own daughter, gets to live a full life, by ensuring her safety moving forward. That image I was sent of you, that's six months old at the time I'm recording this, so whatever you're doing, it's working. Take Serena into your crew. Guard her life like you did mine. 'Comrades until our last dying breath,' you used to say. I'm willing that vow from me onto her now. We're long past the chances when revolution against the Dominion were possible, so all that matters now is survival, living out our lives and enjoying them while we have them.”

“Fuck sake, Darren,” Sketch grumbled beneath his breath. “And you thought *I* was a fatalist.”

“I wanted to reach out, but, shit, I was afraid if I did, it might attract attention to you, and that was the last thing I wanted, but I'm out of people I trust here, Miles, and I'm about out of moves. I hate to call in a favor, but you swore you owed me one for that thing back on Loviwex, and I'm asking you, friend to friend, keep the closest thing I have to family safe, will you?” Darren looked so very much older than Sketch had ever thought possible, and weary, as if the last portion of his life had been lived under incredible amounts of stress and pressure. “In Serena's stasis pod, there's a small piece of metal with interstellar coordinates on it, and a combination to the safe you'll find buried there. If you can get her there, you'll have money enough to keep the two of you going for a long, long time. It pains me to ask this, but like I said, if you're seeing this, it means I didn't make a check-in point, and I've had Serena's pod rerouted to your ship. I'll have arranged delivery of her pod to some remote, distant location, a good long way from the nearest gate, so you'll get to that point, find nothing there, then head back the way you came when she wakes up. That's for her safety and for yours, to ensure the two of you have some time together before you have to make your decision, because I know I'm asking a lot of you. Fuck, I'm asking a hell of a lot, but if there's anyone capable of this burden, it's you. It's just got

to be you. You're the best of us, Miles. Always have been, always will be. So do me this last solid, will you? Anyway, I gotta go. I'm tucking this message into Serena's pod with her, and we're going to keep her in shuffle for a few years before we wake her up again. My hope is that given some time out of the public eye, people will forget about her, and I'll have less trouble keeping her safe. But, seeing as you're watching this, clearly that's your job now. Thanks amigo. Wish we could've shared one last cold beer, but as you always told me, when your number's up, that's it. Looks like mine was."

The message ended, and the space between Sketch and Serena couldn't have been more than a handful of feet, but felt like it could have been lightyears. Neither seemed to have a clue what to say to the other.

"I love you, Sketch," Serena said, the first to speak after an agonizingly long silence. "I know you think that's just due to your crazy empath tricks, but once I realized who you *were*, that you were Stormwalker, the guy Lord Arbard told me so many stories about growing up, I realized maybe I've always been comparing every man I ever met to those stories."

"I'm not some knight-errant of old, Serena," Sketch sighed. "I'm just a man trying to get by."

"And that's what I'm telling you, Sketch. I want to get by *with* you. He told me about your time on the frontlines of Rizos. He told me about how you busted him out of that jail on Tiernan after he got locked up for stopping that guy from beating his girlfriend. Shit, he even told me about how you two smuggled Prince Kobo, my *grandfather*, off of Rinmar back in the day. That's how he *became* Lord Arbard, you know? The Prince made him a member of the House of O'Quincy's royal guard a decade or so later, when Darren was struggling to make ends meet. My entire life, he was telling me stories about Stormwalker, about *you*. You were the ideal man I had set up in my head."

"I'm a long fucking way from an ideal, kid," Sketch told her, shaking his head. "I've done things, rough things, horrible things, things I bet Darren never told you about, because if he had, you'd know that staying with me is basically inviting trouble."

"Sketch, look. The message Darren recorded was *five years ago*. I've been in cold sleep that entire time, so what happened between here and there, to him, to me, I don't know. I don't know how I ended up here, or who he trusted enough to ferry me around for a while but not enough to keep me safe. All I know is that, for me, two days ago he was putting me into cold sleep pod, and yesterday I woke up, only to find I'd missed *five years*."

He'd thought of her as a girl before, but there was definitely an aged wisdom to her, a sort of worldliness and experience that lay behind those bright green eyes of hers. "How old are you, Serena? Not counting the five years in stasis. How many actual years have you lived through?"

"I'm twenty-three," she replied.

"Alright then," he sighed. "That means you're old enough to make your own decisions. I can't tell you what to do with your life, and I've warned you about being on this ship with me, that you're probably going to go through some of the most dramatic and uncomfortable shifts in emotion without warning, and that right now, I can't do a damn thing to stop or control it. If you're willing to accept all of that, then you can stay on *The Praeteritus* as part of her crew, but it's going to be a pretty lonely existence, considering how we both have very good reasons to stay out of the spotlight. That means it's going to be just you, me and Helen, and we're going to spend as much of our time in transit in deep space as we can, so as to not attract attention to ourselves. I can amp up my efforts to find an Ashaka, but until I do, the wild mood swings are just part of daily life. I'm sorry about that, but there's nothing I can do there without an Ashaka. Knowing all that, you still want to hang your hat here?"

"The Stormwalker I heard tales about growing up would walk through a swarm of Ghost Clickers just to do the right thing," she said to him, standing up. "Even if you're only half the man I've been listening to tall tales about growing up, that still makes you twice the man I've ever met before now. I'm in, and don't try and talk me out of it again."

She moved to slide her ass into his lap, one of her hands dancing against the back of his neck before she leaned in and kissed him, shifting and squirming a bit, making sure he could feel her putting

pressure on his cock.

“And while you may be able to stoke affection and lust inside of a person, you can't make them do anything they don't want to, right? And you were the best fuck I've ever had. That's a fact. Your powers don't change facts, do they?” she said, kissing at his neck.

“It's hard to call an opinion a fact,” he tried to argue, as he felt her drawing one of her legs back, folding it at the knee so she could turn and swivel, unfolding her leg again, straddling him now.

“You're a very good looking man, Sketch,” she said to him, kissing his collarbone. “Maybe a little older than I might have normally gone for...”

“Well, I *am* over a hundred,” he laughed.

“How old are you *actually*?” she teased back.

“Forty-four. Thirty-eight years before the freeze, and six years since coming out of it.”

“Good,” she purred. “Experience is sexy, and from Lord Arbard's stories, you fucked *a whole lotta women* when he knew you.” Her fingertips reached down beneath the waistband to grab his cock, finding it already swelling from her very presence. “I suppose I should ask. Were members of The Calm asked to take a vow of chastity or something?”

Sketch laughed a little bit, shaking his head. “The Calm wanted to make sure all its members experienced every aspect of life, so nothing was forbidden.”

“Mmmmm,” she hummed. “That's a little disappointing. There's something a bit exciting about the idea of defrocking a cleric.” She reached down and pulled his shirt she'd stolen up and over her head, exposing her lithe body to his eyes and touch. “So I'll just have to settle for riding a Storm.”

He rolled his eyes with a grin. “You're not the first to make that joke, you know.” His hand moved to give the little piercing through her nipple a little swing with his fingertip. “And I hate to tell you, but this charm has got to go. You can keep the piercing if you like, but this has got a royal symbol on it, and metal like this will get picked up by scanners. If someone comes on the boat, they'll know who you are as soon as they scan us.”

“I have it tattooed here, though, as well,” she said, touching her shoulder. “Isn't that going to be a problem?”

Sketch shook his head. “Tattoos don't show up on scanners, which is why I can get away with nobody noticing these,” he said, gesturing to one of his sleeve tattoos that ran the length of his arm. “As long as I'm wearing long sleeve shirts, anyway. It's actually why I'm a little thankful I hadn't reached Fury by the time of my accident. I'd have had to wear gloves the whole time.”

“Oh?” Serena said.

“From here to here,” Sketch said, starting at his shoulder and going down to his elbow, “is the traditional tattoo markings of a Spark. From here to here,” he said, gesturing from his elbow to his wrist, “are the markings of a Storm. When a Storm becomes a Fury, they tattoo all of the hands, and then the collarbone, front and back, connecting the two shoulder tattoos.”

“Was there a rank above Fury?” she asked, tracing her fingertip along some of the intricate linework on his arms. “Are they the exact same tattoos for each member of the Calm?”

“Fury was as high as the ranks went, as far as I know, anyway. And the tattoos are mostly unique, as they tell the story of that member's life before joining The Calm, their achievements as a Spark, their achievements as a Storm, and what great feats were involved in them becoming a Fury.”

“You said you were a bad man who did bad things,” she purred, wriggling her ass against the tops of his thighs. “You don't have to tell me everything, but maybe a little context would be nice.”

“I was warrior for hire, a mercenary. I took whatever jobs people would offer me, as long as the money was right and it kept me moving.”

“Family?”

He shook his head. “Never knew Dad. Mom died when I was 14, so I enlisted in the Earth Defense Forces, once I was old enough, although I lied about my age to get in early.”

“What happened?”

“One day, somebody gave an order I didn't agree with, and I chose to disobey, and that was that. Got the boot right quick, and then turned private sector. That lasted until I was closer to forty than thirty. Darren ran with us for a while, although he quit that life same day I did.”

“More bad orders?”

Sketch shrugged. “Something like that. For a long time I'd been telling myself they paid enough money so that I didn't ask questions, but on one particular gig, there were just too many questions to be ignored. So we completed the contract, and then I severed my contact with the fixers and went to become a Spark, way older than pretty much anyone they'd ever had.”

“Did they usually start training young?”

“I think the oldest Spark they'd ever taken in was a hair's breadth shy of twenty. I was over a decade and a half past that, but a Storm I'd run into years and years earlier said I had a very strong natural gift, and that if I ever wanted to join The Order, there would be a place for me.”

“Why don't they like them old?”

“Because older men and women ask too many questions, and most of them don't end up liking the answers. It takes a certain level of flexible morality to join The Calm, simply because some people think it's unethical to influence others' emotions.”

“But you didn't think of it that way?”

“I saw it all as a tool like any other. Sword, gun, missile, pen, hammer, ring gate – these are all just tools, and, sure, some tools are easier to abuse than others, they all have their place in the universe. I'd seen a Storm talk two warring factions down and agree upon a deal that probably saved millions of lives, just by reducing their level of anger to one another,” Sketch told her. “Some people, like the Starless Dominion for example, think that's 'tampering' or 'brainwashing,' but like I told you early on, I can't make anyone do anything they aren't willing to do on their own, no matter how far down any Path I put them on.”

“You could scare someone so badly their heart stopped,” Serena said, still stroking his cock slowly, just making sure she still had his attention, although the closeness of their bodies basically ensured that.

“No, I could scare someone very badly, but at some point, their fight-or-flight reflex will kick in, and they're either going to run away, or they're going to lash out at anyone and anything they can get their hands on,” he told her, taking his hand down to let his thumb casually flick against the small golden tag pinned through her nipple, making it swing back and forth. “Which of those options they're going to go down, I can't control. I can influence people, but there are a thousand and one ways to do that in other ways not using empathy, so to me, while it's a powerful tool and needs to be used with a higher degree of care than most, it's certainly not unethical.”

“Even when it's turning a normally rational woman into a raging nymphomaniac on your lap, so direly in need of your cock that she's doing everything she can to hold a conversation instead of giving in to those lusts?”

He laughed a little bit. “See? You're still resisting. I can't mmpph!” She pressed her lips hard against his and started to run her fingertips a bit more intentionally along his cock now, the amount of pressure she was applying turned up slightly.

This, of course, was the perfect time for Helen to interrupt.

“Captain, we're being hailed,” the computer's calm voice said to him, although Sketch almost felt like he could hear an undercurrent of pleasure to the machine's vocalization, as if she had wanted to interrupt what had been about to go down.

“Who the hell's out here in the ass end of nowhere, Helen?”

“It's a Y'bari ship,” the computer replied. “Single fighter, long range class. Shall I answer?”

“Not yet. Better yet, you answer and tell her you're waking the Captain and he'll be on comms in a couple of minutes,” he said, sliding Serena off his lap, tucking his cock away. “What are the odds someone watched your pod being deposited?”

“Very low, I'd assume, knowing Lord Arbard. Why, you think that ship's here because of me?”

“I think I haven't got a damn *clue* why it's here,” he said. “Put some clothes on and do what you can to disguise your appearance a bit.”

They pulled on their clothes, stopping back by Sketch's quarters to grab a long-sleeved shirt, making sure to get it in place as the two of them headed towards the bridge. Once there, Sketch glanced over, stepped to one of the terminals, ran his fingertips along the underside of it to gather a bit of dust and grease, then smeared it on Serena's cheeks. “You look too damn regal, even in my ratty clothes. Mess up your hair a bit. We need to look like boring long-haulers.”

“The pilot's growing quite impatient, boss,” Helen told him while Serena did her best to make her hair look as disheveled as possible. “Are you ready?”

“Put them through.”

On top of the communication dais, a single image of a Y'Bari warrior in battle gear glared at him. Well, Sketch assumed they were glaring – with the insectoid helmet on, he couldn't see any facial expressions at all. “Ship, confirm identification,” the modulated voice said to him. He couldn't even tell if it was a male or female through the sonic distortion.

“Sketch Davis, captain and owner of *The Praeteritus*, making my way back to Relling Gate after delivering the mail out to Colby's Hole. Picked up a passenger along the way, Berry Gillespie, and am ferrying her to Defernus, eventually.”

“Eventually?” the voice said. “That's six or seven ring gates under the best of paths. Long way to go for hauler.”

Sketch shrugged. “Her family wanted to send her back to live with her cousins, away from Colby's Hole. They thought she might have thrived terraforming, but really, it just drove the poor girl crazy, so I agreed to take her back that way at a little less than my normal rate as long as they weren't picky about how fast it was. So I'll grab some gigs hauling stuff that way, and she'll get there eventually.”

“The fact that she's easy on the eyes probably didn't hurt,” the voice said. “He abusing you, miss? We've heard reports of haulers getting handsy with passengers now and again.”

Serena shook her head, doing her best to keep as much of her hair over her face as she could. “No, sir. Captain Davis has been nothing but good to me.”

“Hmph. Well, as good as that is to hear, I'm going to take a look for myself.”

“Excuse me?” Sketch said, turning his head.

“Word came from Mephor Gate to Relling Gate that a ship called *The Praeteritus* was carrying a man with Lingham spores in his lungs, and since you didn't stop on your way out, I was dispatched to give the anti-fungal to you on your way back. Prepare for docking. Aliara out.”

The transmission cut off and Sketch immediately began swearing beneath his breath. “Could we outrun them, Helen?”

“They have a weapons lock on us, Captain, so while we might be able to escape, we would likely sustain heavy damage if we did.”

“It's just one tiny Y'bari fighter, and you've got a smaller corvette-sized ship here,” Serena said. “How the hell is that possible?”

“*The Praeteritus* isn't a warship, Princess,” Sketch grumbled. “She's mostly a transport ship, and while, yes, we do have some military capabilities – torpedoes, some turrets, a handful of other things – we aren't a battle-class ship under any circumstances. That little Y'bari dart's probably got more firepower in one cannon than everything I've got put together. Are they using one of the tubelocks, Helen?”

“Negative, Captain. It looks like they're planning on putting down inside our shuttle hanger, and they gave it a quick scan to make sure we had room for it.”

“Fuck,” he said. “Okay, Princess, you know how to use a blaster?”

“Sure, why?”

"I'm going to lure them away from their ship far enough for you to get a good shot at them, and then once they're downed, we can figure out what to do with them next."

Serena looked at him oddly. "Why not just let them give you the anti-fungal for Lingham?"

"Two reasons, Princess," he said, as they started to walk down towards the elevator that would take them down to the shuttle bay. "The first is the most obvious – they're going to scan me for Lingham spores first, and I don't *have* any Lingham spores in my system." The elevator door opened as they stepped in, the door closing behind them, as the elevator started to smoothly slide down the floors towards the shuttle bay.

"Then why do they *think* that—"

"That's a cover story I've been using to keep people off the ship, because of the *second* reason, which is that as soon as I get that close to our Y'bari friend, my haywire abilities are going to go to *town* on them. From what I've been able to read, Y'bari are *especially* sensitive to Calm manipulations, meaning whichever Path my untethered brain decides to send them down, they're going to go from full stop to hard burn faster and further than any ring gate you've ever hopped through. I had to read between the lines, but the Starless Dominion had to use mercenaries and stealth operatives to wipe out The Calm, mostly, because they didn't trust their Y'bari to do it for them, like they normally would."

"Well, that and the planet cracker they used on the world where the main Calm temple was," Serena said. "I've heard some of the stories."

"Regardless, Y'bari brains respond very strongly towards Calm empathy, so whoever this Y'bari is, we're going to have to figure out a way to dispose of them, the body and their ship without it pointing back at us," he sighed as the doors opened and they walked down the hallway towards the shuttle bay.

"I thought members of The Calm treated violence as a last resort!" she said to him.

"If you've got another option, I'd love to hear it! Shit, Helen, have they landed yet?"

"The Y'Baridart, which is apparently called *The Barrow*, has touched down and I have closed the hangar bay and am pressurizing the area now," Helen said to them. "Just a few moments more."

Hanging on the wall just next to the hangar bay door was a long-range blaster rifle, meant for precision work at good distances, single shots not wide spreads. Sketch felt like if he ever needed to fire the blaster more than once in a confrontation, he'd gone about it all wrong. He picked up the rifle and handed it over to her.

"You keep a sniper rifle just hanging next to the door of your hangar bay?" Serena asked him.

"Let's just say this isn't the first time somebody's tried to board my boat when I didn't want them to," he sighed. "And you're sure you know how to use it?"

"Your friend Darren took me hunting twice a month, Sketch," she said to him. "I won't miss."

"See that you don't, otherwise this Y'bari's going to be taking a long look at you next, and I bet that's an encounter you're not likely to enjoy," he said. He drew in a long breath, trying to center himself, putting on his best poker face, that of the neutral, exhausted long hauler, who was annoyed at having somebody unwanted on his ship.

Serena moved to one side of the door before Sketch opened it and stepped into the hangar, leaving the door open behind him. The Y'baridart was a vicious looking ship, sleek, black and angular, long and pointy with a vicious gleam to it, clearly the result of too much time being polished. The owner of this war dart hadn't seen action in some time, and Sketch's first impression was that the lack of combat might have been getting to them.

The top canopy of the dart swung up and open before the side of the dart's cockpit folded down, unraveling into a series of stairs, as the Y'bari exited their craft and started to make their way down the steps, letting Sketch get a good look at them.

He'd never seen a Y'bari in person before, but there were plenty of holovids of them in the archives. They typically ranged from seven to nine feet tall, built much like scaled up humans, although they were always more slender, a result of them having hollow bones, like the birds back on Earth. The

Y'bari were commonly referred to as elves by humans, at least when the Y'bari weren't around. They had faces much like humans, but had long, pointed ears, and that combined with their slender stature had let humanity pigeonhole the Y'bari into existing fairytale myth.

Learning about Y'bari culture had been damn near impossible, as it seemed like the Starless Dominion liked to keep as many details as they could close to the vest, to keep the Y'bari an unknown, terrifying fighting force. The Y'bari didn't eat with non-Y'bari. They didn't drink with non-Y'bari. The only time most people would see a Y'bari was when they were in violation of a law. The Y'bari were the scary, faceless army of the Starless Dominion, and the Dominion seemed to enjoy it that way.

The Y'bari in question was female, he could see, as while her battle suit was mostly dark blue and black pieces of insectoid styled armor, there were definite swells around her chest, large breasts beneath the suit. He knew he needed to get her out of that helmet so that Serena could have a clear shot, because as good as his blaster rifle was, he was fairly certain it wouldn't be able to pierce Y'bari battle armor on its best days.

“Captain Davis,” the Y'bari said. “I'm Centurion Aliara, here on behalf of the Starless Dominion.” She reached the end of the steps and stood on the deck of the hangar, and it was clear that while Aliara was short for a Y'bari, probably only a few inches over seven foot tall, it was still more than enough height to let her loom large in his field of vision, even at the distance they were at. Though the voice was still modulated, Sketch could detect a complacency to the tone, as if Aliara thought this sort of thing was beneath her. “I'm here to inject you and the rest of your crew with the Hapzix anti-fungal, to ensure none of you are spreading Lingham spores anywhere else in the galaxy. This service is being provided to you and your crew free of charge on behalf of our mighty overlords, the Starless Dominion, may light never shine upon their chambers.”

He'd heard that slogan before – 'may light never shine upon their chambers' – but he hadn't been able to find anything to explain where it came from or where it meant. If the Y'bari were hard to get details on, the Starless Dominion themselves were even worse. The Dominion were never seen directly, never spoken to directly, but ruled the galaxies with an iron fist enough that nobody ever wanted to get in their way.

“It's hard as hell understanding you through that thing,” Sketch said, gesturing at the Y'bari helmet. “Any chance you could take it off so we can hold a conversation like civilized beings?” He felt like this was a stretch, but knowing that the Y'bari was already starting to feel the impact of being pushed down one of the four Paths, it felt like it might not be a stretch too far. He only had a few more minutes before Y'bari, Aliara, would be nearly consumed with whichever emotion his abilities were bubbling up inside of her.

“Fine,” Aliara said, setting down the small case she'd been carrying before reaching up and unlatching one side of her helmet, then the other, pulling it up and over her head before setting it atop the case. “Better?”

With the helmet off, Sketch got his first in-person look at a Y'bari, and had Aliara been a human woman, she would've been considered gorgeous, with high cheekbones, a button nose and a face generally unlike any warrior he'd ever seen before. Her ears were indeed long and pointed, at least three inches longer than they would've been as scale human ears. Her eyes were more like cat's eyes, a deep shade of amber with tall ovals of black in the center of them. Her hair was done up into a bun, to keep it tucked in her helmet, he expected, and it was shades of blue and green, evoking memories of oceans long since departed. Her skin was a pale white, not so light as to be unnatural, but of a complexion that reminded Sketch of an Irishman soldier he'd known once. Other than the ears and eyes, however, she looked almost identical to a human woman, just in larger scale.

“Much better,” Sketch said, waiting for Serena to take the shot, which never came. He tensed up a little, and then wondered if maybe Serena had expected him to bring her out into the hallway, where she would have a much easier time hitting the target, so he started to turn away from Aliara, gesturing for her to follow him. “C'mon, we'll go get Berry and you can inject us both and be on your way.”

"I don't know that I've ever seen one of these Trophe ships intact before," Aliara said, following behind him at several paces. Despite the fact that her longer legs were letting her catch up, Sketch was doing his best to walk quickly, to stay as far from her as he could, hoping the distance might keep his abilities from pressing too hard on the inside of her skull. "Solid craftsmanship. Plus it's nice, having these reasonably sized hallways and doorways, so I don't have to slouch, like I normally would in walking through a human vessel."

He stepped back into the hallway, glancing left and right with his eyes quickly, seeing Serena on his left, pointing to his right, so he turned and started walking right down the hallway. A moment or so later, Aliara stepped into the hall and what felt like an eternity later, he heard the blaster go off. As he heard the body fall to the ground, he didn't hear an accompanying wet splat, so he turned back to look, and the Y'bari's body was in a crumpled ball on the hall floor, her head decidedly *nonexploded*.

"What the hell, Serena?" Sketch said to her, seeing the girl hang the rifle back on the wall. "You were supposed to kill her, not knock her out."

"I was going to, but then I realized... she was checking out your ass while you walked."

"She was check-?" he said, stopping in utter shock. "Serena, have you lost your fucking *mind*? This is a Y'bari Centurion! We should be dumping her body into deep space right now and praying that nobody comes looking for us!"

"She'll have sent a transmission back to her station upon contact," Serena told him, "so the only way they're going to think we're nobody is if she sends them a message *telling* them we're nobody."

"And how the hell do you propose we get her to do that?"

"Oh, based on how she was looking at you, I think we can work something out," the princess grinned, something Sketch felt couldn't possibly bode well for him. "Let's get her stripped and take her to the brig."

How uncomplicated his life of just a single day ago seemed to him now.

Chapter Three

Despite her overwhelming size, Aliara was actually much lighter than expected, at least once they got the battle armor off her. Sketch hadn't been sure how to remove it, but Serena knew how to get it off the Y'bari soldier with almost no pause at all. Beneath the heavy armor, Aliara wore a sleek black bodysuit that had several prongs that connected to the mechanics of the armor itself.

With the armor off, he could see the woman's form better, and he was struck by how remarkably large her breasts were, each one of them having to be basically the size of his head, the fabric of the black suit so tight he could see the indentation of her nipples through the surface.

"How the hell did you know how to get her out of that armor?" Sketch said as he moved to grab Aliara's ankles while Serena was grabbing the woman's wrists, making sure to attach the soldier's case to her belt first, unwilling to leave it behind for whatever reason. The Y'bari wasn't too heavy, but the general size of her made her unwieldy to carry solo.

"I actually know quite a lot about the Y'bari, Sketch," she said to him. "Those of us within the Royal House had Y'bari assigned as personal guards for a while. I saw them taking the armor off and putting it on loads and loads of times. I even helped them take it off sometimes."

Once they had her on the elevator, they set her down and Helen began to move the shifter down two levels towards the brig. "This is only going to get us killed, Princess," Sketch sighed. "You know that right?"

Serena giggled a little and moved over to kiss him, her lips like a burst of sunshine on his own. "You need to trust me on this one, Sketch," she replied. "It's all going to work out fine. No, *better* than fine. *Way way better*."

The elevator stopped, and they moved to pick the soldier up once more, carrying her out of the elevator and into a portion of the ship that Sketch almost never walked through, which included the medical bay and the brig. He'd thought several times about retrofitting the areas to just be additional

cargo holds, but each time Helen had talked him out of it, insisting that some day, he wouldn't be the only person on board *The Praeteritus* and that when he finally got a crew, he would need both of these rooms to function as they were designed to.

Despite the fact that he hadn't used the brig before, it was still spotless and dust-free, as Helen's army of micro utility droids would come through and clean the area up regularly. The last thing he wanted was to get caught up in some sort of fight between a deposed Princess and a member of the Starless Dominion's private army, but somehow, he was pretty certain he just didn't have a choice in the matter. The brig had a couple of cells to it, and as soon as they had Aliara's body in the center of the room, Serena set her down so she could unhook the case from her belt. "Gods below, that's fucking heavy," she said, setting the case on a nearby shelf. "It might be heavier than she is."

Because of the height differential between humans and the Trophe, Sketch had often found himself having to build sets of steps around commonly used portions of the ship, although Helen had done him the courtesy of having the bridge controls lowered to a more acceptable height for him. She'd offered to do that for the entire ship, but Sketch had pointed out he really only needed it for things he would regularly use. The doors were generally controlled by Helen anyway, so there was no need for manual buttons that he could use, but when it came to things like the brig, all of the tables were basically just above his shoulder height.

"Helen, open cell one, would you?" Sketch said aloud.

"Do you want the force shield translucent or transparent?"

"Transparent," Serena said, as they began to pick her up again. "I need her to be able to see through it. The force shield won't affect Sketch's empathic abilities will it?"

"No, m'lady," Helen replied. "We haven't found much of *anything* that will dampen them. If anything, the force shield might even subtly reinforce them."

"Good," Serena said with a broad smile. "That's just what we want."

"It is?" Sketch asked, as they lowered the Y'bari Centurion onto the floor.

"You bet your sweet ass it is," Serena chuckled. "Now where was it... ah! Here it is." She seemed to find some sort of latch or hook on Aliara's bodysuit, and after she unfastened it, part of it began to breakaway on the side, as Serena began to slowly pull Aliara out of the suit.

"What the hell are you doing, Serena?" Sketch said, unsure if he should look away or keep looking on. "As tight as that is, there's no way she could have weapons concealed in it!"

"Well," Serena said with a chuckle. "One, you're wrong." She reached into the back of the bodysuit and pulled out a single silvery tube about the length of his finger, which she tossed to him. "That's a universal solvent. She could've probably carved an escape hole out of the floor with that. And two, that's not the reason we're taking the suit off of her."

Sketch found himself a little unable to speak as the suit was peeled off Aliara's top, exposing those voluminous tits of hers, capped with nipples that would've been simply to-scale human analogs if not for the one slight difference in that they were a sort of muted pastel blue shade, not all that different from one of the shades of her hair.

"You may not know this, Walker," Serena said to him, "but the Y'bari are somewhere around an 83% genetic match for humans." She was starting to work on the unconscious woman's waist now, sliding the bodysuit down over her hips, exposing a sizable pubic bush, neatly trimmed and maintained, but with dark green hair the color of algae in bloom. "The Starless Dominion would never tell us anything about the Y'bari's history, and the Y'bari themselves don't know fuck all about their own past, but the royals theorized that maybe some alien visitor passing Terra in the early stages of human development abducted say twenty or thirty of our primitive ancestors and then kept them as pets, and they evolved on their own."

"Shame all the other royals except you are dead," he said, finally just accepting he was going to look on, as Serena tossed the now-removed bodysuit out past the edge of the cell. "So much lost information when they all died."

“Not as much lost as you think,” Serena said to him a smile, raising her right hand up in the air, waving it at him. “You don't know what that is, do you?”

He looked on at her in confusion for a moment. “What *what* is?”

“On my bracelet.”

He'd noticed she was wearing jewelry, but hadn't taken a particular interest in it up until she'd drawn his attention to it, stepping in a little closer. “Is... is that some sort of storage crystal?”

“Hey, put one point on the board for the old timer,” she laughed, almost sounding impressed. “It's a royal information matrix. When the Starless Dominion took over, the royals didn't want to lose all the records and data they had, so they had a couple hundred of these made. And the archive itself was built into the walls of the House of Sanada, so anytime I walked through a doorway with the bracelet on, all the newest information would be added to my copy of the archive. There's tons of information in here that'll probably help you... I mean, help *us* loads... we might even be able to get an idea where we could track down an Ashaka for you.”

“Why didn't you mention it sooner?”

She giggled again, rolling her eyes at him. “We've been a little preoccupied, you know? And I'm still more than a little cock-mad since you can't seem to dial it down a bit. If anything, since she got here, it's been even harder to focus.”

“My abilities are working on two brains now, yours *and* hers, and I have no idea how that's going to play out,” Sketch frowned. “I'm a little more surprised my head hasn't started to hurt. Maybe because I haven't had to use my abilities in so long they're tapping into a reservoir of built up energy.”

“It's also possible she's amping you up even more,” Serena said. “You weren't wrong about the Y'bari being especially sensitive to the empathic abilities of The Calm. That's the main reason the Starless Dominion had the order wiped out – they were able to influence the Y'bari in ways they didn't care for. Anything that threatens their control cannot be allowed.”

Serena stepped out of the cell and reached high to push a button to turn the force wall on, a slight blue tinge in the air where the shield deployed. “She shouldn't be out too long... oh look, I think sleeping beauty's starting to wake up.”

“The hell did you do to me?” Aliara said, rubbing her face with one of her large hands.

“Well, we—” Sketch started to reply before Serena cut him off.

“I shot you in the head with a stun round,” Serena said, proudly. “You were checking out my man's ass, and I took offense to that.”

'*My man?*' Sketch thought to himself.

“You two idiots have signed your own death warrant,” Aliara grumbled. “Why the hell am I naked and why is it so hard to focus?”

“You don't remember me, do you Aliara?” Serena said, placing her hands on her hips. “To be fair, you didn't see me *that* often, but I would've thought I might have made an impression.” She pushed her hair back out of her face, wiping some of the grime off. It took a moment, but the facial expression on the Y'bari shifted quickly once she seemed to recognize her.

“Princess Serena O'Quincy,” Aliara said in a hushed, almost shocked tone. “How the fuck are you even *alive*? You were slain with all the others on the Parlor Day Massacre.”

“See, I wasn't, not that most of our supposed Y'bari defenders did much to prevent that,” Serena sneered. “Most of them were the ones *doing* the massacring. But you didn't have to get your hands dirty because you were off doing deliveries, much like you always were. You see, Sketch, Aliara here was technically part of the House of Sanada's Royal Guard, but because she had a tendency to question orders a lot, she had been demoted to courier duty. None of the royals wanted her for a personal protectorate, something I always thought was a mistake on my counterparts' judgment. Hell, I might have taken her for myself if I hadn't already had Rozo.”

“Did Rozo make it out with you?” Aliara asked, seemingly with genuine concern. “Tell me it was some other corpse the strike team found and mistook for his?”

“Is that an attempt at camaraderie I'm seeing from you, Aliara?” Serena said, clenching her fingertips together into a fist. “No. He gave his life defending mine, defending all us royals, like every other bonded Y'bari did, fighting against their own kind who had come to slaughter all the human royals. It was his plan to incinerate the body of a servant girl who'd been killed in the crossfire and use that to fake my death, but Rozo had been too heavily wounded to come with us, so he decided to use his death to help sell the story of my own demise. It's good to know that his death sold the story.”

Aliara slowly rose up to her feet, standing over them, looking down at them, as though she hoped her height might intimidate humans, although the fact that she looked unsteady in her stance didn't help sell the intimidation any. “You know I have to kill you now, Serena,” the Y'bari said. “Orders are orders, and I have to follow them.”

Serena chuckled a little bit. “What if you *didn't* have to follow them, though? You always struck me as a Y'bari who seemed particularly unhappy beneath the Starless Dominion. There's a way out, you know. A way for you to be able to ignore their orders entirely for now and all time.”

“I have zero interest in taking the Final Solution, Serena,” Aliara said, glancing around her cell. “Because not all is lost yet, and I can find some way to break out of this... out of this cell... and... and overtake... *fuck!* What are you doing to my *mind?*”

The Y'bari soldier's hands were rubbing along her hips, as if she was trying to keep them busy, to keep herself occupied, but her legs wobbled a little beneath her, as she turned to look at Sketch and couldn't help but moan a little bit.

“Fuck, *he's* doing it to me, isn't he?” she said, her voice dropping an octave, into an almost husky tone. “What the *fuck* are you doing to me, you thrice-damned human?”

“You've probably never seen one in your lifetime, Aliara, but *he* is a member of The Calm. He's a Storm, to be specific,” Serena said, taking the box down off the shelf, bringing it over towards the door to the cell. “And because he doesn't have his Ashaka, his tool of control, his abilities are sort of running rampant, doing their own thing, without his say so. You feel it, don't you?”

“I feel... something,” Aliara said, biting her bottom lip for a moment. “I don't know *what* the fuck I'm feeling right now...”

“Oh right,” Serena said with a smirk. “Rozo told me about that. How the Y'bari don't know sexual pleasure or gratification unless they're bonded with someone. In fact, they have their sexual desires suppressed until they're about to be bonded. But the Storms could override that suppression, and let the Y'bari feel things like desire, heat and lust. Things you're feeling right now, aren't you Aliara?”

“Is... is *that* what *this* is?” she said, the expression on her stern face slipping into one of confusion and nervousness. “Is that why it feels like I can't think clearly? Like my body is too warm for its liking?”

“That's it exactly,” Serena replied, opening the top of the toolbox that Aliara had brought from her ship into theirs. Inside of it looked like hundreds of small compartments, each with a symbol on it that Sketch couldn't read or translate, presumably the written Y'bari language, another closely guarded secret, if reports were to be believed. “When a Y'bari is about to be bonded to someone, they take... well, *one* of these pills in here, although I don't know which one. It removes the genetic inhibitors that keep the Y'bari from feeling things like love, lust, joy, sadness, regret... all the parts of their humanity that the Starless Dominion thought would just get in the way of their perfect warrior species.”

“*FUCK*, why is it so fucking hard to *think?*” Aliara shouted, slamming a fist against the wall of the cell, her knees bending just a little bit.

“Because instead of the inhibitors coming down slowly and gradually, one of them got knocked down first and foremost and in a big, bad way,” Serena giggled. “All you can think is how your body wants to be touched, to be fondled and caressed. How you feel like nerves you never had access to before are suddenly lighting up, and you don't know what to do with them.”

“Rozo...” Aliara said breathlessly. “He was bonded to you. He... he was a friend of mine.”

“Friend?” Serena sneered. “I thought you weren't *allowed* to have friends as a Centurion. I

thought even the most casual of attachments was frowned upon by your superiors.”

“Kept...” Aliara said, her massive chest rising and falling with eager breaths now. “Kept it secret... from superiors...”

“Oh *ho*,” Serena said with a nod. “So you've *always* been a little troublemaker, but you've just kept it well hidden. If you were friends with Rozo, then you know what I'm offering you. If you're bonded, you know that overrides any control over you that the Starless Dominion would have.”

“W-w-w-what?” Aliara said, dropping to her knees, her legs too unsteady to hold her up now.

“In just a little bit, after your body is so warped by lust and sexual desire that it feels like none of the muscles in your body will work, I'm going to open this door, and I'm going to give you a choice,” Serena said. “Life and freedom, or death. Not much of a choice to me, but it *has* to be your decision. Unlike what the Dominion did, *I* believe in giving people a choice.”

Sketch had been trying to exert some control over his abilities, desperately wanting to tamp them down or bring them back in line, but it felt like every time he pressed against that spot inside of his mind, instead of reducing his output, he only seemed to dial it up even more. The flush that covered Aliara's skin was evident, as was the damp slickness on the inside of her thighs. He'd decided to stop struggling against it, lest he make it even worse.

Some part of him wondered how the hell Serena had ever been with a male Y'bari, as the size and scale differences seemed almost insurmountable. A Y'bari male would have to have a cock the size of a human forearm, and even the most gifted of human men would have trouble giving a Y'bari female enough to notice.

“Princess, please...” Aliara whimpered. “Couldn't... couldn't you just let me go?”

“We're long, long past that point, Aliara,” Serena said, reaching down, pulling the shirt of Sketch's that she'd borrowed up and over her head, leaving her dressed just in a pair of panties. At some point between Aliara's hailing and her arrival, Serena had apparently also removed the royal tag that had been affixed to the piercing through her nipple, not that it mattered much at this particular moment. The piercing itself still remained, though, a brass colored ring with a small ball to keep it sealed. “You can *smell* him, can't you?” she said before glancing over Sketch's direction. “Old leather, machine oil, sweat and a hint of persistent orange. You must love fresh oranges, don't you Sketch?”

He smiled a little bit, blushing just a little, trying not to notice the two nearly naked women in front of him, and failing badly. “My one vice. My fixer instructs clients to leave a bag of freshly grown oranges with each pickup, so I know she's signed off on the job. Most times that's only one or two, because they aren't always easy to come by, but sometimes it'll be a great big sack of them.”

“Don't worry, Aliara,” Serena said, pushing down her panties down to the floor, leaving her nude in the room. “When he fucks you, you're going to be so overwhelmed with orgasms that any hint of regret you have left remaining will simply be washed away with them.”

He laughed nervously, looking away from them. “I don't think we're to scale for that to work, Serena.”

“Oh? Oh! Oh, right. I didn't mention it. Part of the bonding process involves biomorphing, changing the sex organs to match and be to scale with the person or persons the Y'bari is bonded to,” she giggled. “When I first saw Rozo nude, I thought to myself, 'my god, that dick won't fit in me no matter *how* much I loosen up,' but then he bonded to me, and a day later, his cock had shrunk down to what I considered the perfect size.” She licked her lips, stepping towards Sketch. “Although clearly I had my sights set too low, because he was smaller than you are, and you fit *just fine*, don't you, Sketch?” She reached forward and dragged her fingertips across his chest through the layers of cloth he'd yanked over his form earlier to conceal his tattoos from the Y'bari Centurion. “I guess my opinions of what's ideal have changed over the past few years.”

“She's... she's right,” Aliara panted. “Whatever you... think... is ideal, that's what I would have. If I were.... If I *did* bond with you... which I won't...”

“It's actually in your genetic makeup, Walker,” Serena said as she started to draw layers of cloth

off of his body. “Although your mental state affects it too. It's kind of nice, having someone who has a sex part that's basically tailor made to exactly what your body thinks will *feel* right. Humans and Y'bari can even cross breed, I'm told, although we royals never had a chance to test that.”

“Oh... oh god,” Aliara whimpered. “You're... you're not going to...”

“Relax,” Serena said, taking off the last of Sketch's tops, exposing the highly tattooed arms and shoulders of his. “As fun as it would be to *breed* you, Centurion, nobody's going to do it against your will. If you decide you *want* to, though, well, we're certainly not going to stop you...”

Serena's slender fingers trailed along Sketch's belly and started toying with the belt holding his pants up, and he felt a slight shiver run up his spine at her fingers, a reflexive pulse of Warmth bubbling out of him and into both the women in the room, something that made Serena purr and Aliara groan.

“Rozo tried to be a good lover, but like all Y'bari, he didn't know a damn thing about sex or sexuality,” Serena said. “He tried reading up on it, but he didn't take the study all that seriously, claiming it would detract from his ability to protect me.”

“That... that's true,” Aliara said, her hands rubbing up and down the tops of her thighs.

“No no, dear,” Serena said, unbuttoning Sketch's pants, pushing them down towards his ankles. “Rub your hand right over your slit, where you're feeling the itch. I know you've been trained not to do it, but you need to ignore that now and learn how to bring yourself pleasure.”

“I... I shouldn't,” the Y'bari said, although her hands were slowly creeping towards the insides of her thighs. Her eyes were locked on his cock like it was a predator ready to strike at any moment. “It's... it's forbidden...”

The young princess giggled, giving Sketch's cock a tug. “All the fun stuff is.” He was hard, being in the presence of two beautiful female figures, even if one of them was marginally out of scale.

Aliara's ass rested on her heels, and finally, her legs spread wide as she brought one hand down to stroke across her large pussy, her back almost snapping into an arc as soon as her fingertips brushed across that flesh, a sharp sudden gasp of inhaled breath cutting through the air like a knife. “Oh fucking hells that's good...” Her pose was one of supplication, her head turned to one side, her breasts thrust proudly out for them to look at.

“And that's barely the tip of the spear, Aliara,” Serena said, licking her lips. “Even though Rozo was only what I'd call an adequate lover, he helped me discover the things I liked and the things I didn't. He was a piss poor student of that, too, I'm afraid, so he never learned to lean into those things, no matter how much I tried to teach him. But Sketch is excellent.”

“It's... it's so fucking difficult to *think*...” Aliara whined. “God, his *scent* is fucking *intoxicating*. And that cock of his... I could get so *tight* around it...”

“You want him, don't you, Centurion?” Serena taunted. “You're fucking *yearning* for him to just fuck you until your nerves are overwhelmed with signals they've never sent before.”

“N-n-n-no...? Y-y-y-yes? F-f-f-Fuck I don't... I don't fucking know. I can't... I can't fucking *think straight*, no fucking idea what I fucking want...” Her voice, which had been higher pitched before, was descending into a deep growl now.

“Her thermic levels have risen by several degrees, Sketch,” Helen's voice said, a certain level of amusement in her tone. “And her vagina is quite significantly more damp than it was when she arrived.”

“Gods, Helen,” Serena laughed. “You need to loosen up a bit. Pussy. Cunt. Twat. Snatch. Unless we're in a strictly *non*-sexual situation, I don't *ever* want to hear you use the word 'vagina' again.”

“Yes m'lady. Let me try again.” Helen paused for a moment, then in a wanton, sultry tone Sketch had never heard from her, spoke again. “Sketch, her cunt is fucking dripping for dick. For *your* dick, Captain. I think you ought to let her have it.” He'd never known Helen to have a sex voice before now, and the fact that she did both made him a little more nervous and excited him just a fraction.

“Gooood, Helen...” Serena cooed. “We'll make a slut out of you yet.” Her fingertips continued to slide up and down up his shaft slowly. “Same for you, Aliara. You'd never known what lust was like

until a few hours ago, and now it's the only fucking thing rolling around in that pretty head of yours.” Her other hand reached to slide along his back, pulling him closer to the edge of the cell, using her foot to slide the box of medicines until it was almost right up against the cell's force shield. “How old are you, Centurion?”

“75 Imperial cycles,” Aliara said, her fingers very cautiously stroking across her own clit.

“That means she's barely 25 in human terms, Sketch,” Serena chuckled. “What, was the House of Sanada your first assignment out of the academy?”

“It... it was, m'lady,” Aliara said, wincing a little bit. “This touching... it soothes but... it doesn't not *relieve*, it... it does not *alleviate*...”

“That's the problem with an unconventional uncapping, Centurion,” Serena said, an almost vindictive smile on her face. “The only time sexual pleasure is permitted for a Y'bari is if they are being paired with someone, although once they're paired, they have full access to it. But the uncapping? That's irreversible. That means if you go back to your people, you will be considered sullied, defiled, worthless. They will reject you at best, kill you most likely.”

“Why... why would you... *choose* to do this to me?”

“Nobody *chose* to do this to you, Y'bari,” Serena sighed. “Except maybe you yourself. You didn't *have* to come aboard *The Praeteritus* to deliver the Hapzix. You could've simply deposited it in our hangar and departed, but you decided you wanted to see the inside of this vessel. Because you were bored, if I had to guess, based on the state of your ship.”

“Kill me... or set me free... m'lady... you cannot be... this cruel...”

Serena's face clenched up in anger. “Your people killed every family member or friend I ever had, all because the Dominion decided the royals were more trouble than they were worth, so do not *speak* to me about what level of cruelty I am and am not capable of,” she seethed at the taller woman. “I'm the only royal left, and you have no idea the pressure that has me under.”

“Not... not the *only*...”

Serena's head wheeled up to try and stare Aliara in the eye. “What did you say?”

Aliara laughed, wheezing in a breath, as if realizing she had a card left to play in this game.

“You... you don't know... hahaha... oh I've got a bargaining chip now, m'lady...”

“You can't hold onto it for long, though, can you, Aliara?” The princess was attempting to regain control of the situation, but Sketch could see she was a little rattled, some piece of information having been introduced that didn't line up with her world view. “All you have to do is agree, take the pill and choose us instead of the Dominion,” she said, as she leaned her arms against the force shield that formed the door, moving to widen her legs a little bit, wiggling her ass in his direction, inviting Sketch to stick his cock inside of her.

“You... you make treason... sound... so easy...”

“It's *freedom* not *treason*, Aliara,” Serena said, sliding one arm off the wall to reach beneath her, rubbing at her own pussy, using her index and middle finger to spread her folds, not looking back, keeping her face pointed at the Y'bari. “You'd be bound to us, but we won't force you to do anything you don't want to, won't make kill your own people, although they're likely to be hunting us...”

“Trading... one master... for another...”

“Except we won't order, won't command, won't control...” Serena purred at the larger woman before looking back over her shoulder at Sketch. “Are you going to fuck me, or are you going to make me *beg* for it?” She giggled a little, licking her lips. “Is that what you want? To see me whimpering and pleading just like the Y'bari on the other side of the cell? 'Please, Storm Walker, shove your mighty cock inside me and let me know your love once more. Rip my young womb open and fuck me until my knees cannot lock... Fucking rail me!' Shit like that?”

“I mean,” Sketch chuckled, “I just wanted to hear you say it, so I knew you really wanted it.”

“Does it turn you on to hear me *say* it, Walker?” she said, turning her eyes back to focus on Aliara, as he moved to close the distance between them.

“If I deny it, you'll know I'm lying, and if I admit it, you'll have power over me,” he said, as the tip of his cock touched against the back of one of her thighs, making the princess shiver with anticipation, trying to manipulate her body to get herself into position.

“I only have as much power over you as you give me, and that will only ever equal, never exceed, as much as I give you over me in return,” she purred. “Now get that fucking dick inside of my twat before I start leaking all over the fucking floor...”

“I've got power over you, huh?” Sketch laughed as he lined the tip of his shaft up against her wet folds and then pushed forward, a strangled groan escaping his lips, one that was echoed by both Serena and Aliara. “That'll disappear once I get an Ashaka again.”

“You believe that, Walker, and you're a goddamn fool,” Serena moaned, lifting one of her feet before stamping it down hard on the metal floor, as if to try and recenter herself. “Fuck, you feel so fucking *good* inside of me... so fucking *full* of your *dick*...”

“You're a bitch, Serena,” Aliara whined. “Cruel. Heartless. Wicked.”

The bottom of Serena's fist thumped against the force shield, the almost completely transparent blockade responding with a slight ripple of blue coloration, as if simply noting the strike. “Far less cruel than your Dominion masters, Centurion,” she gasped. “Join us, and you will have access to your sexual side, to pleasure and lust and delight and joy.”

“Is... is that what this is?” she whimpered, her fingers strumming quickly against her pussy. “Why... why does it feel... like a hunger... that I cannot quench...”

“Because you can't orgasm until you're bonded,” she said. “A cruel fact of life put upon you by the Starless Dominion. Don't you want to let them be your past and not your future?”

“I... I don't...”

“Fuck, Walker, you're so *fucking* good at that,” Serena moaned carnally. “You're barely started and I'm already close to creaming all over that fat dick of yours...”

“I'm not far myself,” Walker said. “Several years of solitude have left me... sensitive...”

“Don't you fucking *dare* cum inside of me this time, Sketch,” she growled at him. “Not this *one* time. You think you're getting close, slow down...”

“What?”

“You fucking heard me!”

Aliara lifted one of her feet and kicked at the force wall, and while the blue coloration ripples were much more visible, the force shield held. “*FUCK!*” she shouted. “This is untenable! Intolerable! Gods below, it is *fucking evil*.”

“Yes yes *fucking yes*,” Serena yelled before she tensed up, and he could feel her seeping liquid all over his cock, even while she vibrated in the throes of a sudden orgasm that gave no real warning before it was upon her, as she banged her head against the force wall, every muscle in her body going into the shakes.

Aliara's other hand was pinching one of her nipples now, her face a contorted masque of lust and frustration all bubbling into one heady cocktail of emotions. “I can take no more of this!”

Serena slowly pulled herself forward, slipping Sketch's still hard cock out of her, the length of it gleaming with her milky white fuck cream, as she laughed. “Then which pill will it be, Aliara?”

“The... the upper ri- ... no... the second tray, bottom center, with what looks like two circles with an overextended diamond between them...”

Serena knelt down and lifted the top tray from the box, setting it aside, finding a compartment with a single pill in it, four other compartments to the left and three to the right, the top of the compartment having two ovals with a symbol in the that looked a bit more like four X's shoved together to form a diamond in the center of them. The pill itself was clear with a sort of swirling mix of blue and red metallic looking liquids inside the pill, as if the two liquids were refusing to mesh together, each holding its own in a battle. “This it?”

Aliara glanced over at it, then nodded feverishly. “That's it. Give it.”

“You know what it means, don't you?”

“You know I *fucking* do, Princess,” Aliara snarled. “Do you?”

“Just confirming your choice,” Serena said, a smug look of satisfaction on her face. “Helen, lower the force shield.”

“Excuse me, m'lady?” Helen's voice said. “Are... are you certain that's wise?”

“We've tormented the Centurion long enough, Helen,” the princess replied.

“Centurion no longer,” Aliara sighed, although to Sketch's ears, she didn't sound particularly sad about that development.

“Lower the door,” Serena repeated.

“Captain?” Helen asked, wanting Sketch's confirmation.

To his eye, Serena and Aliara had been engaged in some sort of battle of wits, but it seemed like a victor had been discovered, based on the princess's confidence. “We're going to have to trust her sooner or later, Helen,” he replied. “Lower it.”

There was a pause, much longer than Helen had ever taken in executing an order before, but after what felt like a minute or two, the force shield dropped, and Aliara leaned forward, then flopped onto her stomach before rolling onto her back, as if she did not even have the energy to keep herself even partially off the ground. “Give me the pill, princess,” Aliara huffed, her breathing jagged and uneven still. “And your word of loyalty to me as I am giving to you.”

“To *us* ,” Serena corrected. “We're the crew of *The Praeteritus* now, and so will we be until either we are no more, or the ship is.” She held out her hand with the pill, as Aliara opened her mouth wide. Serena dropped the pill into the Y'bari's mouth, then looked over to Sketch. “Are you close?”

“I've eased off a bit, but I'm not far,” he said, as Aliara swallowed the pill. “Why?”

“Come here, Walker,” she said with a soft smile.

He moved to stand almost over the giant woman, as Serena's hand began to fondle his balls. “When you're close, tell me,” she said quietly. “Look at this magnificent specimen of femininity you have before you, Miles. She wants to worship you, to adore you. But more importantly, she wants you to *fuck* her, to teach her what the sensations of orgasms are like, and to reward her for choosing risk over security, choosing adventure over safety, choosing lust over fear. She, much like I, will be your ideal lover, a warrior woman in the world and a fucking *freak* in the sheets. We will devote part of each day studying what makes you tick, makes you shudder, makes you weak in the knees. We will learn every sexual thought you have ever entertained, and will bring them all to life vividly.”

Serena's eyes were focused on his, and they were practically gazing into his soul. “You... you just met me...”

“Shhhh.... Shhh shhh shhh... I know that and you know that, but our bodies? Our bodies are going to learn whatever it takes to make you orgasm endlessly and as intensely as your does to us,” she purred. “Look at her... just look at her... she wants to taste your seed, don't you Aliara?”

“I... I can't fight this... I yield... you win... if it will break this dam... then you... you *must* claim me... you must *own* me... I am yours, Storm Walker... if... if you will have me...”

“What... what do I do?” he asked the princess.

“Are you ready to cum?”

“Nearly there...”

“When you're about to pop, you need to shove your cock into Aliara's mouth as much as you can, and make sure she takes all of the seed you are going to give her, and that she licks your dick clean, both of your juices *and* mine... You want that, don't you, Aliara?”

“Yes, m'lady.”

“And what will that make you?”

“A Centurion no longer.”

“And instead?”

“Yours... your concubine and warrior... your...” She inhaled a breath, as if she was letting go of

some long-held beliefs and embracing her new identity. “Your fuckpet, your slut, your protector and whore and lover and soldier and whatever the fuck else you two want me to be, but *fucking take me already for fuck's sake! BIND ME!*”

The way she began to talk faster, more enthusiastically and more energetically, it was clear to Sketch that whatever reservations she'd had before, they were left in the stardust of the ship's wake, and the Y'bari was opening her mouth as wide as she could, sticking her tongue out, her amber eyes looking up at him imploringly, almost desperate, as if the wait was literally eating her up inside.

He was about to push into her mouth when Serena moved to sit down on the floor, lifting up Aliara's shoulders and head, propping her up so that the Y'bari's mouth was exactly at waist level. “Well?” Serena laughed. “She's waiting. *Feed your slut.*”

Between the needy look on Aliara's face and the mischievous grin on Serena's, he was about to pop when Aliara's arms lifted up suddenly, her massive hands grabbing his asscheeks to force his feet to slide across the floor until he felt his cock enter her mouth, like she was trying to swallow him whole. The increased size of her didn't mean that her mouth was much deeper, and when he felt the head of his dick touch against the back of her throat, he placed both hands on top of Aliara's head and let loose.

Despite the fact that he'd given Serena two loads over the last twenty-four hours, there was something unique and unusual about this, the way that Aliara was holding his body against her face, refusing to let him pull back, even as she swallowed and drained his balls of jizz in addition to licking up every bit of Serena's cream off of his shaft.

Somewhere in the middle of it, the Y'bari let loose a cathartic moan of pleasure that sent shivers up his spine, being that his cock was absorbing all of it, and it made him give a couple of extra spurts when he thought he was dry. The tremors lasted for a long moment, and then he felt her hands suddenly fall off of his ass and bang against the floor, her tongue stopping in its movement, as she went slack, almost completely lifeless, and Sketch stepped back, sliding his softening cock from her lips, as he noticed they were moving.

He bent down and could hear as the quietest of whispers “Imprinting, human, subjects: 2” repeated over and over again. Perhaps, he thought to himself, this bonding was a lot less figurative than he'd been expecting...

Chapter Four

Sketch found himself still trying to adapt to sleeping with other bodies next to his when he crawled out of bed in the wee hours of the morning, having to extract himself from Serena and Aliara's limbs, something he found he was still rather adept at doing.

In his younger days, he'd been quite the ladies man, as well as quite the drinker, and so while he wasn't proud of it, he'd had more than a few mornings where he'd woken up in a strange bed with a stranger woman (or women) and had needed to sneak out as quietly as possible. Despite not having used those skills in several years, he found they had come back to him naturally, and he'd been able to escape from their cocoon of arms and legs without too much fuss, and without waking either of them.

When he needed to think, he liked to simply walk the halls of the ship, as if the chance to have his feet beneath him helped clear his mind. He'd had plenty of time to do that over the past few years, so he knew most of the ship pretty well at this point, although when he found himself nearing the hangar, he knew he needed to step in and take a look at the Y'bari dart resting in their hangar bay.

The long sleek slender black dagger of a ship didn't take up a lot of space in their hangar bay, since *The Praeteritus* could hold several small fighters. Sketch had considered using it as hauling space, but there weren't easy places to strap things down in here *other* than ships. There wasn't much remarkable about *The Barrow* other than how immaculate shape it was in. Fighter ships used for deep path patrol and escort work tended to take a lot of micro damage, traveling through space without heavily used pathways, and so they often had pockmark scarring on their surfaces. Other than a few minor blemishes that looked fresh enough that they had to have been gained on the ship's way to meet

up with *The Praeteritus* and Aliara hadn't had a chance to fix them yet. That meant she tended to this ship like she didn't have anything else. Maybe she didn't.

With so little known about the Y'bari, Sketch felt like he was just making educated guesses, based on what little information he could glean from the various accidental bits of information the Starless Dominion had accidentally let slip through. Their culture, their weapons, their tactics, all of it was the kind of thing they kept mostly confidential.

But here was a Y'bari battle dart he could just peel apart if he wanted. Of course, that would bring a bigger Y'bari cruiser the minute he cracked the hull, so he decided to just do a visual inspection. The weapons were internal, hidden beneath paneling and folds, so he could only look at the external engines, and the tech was epochs beyond his understanding.

Even when he'd been a career troubleshooter, the tech aspect had never really been his focus, so he specialized with weapons systems, and even then just in the weapons he was typically working with at that moment in time.

Helen had done what she could to scan the ship, but the outer layer of the Y'bari vessel was covered in some sort of stealth coating that made it impenetrable to her sensors. She'd informed Sketch that once Aliara had removed some of the plates, at least temporarily, she would have a much better understanding of the vessel, but Sketch had replied that they would take it one step at a time.

After leaving the hangar, he headed into the library to read up a little about the Monarch Purge. Before his slumber, the Four Great Houses had the default political system, and while it hadn't affected his day-to-day life much at the time, he'd still had to be aware of it. He wished Serena had simply added the royal archives to Helen's already exhaustive database, but without it, he was limited to what information they'd picked up along the way over the last several years.

He'd only been out of the ice for about a year when the Monarch Purge had happened, and it had been given such little news that he'd assumed the combined Royal House had become something of a vestigial legacy under the control of the Starless Dominion. The reports were that the Royals had been discovered to be plotting against the benevolent rule of the Dominion, and as such, were executed as traitors, with no Royals said to survive.

As much as he tried to dig, he couldn't find any real information beyond the propaganda, so he resolved to look up all of it later when he had time that included access to Serena's archives. He also didn't want to look up any information about his late friend, because that kind of query into the Dominion's databases would *definitely* draw up some red flags.

They would be at Relling Gate in a few days at their current pace, so he decided they would need a day or two to stop somewhere along the way and think, to figure out how they were going to move forward with all of this. A quick glance through the nearby planets found a planet in the midst of terraforming called Wystoria that was basically abandoned, just one completely automated terraforming machine running near the magnetic northern pole. Wystoria was an ocean world, although despite the surface being completely covered in H₂O, there wasn't any natural life on it. The machine in the north was set to be drilling down to stimulate the molten core, to cause a number of volcanoes to spring forth and build land masses on the surface, but it was still several months away from bearing fruit, meaning it was nothing but endless empty water in all directions. A perfect little place to stop and take a breather, Sketch thought to himself, as he ordered Helen to descend down through the atmosphere, which he was pleased to find was already breathable.

One of the things he'd found out about *The Praeteritus* early on, which he'd come to love, was that she could be put down just about anywhere without too much of a fuss, with a variety of ways to land, vertical if the target zone was narrow, horizontal if there was plenty of space to stretch out. The ship even had enough buoyancy that it could be laid down flat in any large body of water and it would stay atop like an old Earthen boat. That last was what he was going to do on Wystoria.

While there was a small amount of shimmy and shake going on internally when *The Praeteritus* burst through the atmosphere, the internal inertia dampeners and stabilizers kept most of the ship from

even shaking so much as an inch or two. He wondered if Serena and Aliara had even woken up as he laid the ship down in the middle of a calm patch of the ocean, the waves small and not overly disruptive. Then he went to do something he rarely got to do, sit on the outside of his ship.

He headed to the top hatch, letting Helen open it for him, as he stepped out into fresh atmosphere. Helen was recharging the solar cells and filling the oxygen tanks with the local atmosphere while he moved to sit down on top *The Praeteritus's* red metal hull, looking towards the horizon, having picked a spot where he was able to look and see the strange thin pink clouds just slightly obscuring the descent of the three suns, one large, one medium and one small, the trinary star at the heart of the system bidding farewell to this side of the planet in a short while.

Sunsets were such a glorious thing, he made it a point to see one at least once a month whenever he was able, often more. He knew the science behind it, but it evoked such a sense of awe and wonder, that sense of respect for the power of the universe and all its majesty.

“Helen said I'd find you up here,” Aliara said to him as she climbed up and onto the deck. She was dressed in loose fitting pants and a rather fetching tight white tank top that was sheer enough that he could see the outline of her nipples through it. “Serena's still sleeping, so I thought maybe you and I should have a talk before she woke up and joined us. How are you feeling?”

“I should be the one asking *you* that,” he chuckled. “Hopefully your bioshaping wasn't too painful? I've never known a species to do that.”

“Yes, well, the Y'bari aren't entirely a *natural* species,” she said, looking down at her hands as she moved to sit down beside him. “The Starless Dominion has been tinkering with our genetic code for eons. We don't know our home planet, we don't know what we were like before the Dominion found us – our history, our past, all of it is from before the Dominion arrived is gone. The physiological adaptation process was something the Dominion built into our species long ago, but the level of bonding and devotion to anyone *other* than the Dominion is a relatively new development. When they conquered your people, they went digging through your entire well of history, searching for anything they could use, because no part of a conquered species should go unapplied. They discovered in the forgotten annals of your species knowledge repositories a formula that was once used to treat a great plague millennium ago, before your race had done more than dip its collective toe into the wide black. And they adapted it and used it to bond the select few of us that were chosen to be specific protectorate services. We keep one pill of it in our pill kit, in case we're assigned to be a guardian for someone specific. It's rarely used, but when it is, our devotion to our protectee is unquestioning. That's why the Y'bari who were bonded to human royals died attempting to keep them safe, even though the orders had come from above. So yeah, if it comes between you or the Dominion now, I'm always going to choose you. Or Serena.”

“I can imagine you have some mixed feelings about that.”

“Why would you think that?” she said, curiously. “Just because I'm Y'bari doesn't mean I'm blind to the attitudes and approaches the Starless Dominion have been using my entire lifetime. But I couldn't exactly just leave, now, could I?”

“How long are you bonded to us?”

“For life,” she said. “So unless I die, or the two of you do, we're together forever, which, I have to admit, doesn't seem all that bad.”

“Aren't your commanding officers going to come looking for you?”

“That's what I was going to talk to you about, actually,” she said. “We need to fake my death. It won't be all that difficult, really. I can just strip out the transponder, strap a radio beacon into it, then use a rocket to fly it into one of the exposed volcanoes on this planet.”

“Aren't we taking a risk by keeping your dart?”

She sighed, nodding. “We are, but I'd like to request that we do it anyway. I can think of how useful it would be to have a Y'bari battle dart at *The Praeteritus's* disposal. I know you have a couple of shuttles, but my weaponry could be quite useful now and then. Her natural shielding will keep her from

being detected by ring gate scanners, so all we would need would be a tarp of some kind any time the hangar was exposed. Since you're a Storm, I'm guessing you've been making a living as a smuggler?"

Sketch chuckled, bouncing his eyes a little. "I prefer 'subtle cargo relocater' but yeah, smuggler's about right. Before I was a Storm, I was a mercenary, so I learned a lot about how smugglers worked, because we needed to transport weapons and prisoners discretely. Anything I can take the time to learn, I do so, the hard way. So when I came out of the deep freeze, I had a lot of tech to get caught up on, especially with all the shit the Dominion brought in, but the old smuggler tactics still held up pretty well. I started investigating fences and found someone to rep me for jobs who was willing to put up with my... eccentricities... and I've been laying low ever since. Although my Lingham spores excuse won't be holding up anymore, so we'll need to find a new way to discourage people from coming onto the ship. Speaking of which, are we going to need to worry about your presence raising any red flags anywhere we go?"

"I'm going to have Helen do some minor cosmetic surgery to my face – nothing too severe, but adding a few tribal tattoos over one of my eyes and along my cheek, as well as making a slight tweak to my nose. It'll make me look like a P'nox, the wild offshoot of the Y'bari who are allowed to run free, considered too genetically aberrant to be allowed to join the Y'bari military forces. Usually P'nox are left to die out in desolate areas, but some have survived, and they have formed a few colonies scattered across the stars," she said. "Assuming that's okay with you and Serena. If you would be bothered by physical changes, we can try another solution."

"Are *you* comfortable with it, Aliara?"

She tilted her head to look at him, a strange expression on her face. "I... I don't understand the question, sir."

He raised a hand up and sighed. "Not sir. Sketch or Miles, Captain if you must, but you don't have to call me sir."

"But... I'm bound to you."

"And I appreciate that. But *The Praeteritus* is a freehold ship, and everyone who serves aboard her does so at their own discretion. In the heat of battle, I'm calling the shots, but any time we can stop and have a discussion about things, majority vote wins."

"You mean if I can convince Aliara to agree with me," Serena said, moving up out of the hatch, "then we can outvote you?" She was wearing another of his shirts like a dress, the bottom edge of it hanging almost to her knees. He wasn't entirely certain she had anything on underneath it.

"Well, Helen gets a vote too, and if it's a tie, the Captain's vote breaks the tie," he said with a chuckle. "It seems like the Starless Dominion feels differently, but I think AI are entitled to the same rights as any other intelligence. I had to override Helen's compulsive need to ask me to constantly reset her, but other than that slight modification, she's entirely grown into her own person."

"But what he's saying, Aliara, is that he wants you to make up your own mind on things. I know you're used to being a soldier, following orders and never worrying about the consequences, but it's clear that hasn't been working out for you, so maybe it's time to try something new, don't you think?"

"I... I guess so," she sighed as Serena settled down on the other side of Sketch, the two of them flanking him as the three of them slowly watched the sun descend beneath the horizon.

After the sunset, the trio climbed back into *The Praeteritus* and headed up for orbit. Once they had a stable position, they headed down to the hangar bay and removed a torpedo from *The Barrow*, as well as the ship's transponder. Helen reprogrammed the transponder data so that it would send prerecorded data streams showing *The Barrow* had encountered catastrophic engine failure and was falling into a volcano right up until the moment the torpedo dropped into the lava, and within moments, the signal would die and the Y'bari carrier ship would write off Centurion Aliara as a casualty of mechanical failure. They set the torpedo to engage just as *The Praeteritus* was on the edge of sensor range, so they could follow the signal and make sure the torpedo didn't malfunction. Just as planned, the device sent the signal and then flung itself into the volcano.

Aliara was dead; long live Aliara.

Over lunch, they discussed their next plan of action, and Serena was quite excited when it came to her turn to suggest where they headed. "I think we need to swing by Jamolti, the second planet in the Dally System, just off of the Fenth Gate," Serena said to them, tapping a part of the holographic systems map floating in front of them.

"Jamolti's a graveyard planet, Serena," Aliara said. "I'm not sure what you're expecting to find there, unless you're suggesting we go grave robbing."

"That's *exactly* what I'm suggesting we do."

"Which part of 'low profile' do you think that falls under?" Sketch asked, leaning back in his chair with a sigh. "We'd be calling all sorts of attention to ourselves."

"Look, I know how to bypass their basic security, and we're not going to be there all that long, and we're not going to take all that much," Serena said. "So I think as long as we're careful and don't let Sketch interact with other people too much, we should be fine. I don't think that'll be a problem anyway, considering there aren't even guards watching over the human royalty chambers any more. The Y'bari guards were called back after the royals were killed off, and nobody really pays much attention to the human sector over there anyway, since it's not all that big. But we can find what you're looking for there, Sketch."

"Wait, what?"

"I think there's an Ashaka buried there, along with someone from your order. It wouldn't be listed, so nobody would even know we took it."

"I sense a down side here, Serena."

The princess frowned for a moment, looking away before looking back up at him. "There's a good chance that the Starless Empire would learn I survived if we do this."

"What? No!" Sketch said, throwing his hands up in the air. "That's not just foolish; that's *insane!* The fact that you're off their radar is the only thing keeping you safe right now in the first place!"

"Okay, maybe *good* chance is a bit stronger than I meant, but there's a *chance*, okay? But you need to be able to walk among the world again, and we can't pretend that we're ever going to be able to do that without you ever getting your Ashaka back! They aren't big, they're easy to conceal, and they'll let us start interacting with people again, which will raise our exposure a little, but will lower people's suspicions of us a thousand times!" She was pacing around the room as she spoke, like she was presenting a case before a courtroom. "And as much as I love the sort of low-frequency sexual hum I feel around you all the time, I could also use a fucking break from it now and then! I'm the one who would be at risk, and *I'm* willing to take that risk!"

Sketch stood up and moved over to her, taking her hand in his own. "You're not the only one at risk anymore, Serena. We're a crew now, which means we all look after one another. If you think the risk is important enough to take, we can put it to a vote."

"I say we go," Aliara immediately said. "You may not recognize it, Storm Walker, but you've been removed from social contact so long that your personal skills have atrophied some. Not unforgivably so, but little small nonverbal cues have begun to escape you, and we need you to be at your sharpest. And you both need me at my best. I can't be that if I constantly feel like I want to bend over and present my cunt for your taking, which I very much do right now."

"That's two in favor of us going," Serena said. "Helen?"

"Captain?" Helen's voice said, perhaps with a slight undercurrent of nervousness.

"No no, Helen," he said. "This is your call and your call alone."

The air was silent for a moment before Sketch felt the ship's positional thrusters burst for a moment, as the ship began to turn. "Setting course for Nymar Gate, which will take us to Fenth Gate after three jumps. We should arrive at Jamolti within three days' time."

"Good, now that that's settled, you can fuck my brains out," Aliara said, peeling the tank top

over her head, exposing her stiff as rocks sky-blue nipples. “Because I'm hoping it clears my fucking head. It has been so fucking difficult being this near to you, *smelling* you, and not having been properly sated yet.”

“Well, I—”

“It's not your fault, Sketch,” Aliara said, lowering herself down onto her knees. “I'm genuinely looking forward to it. The sensations I felt when I swallowed your seed... it was alien and foreign to me in a way I can't quite comprehend.” She bent forward and laid her arms down on the floor of the ship before placing her head atop of them. “But I'm ready now. Ready to be fucked and to feel what's worth walking away from an empire for.” She reached behind her and pulled her pants down to her knees, exposing her newly reshaped pussy. True to Serena's word, it had contracted and shrunk over the night, biomorphing so that it would match with his own cock in size. The contrast of her smaller snatch against her powerful thighs looked a little unusual, out of scale with the rest of her body, but only in minor measures, and not in any way unappealing. “Well? Are you waiting for an invitation?”

Serena laughed, licking her lips as she pulled Sketch over towards Aliara's supplicating body. “Look at how eager she is for you, dear. All wet and wanton. Your warrior woman eager to feel you enter her for the first time. You're going to have to teach her all about pleasure.”

“Well then,” Sketch said with a laugh. “Let's start somewhere unexpected.”

He knelt down behind Aliara's form and lowered his mouth down to her slit, letting his tongue snake out to run along it, as she shuddered, lifting one hand up before slamming a fist down on the metal floor, a sharp groan of pleasure shredded from her throat. “*FUCK!*” the giant woman shouted.

“You okay there, Ali?” Serena asked teasingly.

“My... my breath caught, and my body trembled, and this wave of euphoria just rolled over me like an ocean wave.”

“You mean you orgasmed.”

“Was *that* what that was?” she whimpered as Sketch's tongue pushed its way inside of her, making the tall woman squirm and writhe, unsure if she wanted to pull away or push her cunt further onto his face. “I've... I've only done that once before, when you were down my throat.”

“Oh, sweetie,” Serena said, kneeling down next to Aliara. “It gets so much better.” She leaned in and locked lips with the giant woman, who moaned into the princess's mouth, as they tangled tongues with one another.

Sketch found himself standing up as Aliara waggled her ass in his direction. His cock had swelled on its own, and when he tugged his pants down, he moved to place the tip of his shaft against her slit. He was going to take it slow, but Aliara had other things in mind and once he was beginning to slide into her, she thrust back hard to make him push the entire length inside of her.

He almost yelped in surprise, his breath catching a moment, as she was *mercilessly* snug around his cock, and he felt like if she wasn't as slick as she was, movement might have even been a touch painful, but instead, it felt like a *perfect* fit around his prick.

“Fucking *hell*,” he wheezed.

“Like it was custom made for you, isn't it?”

“I... I can barely think straight...”

“It's okay, Miles... your first time with her's not to going to be long,” Serena laughed. “You should see her face. She can't clamp her eyes shut any tighter. She wants it just as much as you do.”

He was almost embarrassed by how little time it took him to orgasm, but the moment he started to release his seed inside of the Y'bari warrior, her entire body devolving into endless spasms and shakes before the two of them slumped, his cock softening inside of her, but her cunt still snug enough around him to keep him from slipping out, as Serena went to get a blanket, throwing it over the two of them even as she crawled underneath it to join them.

By the time they arrived at Nymar Gate, Helen had adjusted Aliara's face to make her look like a P'nox rather than a soldier Y'bara. She had given Aliara a metal bar piercing at the top of her nose

between her eyes, and layered three orange-red streak tattoos across her face like bestial claw marks. Her hair had been let down and shaken into a bit of a wild state, but had also been tied back at the back of her head, to make her look more like she was part of the crew.

She wasn't the only one, as Serena had gone through some modifications as well, her hair having been dyed into a chocolate brown, all one consistent color, heavy makeup applied to her face but designed to look like it was also tattoos, everything they could to make her look nothing like the princess's mildly famous face.

Sketch himself tried his best to look as much as he normally did, making sure to throw on a long shirt covered in oil and grease, smudging some on his own face, to give that impression that he was always fixing something that had recently broken.

When the holovid sprung to life, he saw a familiar face staring back at him on the other side of the comlink. "Hey! Sketch! Long time no see! What brings you back this way?" The man's name was Ashe, and he had been one of the watch commanders at Nymar Gate for as long as Sketch had been moving cargo. He was always friendly – a little *too* friendly for Sketch's liking – but also tended not to pay too much attention to what *The Praeteritus* was carrying or where she was heading. "Do... do you have *crew* finally?"

"Mmmm. Nell's my new sys admin," he said, gesturing to Serena, who offered a bored wave, as if she'd rather be spending time with her code, "and that's Anna, my new P'Nox enforcer. Picked her up a few weeks back after some hillbilly redneck fucks decided they wanted to try and pirate my cargo instead of letting me do my damn job."

"You don't seem like the kind that would get rattled by a few dust pirates making empty threats."

"They tried to harpoon my ship, Ashe, and as tough as I am, I'm only one man, so I figured having a trained gun be part of the crew was long overdue."

"No disagreements here, Sketch. Your crew contracts include... side benefits?" he leered.

"Ashe, stop talking before she decides to come over there and give you a boot colonostomy."

"Yeah yeah yeah, what's your final destination this run?"

"Jamolti. Delivering a box of pilgrim ashes to their final destination as part of a columbarium for these Brookians."

"Ain't a whole lotta Brookians left these days."

"That's why they're paying so much to get their ashes with the rest of'em."

"I guess holy people's money spends like anybody else's," Ashe said. "A'right, you're cleared for jump. Safe travels friend."

The call cut off and all three of them let out a sigh of relief.

"I'm guessing that means *The Barrow* didn't show in a scan?" Serena asked.

"I told you that it wouldn't," Aliara replied.

"You never know until you test it," Sketch replied, as the ship moved to settle in the center of the ring, as the giant structure around them warmed up and then flung them across space. A few days and several jumps later, they found themselves in orbit around Jamolti, a tombworld covered in statues, graves, tombs and temple to deities, an entire planet built as a graveyard for a wide variety of races.

"I remember the Brookian columbarium being near the human royalty chambers, so put down close towards it, and we can just walk the distance between the two," Serena said, as Helen started to bring down the ship through the atmosphere.

"Robbing the dead's always been considered bad luck," Sketch grumbled as *The Praeteritus* found a landing zone not far from the Brookian structure, the human royalty section only a short walk away, and the whole sector didn't seem to have any other living souls in it. While the tombworld had some security on it, it tended to focus on the areas where more imperial wealth and garishness was centered.

"You need an Ashaka, otherwise you're never going to be able to fit in on the more populated

worlds, Sketch,” Serena sighed. “I don't like it either, but this is a starting place for us, okay?”

“Whose Ashaka will I be taking?”

“It belonged to a member of The Calm named Fury Rose,” she said as the three of them walked down the gangplank onto the bleak, desolate stony surface of the planet.

“Oh,” Sketch said, clenching his hand into a fist. “Well that might complicate things a little.”

The three of them started to walk down a cleared footpath that would lead them to both the Brookian building and the human royal catacombs. “Why's that?”

“It's probably nothing.”

“If it was nothing, you would've *said* nothing,” Aliara scolded. “Out with it.”

“I'm *sure* it's just a rumor.”

“What was?”

“Well...” he started then stopped. They walked for at least a minute before he finally found the strength to say it. “Legend has it that Fury Rose was cursed.”

“That's not funny, Miles.”

“I'm not *laughing*, Serena,” he countered. “Let's hope it's just a tall tale.”

“Considering your luck?” Aliara chuckled. “It's probably an understatement...”

Chapter Five

The surface of the planet was nothing but dead rock and mausoleums as far as the eye could see, and if Helen was to be believed, there wasn't another living soul basically within ten minutes flight in any direction. The defenses were all automated, and many of them were basically antiques at this point so Sketch wasn't especially worried about them, although there was always a chance that a patrol could come swooping by or that they could trip some alarm he wasn't perfect at dealing with. There wasn't even much in the way of weather on the planet either, simply because the oxygen was produced and balanced by machines, and there wasn't much in the way of things to consume that oxygen.

It was a tombworld in nearly every sense of the word.

Sketch had expected the buildings to be closer together, but it was a decent walk from the landing spot past the Brookian structure over towards the tombs of human royalty. They hadn't been originally located on Jamolti, but when the Starless Dominion had taken over, they'd insisted that the remains of the human royal families be kept on the Dominion's primary tombworld like all other royalists in fiefdoms under their control. A large structure had been built and everything had been interred from their original home on Earth and relocated to Jamolti, something the human royals had been told was a great honor, although in his reading up on the Dominion, he'd been able to recognize their *real* reason for doing so.

With all the deceased royalty of the Dominion's subjects on one distant tombworld in the middle of nowhere, there were less reminders of times when all these species had been under their own guidance and not under the iron fist of the Starless Dominion. Royals were contained to their palaces. The currency was that of the Dominion. Anything to remind subjects of the times before the Dominion held control was constantly being minimized and swept under the proverbial rug. Beneath the Dominion's iron fist, royalty was like a caged animal in a zoo, something the people had to think to go and look at, instead of it being constantly around them.

And if ever the royalty got to be more trouble than they were worth, it also made it much easier to remove them as well, lessons the humans had learned the hard way.

Sketch found himself looking at the building more closely as they approached it, and it had clearly been built by the Dominion itself with only a smattering of care towards what the humans whose remains were interred in would think of it. There were handfuls of pieces with human iconography scattered around the place, but it was all obfuscated beneath layer after layer of Dominion stamping, revealing a complete lack of understanding of who and what humans were. Or, more likely, the Dominion just didn't give a shit. The imagery was strange – people with antique musical

instruments and microphones, performances, thralls of people in worship to the performers. There also seemed to be one figure who recurred in multiple different mosaics across the surface of the building, a strange heavysset man in a white suit that seemed to be adorned with jewels, a large coif of onyx black hair atop of his head, clinging to a microphone as legions of adoring humans heaped praise upon him, droplets of sweat flying from him in every direction.

Parts of the building had become slightly run down, dings and dents peppering the outside of the structure, and the dust that had accumulated on the path leading up to it was thick. Nobody had been near the human mausoleum in quite some time, which made Sketch feel a little bit more relaxed about their whole endeavor, because the last thing he needed was some nosy guard coming across them. It seemed, however, like the Dominion liked to keep humanity out of sight and out of mind.

“I guess I should've been here more often when I was still considered royalty,” Serena sighed. “No one's been in this place for far, *far* too long.”

“In that you humans and we Y'bari are alike – we have no use for our dead either,” Aliara said.

“Well, we've got *some* use for them today,” Sketch said as his eyes combed over the area around the outskirts of the building, looking for some sort of automated defenses that they might have missed, but finding none. “Assuming you're right about this.”

“I'm right more often than not,” Serena said proudly.

“I've been looking through the royal archives and I don't see anything about Fury Rose listed in there, Aliara,” Sketch said. “Hell, I didn't even see her name *mentioned* all that much.”

“It wouldn't be,” she said as they approached the front door of the mausoleum. “We had to keep most traces of The Calm hidden from the main records in case the Dominion obtained a copy of our archives, which is why there's a severe decline in us talking about them internally after Dominion took over. There's lots of things that are still in there, but they're encoded, and I'll teach you the code. We grew very paranoid about being kept so close to the Dominion after humanity's submission. The only reason I even know about this particular internment is because of the stories your friend Lord Ardbard told me growing up. He was friends with Fury Rose, said while she could be unpredictable, she was also remarkably insightful.”

“Unpredictable,” Sketch laughed, examining the door as he shook his head. “That's certainly one word for it. She often claimed to hear voices no one else did. Keep in mind, she was able to change the minds of hundreds of thousands of people, but even many in The Calm itself were never entirely comfortable around her. The tools of our trade, the abilities we wielded as Calm... they came incredibly easy to Rose. *Too* easy if the other Furies were to be believed. They were worried that she held too much power, and that it had taken a toll on her mind. I sort of thought it sounded like superstition, especially since she'd only just become a Fury when I joined up in The Calm. People tend to gossip in any workplace, you know?”

“But... hearing voices?”

“Could've just been eccentricities,” he said hopefully as they came to stand directly in front of the door, his hands reaching out to smooth against it. “So how do we get in?”

“We've got two options,” Serena sighed. “We can break in and hope the alarm doesn't go off, or we can use my access code, which will guarantee the door will open without an alarm, unless my ID code has been tagged, in which case they'll definitely know I'm alive, and then we'll be in an entirely different kind of mess.”

“What are the odds your ID code has been tagged to send an alert?” Sketch asked before turning to Aliara. “Is that the kind of thing the Y'bari would do?”

Aliara looked amused by that suggestion, tilting her head almost scoldingly. “Y'bari troopers don't do *anything* that we aren't directly ordered to. As dangerous as they may have seemed before their deposal, I don't think the Dominion gave the human royals a second thought after they were slaughtered,” the ex-Y'bari soldier said. “My vote is for using her code.”

“That's sort of how I feel,” Serena said, approaching the terminal. “I think my code's still going

to be good, and I'm not all that concerned about what happens when the door opens. Even if an alarm goes off, it's not going to be responded to very quickly. There isn't anybody all that nearby on world, and if some kind of notice is sent to the Dominion, they're several hours away, at the very least. We can go and have ourselves a looting before anyone shows up, I'm sure of it."

"Fine," Sketch said, pulling his cloak a bit closer around him reflexively. He'd gotten out of the habit of trusting other people, so this all still sat a little uncomfortably with him, but it seemed like both Serena and Aliara were intent on being in his life for the long haul, so it would be best to just accept them as allies and putting faith in them.

He just needed to remember how to actually *do* that.

Serena stepped right up to a scanner and placed her palms flat on ID readers, her eyes looking straight forward as an automated system scanned her. "State access code."

"O'Quincy, White Dwarf, Zulu Baker Echo Echo three three seven."

"Access granted," the door replied drearily, as the two sheets of massive metal slid open to allow them access into the tomb. "You have... three hours... of access before doors will close. Do not exceed time allotted or you will be locked inside until an attendant can come and verify your identity, at which point you will be released. Thank you."

Sketch tapped the syslink on his neck to open a channel to Helen. "Helen, set a timer for two hours. At the end of it, give us a call and tell us to get our asses out of here. I don't even want to be here *that* long, but who knows how long it'll take us to find what we need and haul ass."

"You got it, boss. Stay safe."

"Only thing I know how to do well. Sketch out."

The path inside the building wasn't covered with as much dust as Sketch had expected it to be, but he could see there were tiny little air vents blowing across the ground, recirculating the atmosphere, and keeping anything from settling on the floors. That only applied to the floors, though, and all the sarcophagi near the entrance had a caked on layer of grime atop of them. There were also cobwebs linked among most of the ceilings, although he found himself wondering what spiders could possibly feast on in here.

The first few caskets upon entry were some of the oldest and most well-known members of the human royalty lineages, Sketch assumed, but he'd never been much of a royalist, so he didn't pay any of it much mind. The names might have held reverence to many other humans, but not to him.

"What we're looking for will be on the bottom floor," Serena told them. "Down among the people who nobody ever came to visit."

"Why down there? I would think the bowels would be the areas that got searched the most," Sketch said.

"You're thinking like a smuggler, love, and not like a member of a noble house," Serena said with a soft laugh. "The basement is where we tend to put all the people we don't like to think about but can't afford to formally get rid of. It'll look a little showy, but that's just because we had to jam our junk somewhere, and that was it."

He found it odd, walking through stacks of bodies within cases, so much gaudy decoration on the outsides of boxes that only held bones and dust at this point. The amount of wealth dedicated to the honoring of the dead had always confused Sketch. The dead were dead. They had no need for such things nor could they appreciate them. He very much wanted to steal some of the decoration layered on top of the boxes, but felt that Serena would've taken to that rather poorly. After all, she was surely related to some of the people buried around them.

The passageways were narrow, without much room to maneuver, so they had to walk one-by-one through the hallways, something which only made him even more nervous. Sure, the defensive choke points would prevent anyone from coming in after them, but it would also seriously impede their ability to escape under pressure. He just hoped that it wouldn't be necessary. But his old soldier instincts had never truly left him, even as atrophied as they were.

As the three of them descended down the stairs, Sketch noted that there was no chance anyone had used them in at least a decade. The whole area reminded him of old ghost stories soldiers he'd served with had often told. Military men were, strangely, often superstitious by nature, and the idea of graverobbing would've put some of his old cohorts on edge, but Sketch had never bought into any of that. The newly dead and the long since dead differed in only one real way – time. Sketch had other reasons to be cautious around graveyards.

It was much more about who was protecting the dead than the dead themselves.

They moved not one or two levels down, but nearly ten flights of stairs, the last level being only a short half-level walk into a room that was lined with suits of battle armor on either side, like terracotta soldiers of old, an entire squadron of dead warriors protecting the corpses of a handful of key bodies, including the first true Terran Queen, Aliyah.

“Aliyah's tomb is buried deep enough that nobody ever comes down here, which Lord Arbard said they used to hide Fury Rose's remains. Fury Rose was badly injured, fleeing from the Dominion's attempts to eradicate all of The Calm, and despite Lord Arbard's attempts to tend to her wounds, she succumbed to them and died,” Serena said. “He told me that tale multiple times when I was growing up, that the Dominion hadn't realized he'd spirited her away from the Y'bari sent to kill her, so that she could actually rest in peace somewhere.”

“Until we came along to dig her up and ransack her body,” Sketch grumbled, examining one of the suits of power armor, considering if there might be any use for having one of them on the ship, but ultimately deciding against it, knowing it would generate more questions than he would've liked.

“No, we're here to get her thingamabob for you,” Serena replied. “We're not graverobbers.”

“In the most literal sense of the word, we are,” Aliara said with a smirk.

“I don't think she'll mind,” Serena said, as she brought them around the backside of a large ornate casket. Once standing behind it, they could see some details on the back of the casket that hadn't been visible on the front, notably that there was an inset tray a couple of feet deep right at the base of it. There were latches on either side of it, which she released. “Nobody's squeamish about dead bodies, are they? Didn't think so.”

With Sketch's help, she pulled out the tray, revealing that there were two sets of bones interred in the casket, one of which was Aliyah's, the other of which, far less desiccated, was that of Fury Rose, some of her cloth still in shreds atop of her body, decades worth of decomposition having stripped the flesh from her bones. Clenched in her hands, however, was the important relic, the reason they were here in the first place – the Ashaka.

Each member of the Calm had their own personal Ashaka, a complex sphere full of science and mysticism. They spent an entire month of their training crafting not one, but two such devices. The parts were generally easy to obtain, or at least they had been in their time, but since the Dominion had taken over, a few of the specific gemstones inside had fallen under a small list of things that the Dominion considered “forbidden.” If it had just been the basic innards, Sketch could've built a new Ashaka, but the status of the gems made them near impossible to obtain. Even his fence, who was typically game for anything, said they were “too hot to handle.”

The inside of each Ashaka was a maze of crystal, gears, gems, diodes and wires, so complex that anyone unfamiliar with the structure wouldn't even know what the importance of any individual piece would be. The Ashaka looked like it was relatively intact, although Sketch was certain the energy source in it was completely drained, and would need to be recharged if not replaced. The exteriors were built out of very durable metal, so that they could endure all sorts of abuse and problems.

Some members of The Calm decorated their Ashakas, but others liked to keep them purely utilitarian, as plain on the outside as possible. Fury Rose had adorned the exterior with floral patterns all over it, some etched into the base surface, some painted on with gold leaf and some actually layered on the exterior in relief. Sketch wondered if that impacted the Ashaka itself, but he remembered hearing that it shouldn't have any real influence on the focusing the Ashaka did.

Sketch sighed, closing his eyes for just a fraction of a moment, as if to remind himself that he didn't believe in ghosts or curses.

He was the least certain he'd ever been in that belief in the split second before his fingers touched Fury Rose's Ashaka.

When he did...

...nothing happened.

He exhaled the breath he didn't realize he'd been holding the whole time.

The ball was inert, which he attributed to it needing new fuel cells, and the Fury's skeletal fingers let go of it with a few cracks and creaks. He glanced around the room, looking back at Serena and Aliara. "Well, if it *is* cursed, it didn't hit me right up front," he said, a nervous laugh from his lips.

"I don't feel like the need to fuck you blind easing off," Serena replied with a frown. "Is it broken?"

"It's not powered," Sketch said. "And it's not attuned to me yet. So let's go back to *The Praeteritus* and get off this planet."

The trio fled from the mausoleum quickly and headed back to the ship, seeing no one approaching them, no signs of patrol cruisers or any other small craft zipping towards them. To ensure they didn't draw too much attention to themselves, however, they also made a quick detour over to the Brookian building, placing a box of ashes atop one of their stairs. The box only contained wood ashes, but it was unlikely that any Brookian would come by and complain any time soon. Their race was in what might be its final generations, but was doing its best to try and repopulate some.

As *The Praeteritus* lifted off of Jamolti, Sketch let himself have a brief sigh of relief. "So hopefully within a few hours, I should have this fixed and functional again, and then I can start getting myself aligned with it."

The ship cut through the atmosphere and back into the black, setting a path for a nearby settlement world called Veline, not much more than an intergalactic truck stop of a planet, but it would give them time to get used to the new way they saw each other once he got the Ashaka back to functional. He was hoping there wasn't some sort of larger problem he'd missed, but it felt good, being so close to a working solution, one that would allow him free passage in all sorts of other places he'd been unable to walk into for half a decade now. Like bars. *God* how he missed bars.

"So how long before you're going to have it up and running again?" Serena asked him. Over the week and change they'd spent together, he'd found her relentlessly curious about everything, something he respected even if he occasionally found it rather vexing.

"Best guess? I probably only need a couple of hours, but I don't know what it's going to be like getting connected to it, for me *or* for you two," he said as he brought the ship into an orbit around the planet. "If you two want to take a shuttle down to the surface for a few hours while I'm working it out, I wouldn't blame you."

Aliara shook her head. "Negative, captain," she smiled. "We're here, so we'll just keep ourselves busy while you work on it. And once it's up and safe again, we'll all go together and see the city as a trio. That seems only fair, don't you think?"

He nodded. "Alright, then I'd better get to work. Princess, you have the con."

"The what now?" Serena asked him with a confused look.

"Make sure the ship doesn't crash into anything," he said, tossing the Ashaka up and down in one hand as he headed off the bridge and down the hall towards his little workshop. He'd thought about swinging by his quarters first and grabbing the fragments of his own Ashaka, but they were in such an awful state, he didn't see the point in trying to reuse them unless absolutely necessary.

The workshop had originally been a craft room dedicated towards pottery, but he'd completely reworked it, redirecting everything towards metalcraft. He'd actually built much of a new Ashaka, but without the various gemstones contained within Fury Rose's, the Ashaka didn't do anything.

At first, he'd been considering simply taking the gemstones out of Rose's Ashaka and putting

them into the shell of a new one he'd built for himself, but he'd decided against that, simply because some of The Calm had boobytrapped their Ashakas to prevent tampering. He would be able to tell better once he was linked up with it, after he'd replaced the power cell.

In this, at least, he had a little bit of an advantage. Ashakas generally followed one of four major design approaches, one for each path – The Calm, The Rage, The Warmth and The Fear. About two-thirds of Ashakas were built to lean towards The Calm first and foremost, a result of wanting to use that particular path the most.

Sketch, on the other hand, had gone a different path. When he'd been Spark Walker, he'd known that The Calm was the easiest path to lean into, and therefore it would always be relatively easy to access. That meant he'd wanted to choose a different path for his Ashaka to lean into, one that he found more difficult to summon up easily, which meant his Ashakas had been attuned towards The Rage. He'd found The Warmth had been an easy enough path to lean into, and as a former soldier-of-fortune, he knew The Fear was always just around the corner, but the idea of letting anger get the best of him was something almost alien to Sketch's very nature, so he'd leaned into doing things the hard way.

As he opened the bottom of Fury Rose's Ashaka where the fuel cells would be inserted, he saw that she too had gone a different path, and that her Ashaka was aligned with the path of The Warmth, something he found a little unusual. The Warmth was the least commonly chosen path for aligning Ashakas, simply because the element of connecting to other people generally came easily for members of The Calm. That was their lot in life – to reach out a hand in good faith – so many saw the path of The Warmth as a tool that was always used externally, to help people overcome deep seeded prejudices to see the true person they were sitting across from.

The cells popped out of the bottom of it, two squat cylindrical tubes a hollow shade of gray, when they should've been glowing with a diffuse purple glow. He took a couple of minutes to check the structures of them, making sure they hadn't been damaged or depleted other than through natural dissipation, and was pleased to find they didn't have anything wrong with them. They were also of the same size and shape of the replacement fuel cells he'd built over the years, so it turned out the wait would be even less long than he'd anticipated. He'd had new fuel cells charged and waiting for the day when he'd found gems for his newly constructed Ashakas, but now he could just pop them into Fury Rose's and begin the linking process.

He headed over to the charge box, pulled out a pair of charged cells and slotted them into Rose's Ashaka before closing the cover, hearing the little sphere start to hum to life once more before falling silent again. The hum only happened during the device's starting up or shutting down.

Sketch placed his hands on either side of the Ashaka, cradling it between his fingers and palms as he folded his legs beneath him, starting to meditate in the ritual needed to bring this Ashaka from its original encoding over to his mental wavelengths.

Reclaiming an Ashaka was extremely uncommon, but when he'd been a Spark, he'd asked to learn the ritual for it, in case he was ever lost apart from his Ashakas and needed to borrow someone's spare. His instructor, Fury Mubatu, had thought it a strange request, but had learned to indulge his student's nature for esoteric learning.

He began flowing his emotions from his left hand to his right, directing them through Ashaka, which chirped in recognition of a different set of wavelengths than it was accustomed to. The metal sphere started to warm within his hands, something he'd expected, although the rate at which it went from 'a little warm' to 'almost too hot to handle' surprised even him.

His eyes opened, and he could tell from his reflection in the metal door that his eyes were glowing with a frightening light, something that wasn't unusual for the process but still looked unnatural even to his own gaze. That wasn't what concerned him.

What concerned him was that he was floating a good foot above the ground.

That had never happened before.

The ritual completed with a sudden surge of electricity up both of his arms, as his eyes closed

shut and he felt the weight of the floor pressing up against the underside of his legs once more, clearly having fallen out of the air and back onto the floor.

He unfolded his legs from beneath him and moved to stand a little awkwardly, using his left hand to help steady him as he rose up, the Ashaka in his right hand, the tiny hum ticking off before settling like actual weight against his fingertips.

The change inside of his head was immediate. He felt more like himself than he had in years, a sense of immense clarity overwhelming him, like a part of him had been missing but that he hadn't realized that until had been returned, and now that it had, he could breathe without an immense pressure on his chest, easy and relieved breaths.

"It looks like it worked," Helen said to him, her disembodied voice ringing through the air. "You aren't emanating signals anymore, and your vitals almost make you seem five to ten years younger. Stronger heartbeat, increased blood circulation, increased mental acuity... I imagine you're feeling quite the rush, boss."

She was right, he had to admit. The changes weren't just mental, they were physical as well. His body moved with a sense of nimbleness he had thought long since lost. After his insanely long deep freeze, he'd assumed the degraded reflexes and strength had just been a side effect of that, and not a side effect of not having an Ashaka to focus his mental energies.

"I really am, Helen," he said. He felt steady enough now that he wanted to try something, planting his left hand atop of a table before vaulting his body upwards, balancing himself feet over head, all precariously stabilized atop one arm, his other arm still holding the Ashaka. "Gods, I thought these days were long since behind me."

C'mon, let's not get cocky, a foreign voice said from somewhere inside of his skull.

He was heavily startled but had enough clarity of mind to push back and land on his feet before glancing around the room a bit. "Helen, where did that voice come from?" he said as he moved over to his worktable, tossing the Ashaka from his right hand to his left before picking up a blaster with his right, feeling slightly better with the pistol at the ready.

"Where did *what* voice come from, Captain? I detected nothing."

She can't hear me. Only you can.

He spun around, glancing behind him, his eyes widening a little bit. "You *had* to have heard that, Helen."

"Captain, I regret to inform you... there is nothing to *hear*. Are you experiencing hallucinations?"

I'm not a hallucination.

"That's just what a hallucination would say," Sketch thought but didn't vocalize.

You've grown a bit since I last saw you.

"I... I've what now?" he thought.

Reports were that you were lost on the frontier on a mission, well before the Dominion invaded. Keeping a low profile, were you?

Sketch was trying to remember whose voice it was it felt like was rebounding inside of his skull until suddenly the truth became undeniable.

"Rose?"

Chapter Six

Sketch paced around the room like a caged animal, stalking from one side of the chamber to the other without stopping to catch his breath or even pause to think. He was arguing with a voice in his head, which was the very definition of insanity, and yet, he was *certain* that it wasn't *just* a voice inside his mind, but maybe an echo of a long gone Fury.

Will you quit panicking if I tell you that I'm alive and that you haven't damaged your brain?

'That all depends on whether or not you're lying to me,' Sketch thought at the voice that

continued to ping pong inside of his skull. 'If you truly are Fury Rose, you would know what she called me, wouldn't you?'

You mean how I called you Crawler when I thought you dragging your feet? I meant it affectionately, as a way to spur you into faster activity. You were a very talented pupil, but you did have a tendency to complain about putting in the work needed to improve your skills.

'No, I had a tendency to want to understand the benefits of the things you were making me do, Rose, if you are, in fact Rose.'

You asked me to prove that I remembered you in your youth. I just did.

'Except if you're a figment of my splintered mind, you would've had access to that knowledge. Then there's no possible way for me to prove to you that I'm not just a figment of your brain.'

'You could finish the joke.'

The joke?

'The last time we saw each other, you told me the start of a joke, but didn't finish it...'

Ha! The joke! Oh gods, I'd forgotten I'd started telling you that before you left for your mission.

'If you're not a hallucination, you'll know the end of that joke!'

It's not really that funny, but sure, I can tell it. Guy sitting at this bar says "Hey, lemme tell you a story." Guy sitting next to him says "Sure." First guy says "So Fury Kage, Fury Rizinol and Fury Osthon walk into a bar, and suddenly these sirens start going off inside of the bar, going all WHEE-WOO, WHEE-WOO."

'Sure, I remember that part. Now finish the joke!'

The second guy turns to the first guy and says "Wow, that's quite a story. What's it mean?" And the first guy says "Nothing." So, the second guy says, "Donny, you're an idiot."

Sketch paused for a moment, his face scrunching up into a frown. 'I've been scratching my head about this for decades, and it's just a shitty Shakespeare joke?'

I said it wasn't really that funny. I used to tell Storms half of jokes before we sent them on slightly dicey missions, so they would always fight a little harder to get back home. Usually worked too. So what happened to you, Storm Walker, and why did you dig up my Ashaka?

He stopped for a long second. 'You're... you're actually aware that you're dead?'

Dead is a very relative term, but I will concede I no longer have a corporeal form.

'How in any way is that not dead?'

My mind is still evolving. It can still take on new memories, and I can still influence the world outside of the Ashaka I now find myself sharing.

'Sharing?'

Mmmm. You could ask me questions all day and you would learn much and I would learn very little, so let us take turns at this. How long have I been dead?

'A bit more than half a century? I don't have all the details, but you were gravely wounded in attempting to escape when the Y'bari were ordered to wipe out all the members of The Calm. Your body was laid to rest on Jamolti.'

And how is it you have barely aged at all?

'Ah ah, you ask one, I ask one.'

You asked half a dozen before we started, so indulge an old woman at least one more before we begin even exchange.

'Fair. I was in long term hibernation, being managed by an alien AI that seemed to find some way to counter long-term freezer burn. The ship was trapped, and the AI couldn't manage to get the ship out, but was able to keep me from wasting away until another random collision caused the ship to be shaken loose of its prison. When I returned to the world, I found humanity had been conquered, The Calm had been mostly eliminated and everyone I'd ever known was long since dead.'

And yet, you did not simply lay down and give up.

'You knew me at least a little, Fury Rose. Does that sound like me?'

It doesn't, but I won't hold that as your question. Ask your next.

'You said you were sharing the Ashaka. What did you mean by that?'

Perhaps you heard the rumor that I was cursed. I never let that rumor be squashed, simply because I enjoyed the sort of... mystique that it gave me. It's nice to be given a bit of a unique status, so while the rest of the Furies knew that it wasn't true, until I had a better handle on why my Ashaka functioned so fundamentally differently than all the other Ashakas that The Calm had seen over the centuries. I came to realize that it was because I was a legacy, a member of the order whose Ashaka had been passed down from generation to generation. The Ashaka you have in your hand belonged to my father, and to his aunt before him, and her father before her. Typically each Spark builds their own Ashaka, but our family has kept one Ashaka and it has been kept in our family. Each of us made a point to use it at least one day a week. My father said he felt like it gave him guidance of our ancestors.

For me, that became a great deal more literal. I had to make a few modifications to the Ashaka when I inherited it, because it had been lightly damaged by my father's passing. I needed to repair it, and in doing so, I accidentally discovered something far more unusual about the Ashaka, something which I informed the Furies about while I continued to study it all my life. How much did you study your Ashaka when you created it, Storm Walker?

'Some? I wanted to know how it worked, and so I learned as much as I could about all the various pieces and parts, but some of the specific signal physics involving the crystals and harmonics always eluded me, no matter how much I worked to grasp their function.'

You are not alone in that confusion. Even most of the Furies, with all their accumulated wisdom, didn't fully understand how the crystal matrixes at the heart of each Ashaka completely functioned, only that they did. Our lack of understanding on how the Ashaka does what it does is what has led us to here, where we find ourselves now.

Good lord, Daughter, can you let someone else talk for once? a second voice said inside of his head. ***I am amazed our new host has let you carry on as long as you have without coming to the point. You must have acquired such evasiveness from your mother's side of the family.***

Father, let me talk.

'Father?'

Yes. Let me try to sum up into short bits of information first which we can delve deeper into later. When a member of The Calm uses an Ashaka, it takes an imprint of the user's entire mind, more than a phantom or an echo, it's a complete copy of the user's memories and thoughts. In nearly every sense of the word, it makes a backup of the person, not that anyone in The Calm knew that, until my tweaks to my family's legacy Ashaka tapped into those backups. All four of us reside within this Ashaka now. Myself, Fury Muriel Rose; my father, Fury Horatio Rose; his aunt, Fury Dorothea Lily; and, finally, her father, Fury Kenji Lily.

'So... are you alive or dead?'

Our bodies are long since dust, but our consciousnesses live on, so who is to say whether we are dead, alive, or somewhere in between. I think. I feel. I dream. What more does it take to make me real?

'This... isn't the kind of experience I expected to have using someone else's Ashaka.'

Well, we're with you, lad. From start to finish. How dwindled are The Calm?

'All but extinct. I might be the only living practitioner, although I suppose it's entirely possible that there are others, just in hiding.'

Let's hope. I do not relish the idea that you could be all that remains of our great order. That isn't meant as a slight to you as much as it is a feeling of sadness that all the history and tradition of The Calm could be lost.

Perhaps we can train this one up into being a Fury and he could take on pupils, restart the order once more.

I believe The Calm would still be hunted even in these days, father.

Is that true, lad?

‘I don’t know, but it certainly seems likely.’

Harumph. Well. Keep the thought in the back of your mind.

‘Yes sir.’

“Sketch?” Helen’s voice said to him, stirring him from the internal conversation raging inside of his head. “You seem to be quite focused on something, but I can’t seem to discern quite what.”

Sketch chuckled a little bit. “I’ll tell you all about it later, Helen. Did either of the ladies decide to go down to Veline?”

“Negative, Captain. They wanted to await your all clear, and, more importantly, they wanted to go down to the planet with you.”

“Well then, let’s get dirtside,” Sketch said, tucking the Ashaka into the inside pocket of his jacket as he headed for the bridge.

“You feeling more like yourself, Sketch?” Serena asked him when he arrived. “I certainly don’t feel the intense need to claw your clothes off you right now, so I’m taking that as progress.”

“I’ve got a working Ashaka again, so I can keep all my skills in check,” he replied. “That’s something I haven’t had in several years, so I’ve asked Helen to take us down to the surface of Veline. They only have a handful of actual cities; I told her pick the largest one and to find us the most popular bar she could see, one with loads of people and a decently cranked soundtrack.”

“Am I going to be allowed off the ship as well, Captain?” Aliara asked. The Y’bari had clearly decided that she planned on seeing the city with them. During the time he’d spent working on the Ashaka, she’d obviously had Helen perform the cosmetic surgery she’d detailed to him earlier, to make her look like a P’Nox, a tiny metal barbell in the flesh between her eyes at the bridge of her nose, and a handful of black stripe tattoos along her face. He was surprised how much it changed the general look of her, and he could understand why the P’Nox and the Y’bari, despite being genetically identical, were rarely confused for one another.

Sketch bristled a little at being called Captain, but decided it was his ship, so he was just going to have to get used to people other than Helen calling him that. “I don’t see any reason why you wouldn’t, Aliara. Oh, should I start calling you something else instead, if you’re pretending to be P’Nox?”

Aliara smiled softly. “I’m not pretending, Captain. For all intents and purposes, I *am* P’Nox now. I no longer serve the Starless Dominion; my alliance is to *The Praeteritus* and her crew, now and forever. As such, I need not change my name. It’s a common enough name among both the Y’bari and the P’Nox that it will not draw any suspicion.”

The Praeteritus was designed that it could dock in any major spaceport, but for the first couple of minutes as they descended onto a city called Skrum, Sketch wasn’t entirely sure they would qualify. But as they closed in, he could see they weren’t anywhere near as tiny as he had thought, mostly because it seemed the city ran downward instead of out, one giant column-shaped hole that descended far down beneath the surface of the planet, which made sense, considering the harsh winds that continually ripped across it.

Sketch moved to sit at the pilot’s station and guided the ship down and into its docking bay, where he let Helen and the station’s auto-docker software get *The Praeteritus* where it needed to be, the comms channel popping up.

“Hey hey *Praeteritus*, Skrum Dock Central here,” a voice said, apparently too busy to make visual confirmation. “Purpose of your visit?”

“Just need to get some solid beneath our feet for a few hours before heading back into the black for another long ride,” Sketch said, falling back comfortably into his space trucker persona. “Wouldn’t mind getting a charge, some vapor, some water and if you’ve got anybody who’s selling heavy slugs, I need to refill a couple of empty racks. Cowboys seem to think they can start raiding mail carriers lately, so I’ve had to introduce a couple of them to my discouragement policy lately.”

The voice on the other side laughed casually. “Yeah, we can hook you up with all of that for

about the standard rates, although the water'll have a twenty percent markup, simply because we haven't got as much to go around here. That good, or you want to pass on the water?"

"Ah, just fill it all and I'll pay for it," Sketch replied. "Not entirely sure when I'll be back by civilization anytime soon."

"You aren't by it any time *now*, *Praeteritus*, but you're kind to imply that you might be. Anyway, take your siesta dirtside, and when you're ready to dust off again, we'll settle up tabs."

"You're a peach, Central. *Praeteritus* out." He flicked two fingers in and then heard the accompanying click of the signal turning off. "Helen, you know the drill. Let them into the common bay, and the ammo storage chamber, but keep them locked off from the rest of the ship, and sure as hell don't let them into the hangar bay with *The Barrow*. The last thing we need is anyone getting spooked off by seeing we're hauling a Y'bari battle dart with us."

"Aye aye, Captain."

"Shall we ladies?"

They headed off the ship and into Skrum, which seemed like it was somewhere between a mining colony, a trading outpost, and a manufacturing hub. There weren't a lot of people out and about, as it seemed like the workday was still in full swing, or maybe it was just how the shifts were laid out. Mining towns were hard to predict at first; they had their own natural rhythms and their start/stops were often at unusual hours. The streets were barren concrete, nothing all that refined, except for the main drag, which looked like it was steel plates, designed to handle heavy machinery relaying between the mine shaft.

They found there was one large tavern that couldn't be missed with a giant neon sign of a cowboy astride a jetcycle, a large blaster rifle strapped to his back, pistols on either side of his waist, but his cowboy hat had a headlamp on it. It was such a wild combination of gunfighter, prospector and performance star. The bar's name was "Open a Vein!"

When the three of them walked inside, suddenly the atmosphere changed. While outside was mostly filled with the sounds of heavy machinery off in the distance, inside, there was nothing but mad music, electric guitars and steel drums playing at a breakneck tempo. There was a funky bassline weaving beneath the sound of it, and there was a man in a banana hammock and leather boots dancing on one end of the bar and a woman in a bikini and miner boots dancing on the other end.

Sketch had been prepared for nobody to be in the place, and instead it was *packed*, with most of the tables completely full of miners, many of whom looked like they were *blitzed*, singing along to a song that Sketch didn't recognize at all.

It was strange to go from being unable to be around people to suddenly being a massive crowd. He hadn't expected to dive headfirst into masses of people. He had grown a little accustomed to being completely alone, and now that he was surrounded by living bodies in all directions, it was massively overwhelming. His vision flickered a little, like the walls were closing in around him, like he was being suffocated.

It wasn't just the sound of them either. All his senses were working overtime. He could smell the odors – machine oil, human sweat, barbeque sauce, old leather and caked on perfume. He could feel the vibrations from the throbbing bassline that rippled through his muscles like a rhythmic earthquake that flowed across and over him. He could taste copper and dust and cleaning products, that lingering hairspray that hadn't quite faded from the air. He could hear the sounds of coins jingling in people's pockets, of gaudy earrings designed to draw attention to themselves working overtime and the constant pouring of drinks from over at the bar, not to mention the constant THUMPTHUMPTHUMP of each of the dancers on top of the ends of the bar.

Together, it was both overwhelming and awe inspiring, terrifying and glorious, a cacophony of life and motion and sound, all at once. He'd spent many a night crossing the infinite black of space with jazz music cranked as loudly as he could, so that it didn't feel so empty and lonely, but after a while, he'd internalized all the rhythms of his music, and it didn't provide the shock to his system that

it once did. But now he was surrounded by living people, all heading in different directions, doing different things, dozens of conversations happening in the same room, each group having to yell from time to time so they could rise above all the noise of the others around them.

He both wanted to flee in mental exhaustion and never leave.

“You okay, Sketch?” Serena said as she nudged him, stretching her toes to let her whisper into his ear. “You’re staring a bit.”

“It’s been most of a decade since I was in a room with more than a couple of people, Serena,” he said, finally exhaling a breath. “It’s a bit to take in.”

“Let’s go get a table.”

The three of them moved into the bar, and while they couldn’t immediately spot any open tables, a booth in the corner seemed to be in the process of losing its inhabitants, as the people sitting there were tossing coins on top of a bar tab. Sketch was glad to get a quick glance at it, as it told him they were using the Dominion’s standard Xime currency, and not some strange local money they would need to pick up. Most of the mining worlds ran on Dominion currency, but every so often, he would find one that would make it difficult for him when he stopped in to pick up supplies.

When the miners slipped out of the booth, the three of them moved in so they could take the space, as a server wandered over, scooping up the money and the bill from the table before opening a new one from them. “What can I get you folks?”

“Something with a lot of rum in it,” Sketch said.

“Brandy,” Serena added.

“Martini,” Aliara said. “And if we could get one of those bowls of pretzels, that would be excellent.”

“Sure ‘nuff, darlin’,” the server said, strolling away from them slowly.

“You used to places like this?” Serena asked him.

“Used to be,” he said with a soft sigh of relief. “Before I was... before I joined the Order.” He had paused to reconsider speaking the phrase “The Calm” out loud. “Before I joined the Order, I spent a lot of time in bars on planets all across the black. I was drifting from conflict to conflict, one warzone after another, with brief periods of time spent at outposts, mining colonies, farming settlements and waystations between here and there.”

“Was that a lonely life, a soldier of fortune, back before the Dominion quelled most of the wars?”

“They didn’t quell the wars,” Aliara corrected. “You humans simply hear less and less about them now, because we toned down your ability to hear about them.”

“It wasn’t all that lonely,” Sketch said. “Simply because we were always in motion, and the times spent in bars, at taverns, at whorehouses... all of that was just waiting for the next thing, and the next thing was always just around the corner.”

A couple of giant hulking monsters of men came stomping over towards the table. They were walls of muscle held together within canvas clothes that had clearly seen more than a few years of work without repair or change. They were brutes, used to getting whatever they wanted around the mines, able to pick and take whatever they wanted from whoever they wanted.

“Hey old man,” the first of the two said to Sketch. “Why don’t you buzz off and let us show these ladies a bit of local hospitality?”

“We promise to return ‘em eventually,” the second said, laughing at the first one’s joke.

“Yeah, somehow I don’t think so, fellas,” Sketch replied dismissively.

Send them running with The Fear, Storm Walker. They need to learn to respect a Storm.

‘There’s no Storm here,’ Sketch thought at Rose’s voice inside of his head. ‘There’s only a simple long hauler out enjoying his time off.’

“It wasn’t a question you’re allowed to say no to, offworlder,” the first one snarled.

“This town belongs to the Mayer Brothers,” the second one added.

Then you could just use your skills you acquired before you joined the Order. They should not be allowed to disrespect you.

'I've got this handled, Rose. Calm yourself.'

"Oh yeah?" Sketch asked. "Who says?"

"Says us," the second said.

"You couldn't handle these ladies on your best days," Sketch chuckled. "But I'll leave the decision up to them. They don't owe me anything."

"You hear that, doll?" the first one said to Aliara. "I've heard you P'Nox know how to get freaky after a few drinks."

"Mmmm," Aliara said, sliding out of the booth as she stood up, her body larger than even their giant frames. "You'll never get to know, though. I have seen some truly appalling approaches, but you two take the pie."

"Cake," Serena said, sliding out on the other side of the booth. "The expression is take the cake."

"Cake, pie, I don't care what they take as long as it includes themselves away from here," Aliara replied. "They're ugly to look at, and I don't doubt I wouldn't enjoy either of them half as much as I enjoy our captain."

"Then maybe we should encourage them to leave," Serena said.

"Hey now, we ain't goin'—" the first one started to say before Serena snapped a kick, planting her boot straight in the man's stomach, as he suddenly bowled over in pleasure.

The second was about to try and defend his brother, lifting his right hand up to swing as a punch, but Aliara's hand closed around the man's fist, picked him up by it and tossed him across the room until his back slammed against the wooden bar, making it shake.

Sketch was pretty sure he was about to be thrown out of a bar.

Instead, a cheer erupted from the room as a number of people surged around the two giant men, neither of whom could do much to defend themselves, and began to take turns punching and kicking them, all while slowly moving them over to the door of the bar, finally throwing them out as a collective whole.

The server came back with three glasses and a giant bowl of pretzels, a broad smile on his face. "Don't worry about paying," he said to them. "I think just about everybody in the bar agreed to pick up your tab for putting those two lugnuts out on their asses."

Serena and Aliara moved back to slide into the curved booth, one lady on either side of him, each of them moving to nestle up along against his sides. Serena spoke first. "Still feel like you've got control over your ability to project emotions now that you've got your doohickey?"

"I hadn't realized quite how much I'd missed being around people, but yeah, now I've got control over it, we've got loads of places to get to see, places to go, problems to stir up."

"Is that our mission?" Serena asked with a playful grin on her face. "Go places, cause trouble?"

"Might as well be," he chuckled. "But no. It's going to be the same it was before you two stumbled into my life. Keep moving. Stay low. Don't attract attention. Keep busy. Bring things from one place to another for people who need stuff and have money."

"But what's *our* next stop, Captain?" Aliara said. "I imagine after we've whetted our whistles here, you've got to have some idea of where we go next."

"The next stop is going to be over to the Nobal system," he said with a wry grin. "I've got an appointment that's very long overdue to meet someone who's had a whole lot to say about where I go and what I do, and I think we need to impress upon her some of the new specifics in how we take jobs. For example, I don't have to do everything entirely without meeting clients on either end, and that's going to open us up to all sorts of new contracts. But I'll have to prove that by meeting our fixer."

"You've never met?"

"We've spoken to one another over vidcoms, but never sat down and had a real conversation,"

Sketch said with a wry smile, picking up one of the pretzels. “And I’m thinking we should go pay her a surprise visit.”

“Does she know why you couldn’t have meetings?”

“She does,” he said with a nod. “She’s the only person who did, because I had to trust someone, and I made it a point to tell her that if she ever betrayed my trust, my knife through her heart would be the last thing she’d ever feel.”

“Harsh,” Aliara said before taking a draw off her drink.

“I just wanted her to know that however she was to me, I would repay in kind,” Sketch said, a touch of the old him coming back to the forefront. “If she did right by me, I would keep money rolling in, and would complete the jobs nobody else wanted to touch. If she didn’t, well, I was never one to leave my enemies standing when dropping their bodies into a ditch would do just as well.”

“When do we head out?” Serena asked.

“We can take a day or two, let you both get a chance to know me and the ship more, and then we can be on our way.”

“Oh, did your little doodad turn out to be cursed?” Aliara asked. “Or was that simply paranoia?”

“Let’s just say a bit of column A and a bit of column B. But I’ll figure out a way to make it work.”

Cursed?

She’s talking about the rumor of you hearing voices, daughter.

But he is hearing voices. The difference is that they aren’t figments of his imagination.

‘Either you two quiet down, or I’m going to just cannibalize your Ashaka to construct a new one, and then where you will be?’

Fine, fine.

Chapter Seven

Despite how overwhelming it had been at first, Sketch found the feeling of being back around people extremely comforting. He gotten so used to just spending all his time on *The Praeteritus* that getting accustomed to random sounds happening suddenly around him again had required some adjustments, but now he was starting to feel like, well, more like he used to feel, way back before he was even a member of The Calm.

As much as he didn’t want to relax, he found himself doing it despite himself. He’d gotten to know every single sound on *The Praeteritus* without needed to check on them anymore, and maybe he had been suffering from some hardcore cabin fever, having been unable to go down and mix with other people, to get freshly cooked food, to listen to musicians busking on the street corner.

Now that he could live among people again, he didn’t want to leave, even though he knew that he must.

The soft life was alluring, but he found that several habits died hard, and he was always watching to make sure he was keeping his arms covered, keeping out of the way of most of the security cameras littered around the mining colony. People were kind, especially since the ladies of his ship had sent the Mayer brothers packing, and more often than not, they hadn’t been allowed to pay for drinks or food. Sooner or later, someone was going to catch either sight of his ink or have a flash of recognition about Serena, and he knew they just couldn’t sit around waiting for it to happen.

So as much as Sketch would’ve loved to spend an entire week dirtside, after two days, they were heading back to the ship to get everything loaded up and be on their way. They’d gotten all their requested supplies – air, water, even the handful of heavy slugs he’d asked for, though those had been provided free of charge, the dockhands’ way of saying thanks for knocking the Mayer brothers down a few pegs.

Sketch had seen bullies like them before dozens of times, and once the illusion that they were undefeatable had been broken, their strength would slowly recede back further and further until they

were nothing more than a couple of pain in the asses that people had to tell to shut the fuck up every now and again.

He'd spent a good part of the last two days telling stories about his time before he'd joined The Calm, back when he was a freelance mercenary, solving problems with an iron fist or a gun at the ready. It was fun, reliving the glory days of when his life had been as simple as "solve this problem" without having to worry about whether or not the cause was just or what the long-term ramifications were to their actions. Of course, as he pointed out, that was also why he'd eventually walked away from that life – he'd started thinking about such things anyway, and once he started thinking about them, it seemed impossible to *stop* thinking about them.

Serena had also volunteered some stories about her time as a Princess, and while they were mostly just comedy of errors tales, it was nice to get a chance to know Serena's personality extended beyond her position. She had always been plucky and curious, but over the course of her stories, Sketch could start to see that she had a kind heart, and had never really taken her position for granted, or assumed that it meant she was superior to any of the people who'd been assigned as servants to her.

Aliara, by contrast, didn't have much in the way to offer in terms of stories about her time with the Starless Dominion. The Y'bari were encouraged to keep their heads down, follow orders and not show independent thinking beyond using it to achieve whatever goals they'd been assigned to. She'd found the experience mostly mind numbing and recalled her time at the House of Sanada as certainly the most complicated and interesting experience in her career.

Both women seemed to delight in the fact that they were the focus of much of the attentions of the miners, and that Sketch had, in many ways, disappeared into the background, although both women made it abundantly clear that they weren't looking for anyone to keep their beds warm, implying that either the two women were together or that one or both of them were with Sketch, something none of them ever felt the need to elaborate on.

When they returned to *The Praeteritus*, Sketch personally checked all the deliveries, finding that in addition to the supplies they'd bought, the town had thrown in a bunch of other stuff "on the house," including having done some microfracture repairs to the ship's hull, and leaving them a crate of locally distilled whiskey as well as another crate that was stocked with some kind of local jerky, using the meat of something called a hanasherton, whatever the hell that was. They'd even polished up some of the hallways and replaced a few minor joints that they hadn't even charged them for. Helen described their work as 'remarkably thorough,' but not in an unpleasant way.

Around that point, Sketch began to worry that maybe they'd made *too* much of an impression on the mining colony, but he knew the odds of them being back this way again any time soon were extremely low, so he was trying not to get too worked up about it. The entire time they'd been there, he'd been doing his best to stay out of the line of security cameras, making sure his sleeves were all the way covering his arms and that Serena didn't draw too much attention to herself, also positioning her so that she was never in the direct path of any local security camera, even if the odds of her getting spotted or recognized were slim. The last thing he wanted was someone with a royals' fetish spotting her and suddenly putting them on someone's radar. She'd been out of the limelight for more than a while, but Sketch had learned that there were always strange people who idolized any form of monarchy or nobility to the point of obsequiousness, so it was something he knew they would never feel quite safe with.

"They were pretty thorough in cleaning the ship, Captain," Helen told him as they were finishing their inspection. "They even replaced the filters in the air scrubbers free of charge. Those Mayer brothers you took care of must have been particularly reviled. The service crews were all aflutter with tales of the ladies dispatching the hoodlums post haste."

"Yeah, well, all the more reason for us to get off this rock as quick as we can," Sketch said, double checking that the provisions were strapped down in a way that they wouldn't be easily jostled loose. "The last thing we need is someone trying to get pictures of us for keepsakes or whatnot."

“I followed your lead and didn’t let anyone take pictures with us, Sketch,” Serena said. “I remember my status just as much as you do, and I don’t have any desire to get spotted by some random redneck who’ll broadcast it to all his hillbilly friends and suddenly the Starless Dominion knows I’m still alive. Just because we haven’t been doing this as you have doesn’t mean we’re entirely ignorant of what we can and can’t do.”

“I saw. Thanks, you two.” They left the cargo bay and headed down the hall to the elevator. “I know all of this has been as much culture shock for you as it has for me, so I guess I’m just glad we were all able to go through it together.”

Despite the small size of *The Praeteritus*, the ship still had three levels which felt more like six, because of the incredibly tall hallways. Even for as long as he’d been walking around the ship, he still occasionally felt like a toddler wandering through his parents’ spaceship. It helped, not having to push buttons for most things, but there was only so much adjustment Helen could manage for them. The bridge controls and seats had been lowered, but much of the computer work was built into the structure itself. He’d joked with Helen a couple of times that if it ever turned out he needed a large crew, the bridge ceiling was high enough that they could construct a scaffolding and put a second level around many portions of it. That was true for every room on the ship, except maybe the cargo bays, where the extra space came in handy for hauling massive items.

“You think your fixer’s going to freak out?” Serena asked him as he headed over to the comms station to phone the harbormaster.

“She’s never expected to meet with me in person, and I don’t intend to tell her we’re coming, so yeah, I would imagine she’s going to be a little freaked,” he said, tapping the button to announce their departure. “This is *The Praeteritus* to Skrum Dock Central, requesting departure clearance.”

In a surprise, the screen popped to life and Sketch could see the face of the harbormaster, who looked exactly like Sketch would’ve expected him to. He was obese, drenched in a combination of sweat and grease, heavy denim overalls covering whatever flesh didn’t have oil on it, a giant cap pulled down almost entirely over his eyes, although Sketch could see the chrome spheres reflecting out beneath it. “SDC here. Sorry to be seeing the back of you so soon, *Praeteritus*. What’s your next destination port?”

“Not entirely certain at this point, SDC,” Sketch said, slightly tugging on the wrists of his shirt, making sure they were pulled down all the way to his hands, covering every inch of his tattoos. It would be far too easy to grow complacent, but he wasn’t going to do that, because while his tattoos might be unrecognizable to almost anyone, all it would take was one person and he’d be in the shit. “We’ve got a couple of possible paths we could take in, maybe check in with some of our coordinators, see if there’s a gig with my name on it that I need to get to sooner rather than later. You know how these long hauls are – everybody wants the best of the best, and when they can’t get them, they’ll take us along with the rest, just so the work gets done.”

“I know exactly how that is, *Praeteritus*,” the harbormaster sighed. “Nobody gives a shit us until something ain’t where it’s supposed to be when it’s supposed to be there, and then suddenly they’ll crawl as far up our asses as they can fit, and stretch us further if they can’t. You don’t take no shit off no clients, boyo, and don’t let them push you into any corners you can’t get out of. Dock Central out.”

The line went dark and they could hear the sound of the clamps releasing from the ship’s docking spokes. The engines purred and rumbled to life as Sketch moved over to push the buttons to start the automated process of taking *The Praeteritus* up to orbit around the planet. He was glad Helen was happy to handle the basic takeoffs and landings, because the minutiae were precise *and* dull at the same time.

It was with relief that he saw the scanners painted empty sky and nary a Dominion ship in sight. Empty space was happy space. Sure, plenty of long haulers, mining ships and a couple of maintenance vessels, but nothing with any serious firepower, and nothing that was in any way a threat. The second

the ship started burning out of atmosphere, the more comfortable he got. Deep in the black, a million miles between ports, it was maybe the place he felt most relaxed.

“We’re only an hour or so flight from the ring gate, Sketch,” Serena told him. “How do you want to pass the time?”

“I may need to keep tinkering with the Ashaka,” Sketch said, “but for the time being, let’s just enjoy the ride.”

The space between the gate and the planet they’d just come from didn’t even have a ship in between it to give them pause. It wasn’t the gate they’d arrived in from a few days ago, but another gate, one that would jump them much further in a different direction, more back towards civilization and away from the backwater planets Sketch had spent most of the last few years bouncing between. Except as they approached the gate, he saw something he’d never seen before.

“Huh,” he said, glancing at the observation screen showing off the gate, which had its center filled with a strange fog of glowing red mist, instead of the empty void of space that should’ve been there. “That’s new. Any of you ever seen anything like that before?”

“The Hells is that?” Serena said.

“Certainly nothing I’m familiar with,” Aliara said. “Although I certainly wouldn’t call myself a warp gate mechanic.”

“Well, let’s give a call and see what the hell the gate has to say for themselves.” Sketch tapped the control panel and the communications channel gave out a sharp whistle. “This is *The Praeteritus* hailing Carkem Gate, what’s your status?”

The voice on the other end of the line sounded exhausted, confined to audio channels only. “Carkem Gate here. We are unable to accommodate your needs at this time, *Praeteritus*, as it seems like we’ve got some kind of warp entanglement problem and haven’t been able to reset the gate after our last passenger seemed to get stuck midtransit.”

I can solve this problem for you, m’boy, Fury Horatio Rose’s head said within his head. It will come with a couple of minor complications but if needs be this is the gate we need to use, you need only follow my instructions.

‘What the hell do you know about warp gates and entanglement mishaps, old man? You were a Fury, not a spacetime engineer.’

I wasn’t originally supposed to be in line to take on the family business, and before I joined The Calm, I was studying the warp and how to improve stability. I’ve seen entanglement like this before, and if you think it would be more expedient to use this gate than to reroute, we can have it up and running again in, oh, ten or fifteen minutes.

‘What’s the catch?’

Nothing major. We’ll just have some energy to dissipate afterwards, but nothing we’re incapable of managing.

Sketch still wasn’t sure how far he trusted the long-since deceased minds of the Furies who inhabited his newly acquired Ashaka, but the idea of redirecting would only add a massive amount of excess to their trip and burn fuel when they were on their own dime and not somebody else’s, so he decided to see if these Furies actually knew their shit.

“If we can fix this for you, Carkem Gate, that worth a waved admission fee for this gate usage?” Sketch said. “We’ve got an idea over here that might be able to solve it.”

“You fix this, *Praeteritus*, and we’ll credit your account with a dozen free ring jumps, just to save us the hassle of all the business we’re missing while the gate’s in a broken state.”

‘Okay, old man, what do you need?’ he thought as he gestured for Helen to cut the signal, and the line went silent.

Does your bridge have a biothermal coupling cable link somewhere around here?

“Helen, if I needed to connect you to my Ashaka, you have a cable jack for that?”

“Of course, Captain. On your right.”

A small compartment flipped open on a terminal on the right side of the bridge, exposing about a dozen different exposed cable ends, and about four from the left, he found a prong that looked like a match to one of the jacks exposed on the side of the Ashaka. He connected the cable into it, and heard Helen's voice say, "Oh! Oh my! Captain, your Ashaka seems to be interfacing with our signal array, temporarily commandeering some of my systems."

"Yeah, well, let it do whatever it's going to do, I guess, Helen, and I think we'll know when it's done. At least I hope."

"You don't know what you're doing?" Serena asked.

"Well, I'm not the one *doing* it," he said. He hadn't gone into the various minds living inside of his Ashaka with Serena and Aliara yet, mostly because he wasn't entirely sure how to bring the matter up. It didn't feel like a casual conversation kind of thing, and he still wasn't totally convinced that maybe it was some kind of glitch in the Ashaka that might suddenly course correct. He didn't believe he'd get that lucky, naturally, but a man could hope.

On the screen, the red fog seemed to be drifting away from the gate, floating towards *The Praeteritus*. "Is this supposed to be happening?" Aliara asked.

Yes, now tell her to be quiet. I'm concentrating.

"Apparently this is normal," Sketch replied, seeing the viewscreen starting to fill entirely with red mist. When the red mist started filling the bridge, then even Sketch got a little nervous, but he noticed that it was all making a quick beeline straight towards the Ashaka. The metal ball began to absorb the red mist and like some sort of cosmic vacuum cleaner, it inhaled all the red mist until it finally seemed to be gone, leaving a sort of white outline of a hauler ship that slowly steeped with color and hue, the ship appearing like any other once the shades of metal melted over it.

On the viewscreen, the center of the gate wobbled and warbled back into normality, as the standard sight of the gate opening and closing happened, and the ship was gone.

Sketch felt an intense amount of pressure weighing on his brain, like the most colossal headache he'd ever had in his entire life, and while it seemed like it had crescendoed and was starting to recede, it still hurt like hell.

Tell the gatewatch that whatever ship that was before us, they had Traeger crystals they were either smuggling or carrying unwittingly, and Traeger crystals can sometimes cause gate harmonics to get out of phase. That's why they aren't permitted near warp gates.

Sketch repeated what Fury Horatio Rose had just told him, and the voice on the other end of the line sounded relieved. "Is that what the hell that was? Well, we'll be sure to assess their account with a sizable penalty, although I'm betting being stuck for most of the day instead of being on their way already chapped their hides pretty good. Anyway, you're clear to pass, *Praeteritus*, so happy trucking."

The ship began to move towards the warp gate as Sketch unplugged his still glowing Ashaka from the ship, thinking to himself, and the others inside of the Ashaka, 'So, *now* what?'

Now you get us on the other side of that gate and start heading towards the next gate at top speed. I need you to be well in the black within about ten minutes.

'What happens in ten minutes?'

All this energy's gotta go somewhere.

They hit the gate and the space around them twisted, warping them from Carkem Gate to Nathmio Gate several systems away. As soon as they were clear from the gate, Sketch set the controls to give the ship a hard burn, mostly along the path to the next gate, but also a bit off to the side, just to keep them away from being directly in the commonly used shipping lanes.

Is the ship set in its path?

'It is. Why?'

I'm going to need to let off all this power, Storm Walker, and I'm going to have to release it along one of the four Paths.

'Wait, *what?* You didn't tell me anything about this.'

I told you there was going to be a cost. Besides, this won't be so bad, once I let it all out. Within an hour or two, everyone should be back to themselves. Don't be such a child.

Sketch suddenly saw the red mist from the Ashaka explode into a puff of glitter that expanded outwards, sifting through the walls of the ship and dissipating out into space. He didn't get long to focus on it, though, as he turned to see the gazes of Serena and Aliara fixated on him, a look unlike any other he'd ever seen in his entire life.

"Get your fucking clothes off, Sketch, or we're going to rip them the fuck off you," Serena said as the two women started to close in on him.

"What you're feeling, ladies, it's a result of—"

"It's a result of us being about to fuck your brains out, little man," Aliara said, having tugged her top off, casting it aside. "The only question is whether or not you're laying down or I'm holding you up by your fucking wrists."

Both of the women were nearly completely out of their clothes as they closed in on him, and as Sketch started to back up, they lunged and were upon him before he knew it. Aliara pushed him to the ground and mashed her lips against his. He was still getting used to the size differential, but her mouth wasn't that much bigger than his was, so while he felt like he was still smaller than her, he couldn't focus on the sensation for long. Especially because Serena was yanking his pants off like they were keeping her from the only thing that seemed to matter to her.

Serena's mouth engulfed his cock like she was trying to inhale him, her lips slobbering over his shaft so she could start bobbing her head along it in a frenzied motion, her tongue basting his cock with her spittle, face pressed down to his groin for as long as she could, while Aliara was pressing her overwhelming tits into his hands before taking one of his wrists to shove it between her thighs.

Sketch had certainly had his share of aggressive partners over the years, but nothing that even vaguely compared to this, far more intense than his first encounter with Serena had been even, because she was doing everything she could to keep her lips sealed around the base of his dick as it started her coughing. He finally lifted his hand from Aliara's breast and reached down to Serena's hair, trying to push her head back and off his shaft.

That may have been a mistake, he would later think, because as soon as her mouth was off him, she crawled over her, reached down to grab his cock, lined it up and then slammed her snatch down onto his shaft so hard, he thought he could feel the tip of his shaft threatening to break through her cervix, her entire pussy clenching him like she just wanted him to stay inside of her for eternity.

"That's it, you dirty royal fucker," she hissed at him sharply. "Break that little cunt in. Hammer my snatch like you fucking own me, princess pumper. Rail me like the good little whore I am for you."

"She's a filthy little bitch, isn't she, Captain?" Aliara whispered to him. "She's a thirsty cumrag for you, and so am I, and you're gonna fucking fill both of us until we're leaking your fucking cum like bad engines dripping oil, aren't you? Gods, she looks hot like this, pogoing up and down on your dick, a tiny little funsized fuck snack, face all bunched up in pleasure, stuck in chain orgasms like you've broken her brain and locked her in constant orgasm mode."

"Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck!"

"Listen to that, Captain... she's only got one word in her vocabulary now... You might as well pump her full of spunk now, let her get that sticky hot cream and short circuit her mind so I can get my fucking turn..."

"Fuck! Fuck fuck fuck! Fucking! Cumming!"

There was something that felt inevitable about his orgasm, and as soon as he started letting loose with his release inside of Serena's belly, her fingernails raked hard against his chest while her body seized up like a bad engine, clenching around his cock as tightly as she could before slumping nearly unconscious onto her side, falling off her straddling position of him, collapsing into a grinning puddle on the floor, his cum slightly leaking out of her, although her cunt was still in regular contractions, as if trying to retain as much of it as she could inside of her.

“That’s the folly of the youth,” Aliara purred at him. “They’re convinced they’re undefeatable until they find themselves out of their league. So why don’t you move onto someone more your speed, aye, Captain?”

She had pulled away from him and moved to get on her knees, lowering her shoulders all the way down to the floor of the bridge, her face resting a cheek against the cool metal. “This isn’t you, Aliara; this is the Ashaka burning off excess energy.”

“I don’t give a fuck *why* I’m currently a rabid slut for you, Captain. That’s what I am. I’m your bitch in heat that you need to tend to. I was worried about our size mismatch at first, Captain, but I think you’ll find we’re practically perfect for each other like this. You can get the same penetration that you would in what you humans call ‘doggy style’ except you can be fully standing up and you can truly put your back into fucking me stupid. So have at, Captain!”

It was still odd for him to comprehend how her cunt had adapted itself to be a species match for him through just a single medication, but her slit was human sized, even against her overly large Y’bari body. He had to wonder how much of her system had changed to be in line with his. Could she get pregnant? Give birth to a Y’bari/human hybrid child? She was correct, though, in that the size differential resulted in the perfect height for him to be standing while she was on her knees.

He moved to get into position and thrust his prick inside of her as she let out an even louder moan that Serena had done, her hips thrusting her massive ass back at him to make those powerful thighs shake and jiggle, ripples running through the flesh of her toned backside.

“Fuck yes, Captain... do it. Harder. You can’t fucking break me but I want you to fucking try, I want you to wreck my adapted pussy. Abuse me and sate your lusts and my own. Gods Captain, I have such an itchy needy cunt. Rail it! Destroy it!”

There was something about Aliara’s tone that made it clear she wanted him to use force, so he slapped her ass with a vicious crack, but he was certain it did little more than sting her. Hell, it was likely to hurt his hand more than her ass. Still, the wanton sound of pleasure that escaped her lips made it clear she was enjoying the harsh attentions.

Somewhere in the middle of it, Serena had woken up enough to crawl over and press her lips against Aliara’s, the two women making out until finally his body had used up what little energy reserves it had remaining. He thrust his cock hilt deep inside of her and unloaded a heavy assault of jizz into her, her body engulfing him to try and keep him in place until she could seep that smoldering cream into her body.

A few moments later, Aliara’s knees slipped out from under her and she fell onto her belly on the deck of the bridge, her and Serena still in delirious post-coital bliss, tangling their tongues together as they cooed delightfully.

Sketch staggered back a few steps and then sat down bare-assed in his captain’s chair, wiping sweat from his forehead with the back of his arm. ‘You know, I found an Ashaka so this kind of thing *wouldn’t* keep happening,’ he thought.

You still enjoyed the fuck out of it, lad, so take the win.

‘But I—’

Take. The. Win.

He laughed, shaking his head. “How long before the next gate, Helen?”

“About ten hours, Captain.”

“Fine. I’m going for a shower and then the longest nap I can cram in.”

The two women scrambled to get up off their feet. “We’re coming with,” Serena said, groggily.

“Alright, but when I say I’m sleeping, you’d better respect that.”

“Oh, we will,” Serena said.

“Mostly,” Aliara giggled.

Chapter Eight

While Sketch had certainly spent plenty of time in highly populated systems before, this was the first time after coming out of the long chill that he would be able to get off his ship for more than a couple of minutes. The atmosphere was so unlike the sort of backwater remote outposts he'd spent most of the last few years around. It was exuberant, seeing so many ships coming and going, full space with vessels in every corner of the void of every stripe of the galaxy, from Earther ships to full blown Starless Dominion flagships, from tiny little two-seater zip shuttles to massive frigates designed for the ultra-long haul.

It was glorious.

Back before he'd signed up with The Calm, he'd been in port systems like this all the time and loved every second of it. With so many ships coming and going, it was easy enough to disappear into the background, no challenge at all to hide amongst the noise and clutter. He and the rest of the mercenaries he'd been running with could get up to all sorts of shit and before anyone had even an inkling that there was trouble afoot, and they could disappear into the blackness of space again like they'd never been there in the first place.

It had been quite a life filled with trouble and mayhem, but when he'd gotten clear of that, and gotten into The Calm, the views had remained the same, but the background music had changed. He wasn't causing trouble anymore but was instead the person putting trouble down. Representing The Calm had been almost a free pass on or off any ship he'd decided to move around on. They'd been highly respected, well renowned for their ability to squash problems long before they had time to sink their talons deep into people's hearts and fester.

But that had been generations ago, and now The Calm were nothing more than a distant memory of a few old-lived souls who never spoke of them these days for fear of being "forcibly reeducated" and indoctrinated into a school of people who couldn't remember much of anything, including how to dress and feed themselves. Most people, though, didn't remember The Calm anyway – they were just another thing in the forgotten dust of the past that didn't matter.

Traveling through the gates, space often felt like an endless sea of black with only the occasional blip of contact of educated minds, but the Noyal System was one giant party that never started or stopped, just had been rolling on since before anyone could remember and would be rolling on long after anyone alive now would be there to see it. Most of the sub-orbital stations were lined with brilliant lights like electric veins pulsating across the midnight, and every so often, there would be a flareup of engine plumes, cutting through the quick.

"What the hell is that spiny looking thing over by Shibuya Station?" Sketch asked.

"That's a Quardiff cruiser," Aliara said to him. "They're voracious traders, but they've been known to venture far from home to obtain rare things they might have trouble obtaining on their own. They don't often travel through human-based territories, though, as they find your language offensive to their ears, so there must be something especially valuable around they're trying to get their hands on. They also don't like highly populated systems, so I wonder what they found important enough to overcome that foible of their personality."

So very much has changed since we have been away, Muriel Rose's voice said inside of his skull. *The ships, the technology, the gates... nothing is as it was when I left it.*

'Yes, well,' he thought back at her. 'The universe has a habit of moving on without us after we're gone. It's quite the tragedy I know.'

Mmmm. And yet you somehow still came back to life, Storm Walker.

'No rest for the wicked.'

"They're talking to you again, aren't they?" Serena asked him, standing at his side, her hand smoothing along his back. She'd grown extremely affectionate around him since their first encounter, almost as if she was always still slightly tapping into The Warmth, although it seemed like the emotional connection ran deeper than physical. Perhaps she truly had fallen in love with the stories of

him as a child. It was certainly something to keep tabs on, although he would be lying to himself if he didn't admit to enjoying the affection.

"Just Muriel Rose," he replied.

He'd explained to Serena, Aliara and Helen about the personality engrams that were encoded into the Ashaka, how there were four generations of Fury living inside of him, something that all of them had grasped much easier than he had. As it turned out, the art of encoding a backup version of a person's memories and personality had existed long before Sketch's original time but had been restricted to those with wealth and his status, something they'd not gone out of their way to advertise, obviously. Since his disappearance into the ice, the practice had continued, although not expanded much beyond keeping historical archives of important figures. Serena admitted there might even be an engram of her floating around out there, assuming it hadn't been destroyed.

When he'd explained how concerned he was about their ability to exert control over him, Serena had gone out of her way to assure him that he had the final say over anything he said or did, and that while they could offer council or even lend assistance with some of his abilities, never once had there been any record of an engram dictating what could or couldn't be done to or by its host. The engrams were more like imprints than sentient beings, and anything that could hold an engram was imbued with more than a handful of restrictions. The worst they would be capable of, she assured him, was to be annoying him with their constant chatter.

"Do you know where to find this fixer of yours?"

"Cola? Oh yeah, she won't prove too hard to find," Sketch said with a little bit of a chuckle.

"The harder part will be meeting with her without anyone noticing me."

"Why's that going to be tricky?" Serena asked.

"She's something of a high society show-off," he said, amusement in his voice. "She likes the thrill of setting up jobs, using her skills to keep her fellow socialites entertained. They believe she's got an inside line to some fixer in the system and none of them have ever realized that *she's* the fixer."

"How did you end up getting connected with her?"

"I was trying to get information about what happened during my absence, and I got put in touch with her by a fellow 'questionable hauler' named Fletch, who said she could be trusted to be polite and not attract the attention of the Starless Dominion. He still works for Cola, I think. Anyway, she was happy to provide me information, and decided to make use of my services, even with my particular demands about how I did business."

"She uses the cover name Cola?" Aliara asked curiously. "Really?"

"Sure," Sketch responded. "Who doesn't like cola?"

"And she knows you're a Storm?"

"She does. That's part of the reason I feel so strongly that I can trust her. She was looking out for an Ashaka for me, and I think the fact that I had to ask about one told her everything she needed to know. It also put into context all my odd requests about package delivery and retrieval. From that, she's probably learned all about who I used to be and knows that I couldn't go much into populated areas until I had an Ashaka again."

"Which is why she's not going to suspect you showing up on her front doorstep?"

"Would you?" he laughed.

"You want us to go with you?" Serena asked.

Sketch shook his head. "Certainly not you, princess. Your face isn't incredibly well known, especially after a while out of the limelight, but I still don't like the idea of taking the risk that some royalist fanboy recognizes you. I don't know how commonplace P'nox are, Aliara, so it's up to you whether you feel like you can blend into the background in a place like this."

"They aren't often bound for the more populated areas," Aliara answered, "so it's probably best I remain on the ship. No one's looking for me, but best not to push our luck. And you'll be able to pass freely and clearly without any difficulty on your own for the first time in years, so why cramp in on

your style? We'll both wait aboard *The Praeteritus* and not expand our risk portfolio.”

Once they had docked *The Praeteritus* at Basskar Station, Sketch made sure his appearance was exactly how a long hauler should be but kept up the elements of his disguise that needed to be reflexive, the kind of thing he needed to be doing without even thinking about them, like making sure his arms were covered from shoulder to wrist, not a bit of his tattoos showing. Odds were good that if someone caught a glance of just a tiny segment of them, they wouldn't recognize what they were looking at. But operational security was the kind of thing he couldn't afford to be lax about, so he added gloves as well, just to ensure that the chances were basically nil, because camera recordings lasted forever and who knew when people were looking at those.

He still found it funny that he didn't need to worry about his *face*, but his *arms* were the utter problem. It had been a couple of generations since he'd been to Basskar Station last, but he didn't remember it having heat issues, so he trusted in the inherent chill of space to keep him from overheating when he'd be walking around.

The harbormaster had asked what the purpose of their visit was, and Sketch had said it was just for a handful of face-to-face meetings and maybe to pick up some minor supplies. If he picked up cargo while he was walking around, though, he told the harbormaster that he'd be sure to let them know about it before departure, so he could be properly assessed the export tax. He was adept at making sure he had the right inflection of somebody who'd maybe tried to sneak by without paying it once and had gotten caught, so that they never really pressed him much on the matter.

Once he was loose in Basskar station, it was both wildly familiar and totally alien to him. Since they'd been conquered by the Starless Dominion, more and more alien races had integrated with humanity, and each time some new species wandered in, they brought their own collection of smells, sights and sounds with them. The thing he was most delighted by was the new resurgence of spices because it meant there were all sorts of new flavors to discover (and often reject). But despite the constant assault of street corner vendors with their assortments of grilled meats, fruits, and vegetables, he wanted to move quickly and efficiently to his target without doing too much sightseeing along the way. He would have plenty of time to explore later.

It was a short shuttle ride to change districts, away from the port and over towards the luxurious upper echelon district, where those of wealth and status called home. The structures were odd mixes of industrial sheik and old-school Earther classicism, brick and plastisteel coexisting side-by-side, columns of marble next to girders of titanium. Sketch had never cared much for the trappings of wealth, although he had always admired the security financial stability could provide. “Those with means always eat,” the lesson went.

Cola's real name was Lady Miranda Biazotto and she was third in line to the Biazotto Construction empire, although she'd shown very little interest in assuming any position of power with the business, having let her husband manage it in her stead, as Lord Deacon Biazotto (he'd taken *her* name in the marriage) was something of an eager business and social climber, doing everything he could to establish himself as a figure of power in the company.

But Cola's side hustle had taken over more and more of her life.

Much like he'd expected her to do her homework on him, he'd done his homework on her, although it had been much more difficult to do for him, considering how much more his hands were tied as opposed to hers. But he'd enjoyed the challenge and learned a lot about Cola's definitely illegal transportation empire.

Sketch knew that she had multiple smugglers working for her, her undercover logistics moving empire not quite superseding the construction business but doing more than enough to keep her busy whenever she wanted to be. Running it out of her main manor would've caused too many questions, though, so he needed to be able to spot where she ran the smuggling business. To find that, however, he was going to need to spot her going there.

That meant following her from the manor home to wherever her office was, because there was

no way in hell he was going to just walk up to her front door and attempt to get her staff to give him an appointment. He probably *could* but where would the fun in that be?

The highfalutin region of the station annoyed him with how many perfumes he was exposed to. It made him want to start sneezing and never stop. These people could buy a lot of things, but they certainly couldn't buy good taste, and layering a dozen smells on top of one another was offensive, never attractive.

The Biazotto Manor was lined with security, but Sketch just knew that as soon as she wanted to, Cola would have a way to leave and ditch them all, so he just walked the perimeter of it and spent his experience as a smuggler looking for how exits might be concealed if he was building them. And, as if fate had smiled down upon him, he saw a narrow little crevice fold inward before a figure draped in a thick cloak slipped out, almost completely obscured by the shadows, but Sketch had spent more than his fair share of time learning how to watch where he wasn't supposed to be looking.

It would be easier, he supposed, to follow Cola if had brought Aliara or Serena with him, but he needed to get these skills back into his rotation, and it wasn't as though he was relearning fundamentals, just more making sure they came to him naturally and without too much issue. He didn't have any difficulty staying in the pocket of space behind her that she couldn't catch, even as they moved down the streets and into the public transportation veins. A few minutes later, they were on a train heading down towards the industrial and manufacturing sector, just the sort of perfect area for Cola to run her operations out of.

He didn't want to let her get into her little nest because that would've made things much more difficult, so when he felt like they were a good enough distance away from everyone, he slipped in behind her, poked two fingers into her back like the barrel of a weapon and said in his most gravelly voice, "Move an inch and I'll plug ya."

He felt her tense up for a second, and then the odd choice of words set her laughing. "Sketch, you sunuvabitch," the woman said, shaking her head, "I damn near might've killed you."

"What, with that little peashooter that's normally on your hip?"

"*Normally?*" she asked, reaching down only to find the weapon wasn't in its holster where she'd placed it, turning around to see him offering it to her with his left hand, his right hand still making a finger gun. "You bastard, I didn't even feel you lift it off me. When did you take it?"

"Right when I poked you in the back," he told her as she took the weapon back from him. "You tensed up and it made the perfect distraction for you not to notice the missing weight from your hip."

Lady Miranda 'Cola' Biazotto was in her late fifties or early sixties, with finely braided silver hair and a too youthful complexion that came from having more than enough money to throw at the aging problem. Under the cloak, she was dressed in simple pants and a shirt made of common cotton, designed to blend in rather than to stand out. He'd offered her tips on it in the past, but there was no concealing those bright violet eyes of hers. They stood out like glowing amethyst in even the slightest shadow. "You must've finally found an Ashaka if you're out wandering around populated areas again," she said. "Good on you. Where'd you finally locate one?"

"With a bit of grave robbing," he admitted. "The previous owner has told me she doesn't mind, being on account that her mental engram is encoded to the Ashaka itself, along with three others."

Are we comfortable giving away such secrets lightly, m'boy?

Hush father, Muriel's voice corrected, if Storm Walker believes the woman can be trusted, then we must trust in his judgment. It's seemed to serve him quite well so far.

"That sounds..."

"Complicated?"

"I was going to say comforting, but that too, I suppose," she admitted. "You've got *The Praeteritus* docked here?"

"I do. And I'm starting to take up some crew. But haven't you got an office we can go and sit and have a drink in, like a couple of civilized criminals, instead of standing in some darkened alleyway,

waiting for the law to stumble across us?”

She laughed, rolling her eyes. “The law don’t come down here much, Sketch, but sure, we can step into my office.” The two of them didn’t have much further to walk, approaching what looked like a semi-abandoned warehouse with well-faded signage for ‘Renovations coming soon from Biazotto Construction’ placed all over the major points of entry, although the sealing job looked pretty solid, as if it was important that people stay the fuck out. Of course, he understood why.

They approached a collection of oil drums, and she pushed her fingers through what looked solid metal and disappeared beneath the hologram to touch the keypad underneath, drawing some kind of symbol on the surface to signal a door to open as one of the oil drums swung out, unveiling a passage into the building.

Once he was inside, he was pleased to find it was a well-organized lair, several fields of information showed exactly how adept Cola was at running smugglers, dozens of vessels scattered across the systems, a callboard keeping track who was on which assignment and when delivery was expected, so if something had gone sideways, she would know about it in advance.

There was a desk with a big chair attached to it, but also another chair off to the side next to a sofa which looked like it had doubled as a bed more than a handful of times, with a blanket pulled off and to one side. Cola ushered him over to the couch, letting him sit down on it while she took the chair next to it. “So, you’ve been radio dark for over a week now, Sketch,” she sighed. “I take it something went tits up on the Vemex delivery?”

“No recipient there to take delivery of the package and no money waiting for me to just leave it there as per how we usually do things.”

She shrugged. “You know how business like this is. You open the container, see if there was anything of value inside?”

“How much can I trust you, Cola?”

She tented her fingertips together and looked at him with an expression he’d never seen from her on all their various vidcalls – one of annoyance. “It can’t be any more dangerous than the secrets of yours I’m already carrying, can it Sketch?”

“It can and it is, which is why I’m giving you the option of choosing not to know instead of finding out and being burdened with carrying this new particular wrinkle around with you. If you want to know, of course I trust you enough to share, but this is a piece of information you might be better off just *not* knowing and if you want to employ caution, I’d respect that.”

She laughed, leaning back into her oversized chair, shaking her white hair from her face. “With that sort of lead-in, I think I’m rather *forced* to make you tell me.”

“How much do you know about House Sanada?”

“Enough to know that even talking about it isn’t a thing we should do in public, so I’m glad we’re talking about it in private. You find some of their crown jewels or something? It might be hard to line up a fence for something like that but I’m sure—”

“And the subhouses? You know anything about them?”

Her face fell a little bit, sensing the money had left the conversation but the risk had increased. “A bit, but not a lot. Where are you going with this?”

“The box contained Princess Serena O’Quincy, alive and in deep stasis. She might well be the last of the human royals left alive.”

Cola waited a moment to see if he was going to offer further details. “You’re *sure* it’s her?”

“Independently verified. Yeah, it’s her.”

“Well, you certainly didn’t sign up for that shit, so if you want to give her the boot or for me to turn her in, the ransom’s probably *quite*—”

“I made her part of my crew.”

Cola nodding smugly, as if she’d been expecting the twist at some point, but still didn’t believe it. “That’s one way to handle it.”

“She helped me find the Ashaka, and honestly, once you’re hiding one person from the Starless Dominion, what’s a few more?” he said with a weary smile. “And now that I’ve got an Ashaka, I can start taking on gigs where I need to meet a client at either end. I know the mystery thing probably helped me when I got started, but now I’d like to have more flexibility with other contracts, so I’ve picked up a couple of crew members and I’ll probably pick up a handful more while I’m at it.”

“Who else did you get?”

“I grabbed a P’nox who’s operating as my muscle.”

“Fallen Y’bari, huh?” she whistled appreciatively. “Good help if you can get it, and if you can guarantee a solid commitment to your cause. You’re certain there won’t be blowback? No odds of him going turncoat on you some time when your back’s turned?”

“Nah,” Sketch said, confidently. “She’s going to be loyal all the way to the end. As is the Princess. We’ve dirtied her up a bit, and we’ve already passed through a handful of gate checks with nobody thinking anything’s amiss, so I’m willing to gamble that if we aren’t advertising that she’s with us, we can keep a low profile and things won’t go too far sideways. That’s why I’m here. To give you the new status quo and see what jobs you’ve got that need doing. Also, to let you know that if you’ve got a lead on some spare crew, I wouldn’t mind picking up two to four more people.”

“What, specifically, do you think you’re going to need?”

“Not a ton. We could certainly use a cook. I love my AI, but she’s not exactly a gourmet. Also probably need both a pilot and a mechanic, and one familiar with Tropage systems, which I can’t imagine is a common skillset. It also probably wouldn’t hurt to have a doctor on board, considering the sorts of scenarios I find myself running into. I’d be willing to double up two roles into one person, though. And, of course, whoever we get to work for us must be okay with our slightly checkered pasts, and who’ll be understanding of my rather weird ship dynamics.”

“Weird ship dynamics?” Cola asked him.

“Yeah, the princess and the P’nox are both hooking up with me, and each other, on the reg,” he chuckled. “I know exactly how ridiculous it sounds saying it aloud but—”

“It doesn’t sound at *all* ridiculous, Sketch,” Cola chuckled. “If I were thirty years younger and not married, I’d probably have been all over you given half a chance the minute we slipped into my lair. If you want to be captain of the *S.S. Bangsalot*, who am I to tell you no, if it doesn’t get in the way of you getting your runs done. Besides, I’m sure with all the time you spent without any physical contact, you’re just making up for lost time at this point, aren’t you?”

“I’d take offense to that, but unfortunately, you’re probably right,” Sketch replied with a sigh. “Anyway, know anyone who might fall into that particular skillset?”

“I have a line on a medic who could double as your cook, and she comes with an attached pilot at the hip, although finding you a mechanic’s gonna be a longer challenge, and I can’t guarantee you’ll be totally happy with the medic and the pilot I’ve got on offer.”

“Why’s that?”

“They’re a couple and they argue a lot,” she sighed. “The doctor also happens to be my daughter, Jezebel. She’s stubborn and proud, like her mother, but she’s also as resourceful and clever as I am, so you take the good with the bad, I suppose. You don’t have to decide until after you’ve met them anyway, which was what your next gig was going to be anyway, so call it fate, kismet, what have you.”

“You hire me to smuggle things, Cola, not to give tour cruises.”

“My daughter and her wife were *discharged* from their last ship and are currently sitting in a backwater prison on a dustbowl planet that nobody in their right mind wants to visit. I need you to negotiate their release. I can allocate some funds for you, but if they want more than what I’m willing to pay, I need you to find another way to get them out.”

He put a hand on his hip, shaking his head a little. “You want me to stage a jailbreak to get your daughter and her wife out of some hillbilly jailcell, don’t you? What the hell did they even do?”

“They might’ve stolen the sheriff’s hover skiff while they were drunk and crashed it into the town’s only water tower.”

Sketch shook his head with a sigh. “Yeah, I can imagine they’re a little pissed about that.”

“Jez claims they were insulting the militia she used to be a part of, and that she couldn’t let that sort of thing stand.”

“Militia?” Sketch asked, raising an eyebrow.

“My daughter was a combat doctor for Euler’s 48th Legion, a group of freelance mercenaries who were mostly wiped out about two years ago when they attempted to protect a freehold with some Ziari rebels inside. Euler tried to hold out as long as they could, but when it became clear they weren’t going to be able to stand, he gave the evacuation call, and everyone went running. It’s troubled my daughter ever since, soldiers and lost causes and all that. She’s been self-medicating since then, trying to manage her PTSD. I felt like when she hooked up with Lara, maybe she’d hit a turning point and was making progress towards real recovery. They were on a ship together for almost eight months before this happened, and their captain decided just to leave them to rot and find himself new crew rather than deal with it. So, your next gig will be to get them out of jail – if you want to keep them on board as your crew afterwards, that’s fine. If you want to just haul their asses back here and let me deal with them, that’s fine too. You can also try them out on a temporary basis, see what you think of them, give them a few runs and then make up your mind.”

“I’m more accommodating to the latter option, so I’m not having to buy before I try,” he said. “What are the odds are they’re going to accept how much money you’re willing to pay in exchange for their release?”

“Call it fifty-fifty odds. The sheriff sounded like a real hard ass in his message to me, regarding her imprisonment. He seemed to think just because he was sheriff, it gave him complete and total rights to do whatever the fuck he wanted to anyone in town, so is it wrong of me to say I’m almost *hoping* he won’t accept the money?”

“What’s the level of security and protectorate in the area?”

She snorted dismissively. “It’s a backwater mining village with no real sense of honor or nobility. They aren’t worth the time spent talking down to them. They might have a couple of ex-soldiers, and the sheriff might have some remedial skill in firearms training, but don’t forget, Storm Walker, *I know who you are*. Even *without* revealing you’re a Storm, you used to handle things like this without even breaking a sweat. In fact, this sort of thing used to be your bread and butter back when you were just plain ol’ Miles Walker, not that *that* guy ever was all that plain.”

Sketch smirked a little bit. “You must have really had to go digging to find out information about that old fossil.”

“Not as hard to find as you might think,” she replied. “The name Miles Walker was apparently something of a boogeyman in the mercenary circles up until you retired to join The Calm, so some of those stories are still in the written records, although sometimes it can feel a little like trying to separate old ghost stories from truth, because there’s no way you could’ve actually done some of the things you’re linked to.”

“Like what?”

“The Sutra Shipyards Strike? You and four other mercenaries took down an entire automated shipyard in an attack against the Spither Corporation?”

“Don’t be silly,” he said with a dismissive laugh. “Five mercenaries against an army guarding a shipyard? That’s insane.”

“I thought so.”

“There were *seven* of us.”

She turned to shoot him a dirty look, to which he could only shrug in response. “Two people made *that* much a difference?”

“It’s never about numbers, Cola. It’s about skillsets, planning and dedication. That and armies

on lax guard duty tend to get fat and squalid,” he said. “They were never much of a real threat.”

“What do you think? You want to take on my daughter and her wife into your crew, at least temporarily? Once you pick them up, I can give you a couple of milk runs to see if they’re worth keeping around. There’s some work out that way that needs doing sooner rather than later, and I figure it’ll help you figure out where their strong and weak points are.”

“And you’re okay with them being part of my crew, knowing the kind of dan—”

“Sketch. You’re a black-market smuggler and I’m your fence. We aren’t exactly pure and noble folks to begin with.”

“Lady Miranda Biazotto seems pretty noble to me.”

She scoffed at him. “Don’t let the nice house and the bumbling obese husband fool you. Nobility’s just another kind of disguise people wear. And if you’re expecting my daughter to be a well-mannered lady of high society, don’t hold your breath. Remember, this is a woman who got drunk enough to steal a *sheriff’s* skiff and then crash it into a water tower, only to claim it was an act of political protest afterwards. Like anyone was going to buy that.”

“Knowing what some of the Podunk regions are like, it might well have been,” he said.

“See? You like her already. Anyway, this job’s on my dime, so I’ll send the funds to your account in full in advance, including the money for the sheriff. He chooses not to take the cash, you pocket that as an added bonus. Keep Jez and Lara as long as you want or ditch them after a single run, as long as you promise me you’ll give them at least one good run to prove themselves worth the trouble they bring.”

“At least one run, on my honor.”

“That’s more honor than I’ve got, so you’re on,” she said, standing up, offering him her hand to shake, which he did after standing up himself. Then he pulled her in for a hug, startling her a little, but she returned it eagerly. “Nice to be back among people again?”

“You’ve got no idea,” he laughed. “You never realize how important human contact is until you go a few years without any.”

“Don’t be a stranger then.”

“I won’t.”

He started to make his way towards the exit when she called out to him. “Oh Sketch?”

“Mmm?”

“Regardless of how much of a pain in the ass she is, she’s still my daughter. So, y’know, look after her, hm?”

“Like she was my own family.”

“Oh, I’m sure she will be,” Cola muttered quiet enough that she’d thought Sketch wouldn’t have heard her, but he did. “She’s never met a bed she couldn’t warm.”

Chapter Nine

To call the planet where Cola's daughter was incarcerated backwater would've been extremely generous. There were heavy duty automated ships and mining robots trafficking through the area, but actual people seemed to be scarce, which meant this was a corporate town, one with significant financial backing, despite how rural it looked.

While lots of mining planets relied on manual labor, or at least some layer of human oversight regarding the powerful automated tools extracting precious resources from beneath the surface, some companies had cut out the middlemen and women entirely, and just let the machines do all the work, with a skeleton crew of people occupying a nearby town to perform repairs and maintenance, as well as provide a little bit of security.

That was both good and bad for Sketch. It was good, in that it meant the security team would likely be fat, lazy and undisciplined. It was bad in that they wouldn't have much else to do other than harass people who'd stopped by for whatever reason.

Sketch preferred it when they'd gotten complacent *and* they were too lazy to put up much of a fight, but it was certain that wasn't going to happen here. The planet was called Kenset. The town was called Kenset One. And when Sketch brought *The Praeteritus* to land at Kenset One, the sheriff was there to meet them at the port.

"Two hundred and eighty thousand ectash," the squat, almost dwarflike man said to him as soon as he stepped foot off the ship and onto Kenset soil. "That's how much it'll cost for you to get those two out of my prison cell. And not a single credit less."

In looking at the sheriff, Sketch immediately knew this was going to end up getting done the hard way, but he was still going to do his best to try and negotiate his way out of it. The man was built like a powerlifter, squat and square, the shape of an old earth fireplug, and he was dressed in a long black drover trench coat with a black silk vest, black silk slacks and a white linen shirt on, with a giant silver star that read 'Sheriff' on it.

"C'mon, Sheriff," Sketch sighed. "You know that between what the average fine should be and the estimated damages, you shouldn't be asking for more than a hundred grand in ectash, and even that's being generous. Hell, the water tower's even rebuilt already, so it couldn't have been that bad," he said, pointing over the sheriff's shoulder towards the newly erected structure.

"We had a new water tower that was supposed to be going up in a few weeks, but now we had to speed all that up, and that's always a pain in my ass when something goes off schedule, so you've got to pay what I call processing fees," the sheriff said to them.

"I got a hundred grand in ectash here that could be yours nice and easy if you just hand the two of them over to me, sheriff, otherwise we're gonna end up doing this the hard way," Sketch said. "And believe me, you don't wanna do the hard way. Shit, *I* don't wanna do the hard way. It's more work for me, and while I do get to *keep* the hundred grand I'm supposed to give to you, I'd rather you just take the money, I take the two troublemakers and nobody gets their panties in a twist over any of this."

"You make it sound like you got some other option than payin' what I'm askin', boy," the sheriff sneered at him.

"And *you* know that I do, sheriff," Sketch sighed, leaning against a nearby wall. "This here's a corpo town, which means corpo laws apply to it, but they end the minute we leave your atmosphere, and nobody's gonna take 'em seriously anywhere else. That means while you *think* you got loads of power here, it ends the minute I get off this planet. So all I have to do is get those two women out of your jail, onto my ship and get my ship off this hunk of dirt, and you are no longer of *any* consequence to me. I mention to any *actual* authorities how you were attempting to grift graft off the top of what was a reasonable settlement of fines, and, well, then you're just another hillbilly that nobody's got time for, and your argument is over."

"You really think you can break into my jail, steal two prisoners out from under me, make it

back to your ship and then take off without any form of consequences?” the man said, stabbing a finger in Sketch’s direction the entire time.

“I can and I will, sheriff,” Sketch said to him. “You can get all pissed off all you like, and you can even tell other people in your tiny little mining collective about my ship and how I caused you all sorts of trouble, but then of course I’m going to have to counter with a recording of you attempting to extort me for more than is reasonable, as well as me releasing recordings showing just how easy it’ll be for me and my people to take down you and yours.”

“You wouldn’t...”

“Oh, sheriff, you have *no* idea the extent to which I would go about embarrassing your country bumpkin ass given the opportunity,” Sketch said, leaning his back against the wall, folding his arms over his chest. “I could humiliate you six ways from Sunday before you could even get up in the morning, and there isn’t a damn thing you could do about it.”

The sheriff pulled aside his long coat, grabbed the handle of his sidearm and lifted it up to point it at Sketch, who only sighed a little bit more. “What about now, smartass? What say I just shoot you right here and then impound your ship and the money on it?”

“Tell you what, Sheriff.” He unfolded his arms slowly, gesturing with a single fingertip in the man’s direction. “If I can get that gun off you before you can fire a shot, you accept my kind offer to take the money and release the two women without further incident or hassle. You get the shot off before I can disarm you, well, then I’ll just *give* you the hundred grand ectash *now*, as long as you agree that *when* I get the two women broken free and off the planet, you and me let this whole squabble die right then and there.”

“Fine, you got a deal,” the Sheriff said, right before he pulled the trigger.

And nothing happened.

With practiced accuracy, Sketch dropped down to his knees and then jumped forward, tackling the man, knocking the firearm from the man’s hands with the sort of precision finesse he’d been known for back in his mercenary days. Once it was free, Sketch sprung back onto his feet and casually moseyed over to pick up the gun. “So, I’ll meet you at the jail in half an hour with the money so you can give me my two people then, yes?”

The sheriff looked like he was about to explode, then made the wiser decision and cooled down, letting all the anger drain from him. “Fine. With two additional caveats.”

“You’re not much in the place for negotiating extras here, Sheriff,” Sketch said with a wry smirk, “but I’m a reasonable man, so I’m willing to hear them out before I say yay or nay.”

“First, you keep those two the hell off my planet for good. I don’t want them coming back here, and if you personally have to bring you ship back to Kenset, you don’t let them set foot off the ship the entire time you’re here.”

Sketch chuckled, surprised at how reasonable the sheriff was being, but also respecting the man for choosing the wiser of the two paths. “Yeah, that’s a thing I can readily agree to. And the second?”

The sheriff rubbed his sore wrist, but then pointed over to his gun in Sketch’s hands. “Tell me why the gun didn’t work.”

He smirked a little bit, as the sheriff was asking to know one of the tricks of the trade that Sketch had just employed to solve the situation. It would remove a little bit of the mystery of what he’d just done but if it made it so he could just get the two people and get them off this planet, he’d consider it progress. “Tell you what. I’ll tell you after you release them, on my honor.”

The sheriff reluctantly nodded. “Half an hour. I’ll go start the paperwork.” He turned and walked away from Sketch, who let out a light sigh of relief. He was, of course, capable of dealing with this Podunk bunch of amateur hour rent-a-thugs without so much as breaking a sweat, but there was always a risk in doing so, one that might come back to bite him in the ass later.

Sketched turned around and walked back onto the ship to fetch the money that Cola had given him to pay for bail. The sheriff’s asking for more might’ve been fair, but then again, it might not have,

and it wasn't really his concern to figure out either way. His job was simply get the people and get the hell off the rock.

He was only a couple of minutes from the hull of his ship, so he was back there in a flash, finding Aliara and Serena there sparring with bo staves.

"We fighting or paying?" Aliara asked him as he ignored them and moved over to one of his various hidden compartments.

"Paying."

"Bah, that's no fun," she scoffed, returning to take a swing at Serena, who was already moving out of the way.

"He took the money first offer?" Serena asked, jumping up as Aliara took a swipe at her legs.

"Second."

"What was wrong with the first offer?" Aliara asked.

"I wasn't being persuasive enough, I guess." Sketch pulled the small satchel of ectash from the place he stowed it. There weren't a lot of currencies that were accepted basically anywhere, but ectash was the credit of the Starless Dominion, so to *not* accept it would be basically admitting to treasonous behavior, something nobody wanted to do, regardless of how they might actually feel about the overlords that had seized control of humanity's fate like so much errant cattle.

"What was the difference between the first offer and the second offer?" Serena asked.

"I explained what would happen to him if he *didn't* just take the money."

"He didn't care for what you had to tell him?"

"He seemed none too pleased with it all, no, but he also tried to draw down on me, hoping he could shoot his way out of the problem."

"Take it that didn't work either?"

Sketch smirked. "It did not." He headed back towards the door. "Either of you want to tag along, or you happy just to remain here?"

"I don't think there's going to be anything interesting going on, so you go and run your little errand and have your bit of fun without us," Serena told him.

He shrugged and headed back off the ship.

The town of Kenset One was like a lot of barely inhabited planets he'd been on, so while the names of the establishments scattered around the place might've changed here and there, they were all basically the same things in the same places. A pub here, a company store there, a whorehouse over in the corner, a movie house near the center of town. But at the center of it was the town hall, and just off to the side of that, where it usually was in such layouts, was the sheriff's office and jail.

Like most of the buildings in most mining towns scattered through the galaxy, they were both relatively new but also looked like they'd been around for centuries, weathered and sandblasted to hell and back, the backwash from the mining machines tending to blow through the town in waves during the nights, stripping any paint or detailing that was done on the exteriors, which was why most of the identifying signs were riveted steel, designed to endure just about anything.

Sketch made his way to the front of the building and headed inside, finding it wasn't much more than he'd expected it to be. The sheriff had made the right call to let him simply pay for the two and take them on his way, because the security of the place would've taken him all of four minutes to circumnavigate, and half of that was because he needed people alive.

"See you didn't have any trouble finding the place," the sheriff said to him. There were a couple of deputies milling around, and for half a second, Sketch wondered if the sheriff had changed his mind and was going to try and make a play for more money again. That passed a moment or so later as the deputies headed out the front. Sketch could hear them hopping onto a skiff, which then zipped off to go and solve some problem or other.

"Sign's pretty clear what's what. Your boys seemed to light off in a bit of a hurry. Anything you need to worry about?"

“Nah, Ol’ Erika’s causing a ruckus over at the whorehouse, ‘cause her favorite boytoy’s away on vacation and apparently he forgot to tell her. Nothing they can’t handle.” He glanced over at Sketch, and Sketch couldn’t tell if it was admiration or annoyance on the sheriff’s face. “You bring the coin?”

Sketch tossed him the small bag about the size of two fists next to each other across the room, which the sheriff caught easily. “You can count it if you want.”

“Nah, if you’re going to try and short me, I can just run you down before your ship gets off the planet,” the sheriff said. “Besides, I thought about it some on the way back, and the more I thought about it, the more I thought I should be paying *you* to get those two shitheels out of my prison. They’ve been obnoxious as hell, and the longer they’re here, the more miserable I am. C’mon, let’s go get them so you can take them the fuck off my planet.”

The two of them walked down a flight of stairs and over towards a series of jail cells, only a few of which looked occupied. There were a pair of oversized ruffians in the first occupied cell, but the second one had two women in it who could not have look more bored.

Sitting on the bench was Cola’s daughter, Jezebel. Much like her mother, she had the same silver colored hair, and a similarly refined and pedigreed face. She was dressed, however, like she had been working on the frontlines of the mining area, brown slacks and a brown shirt, her silver hair done up in a tightly wound-up bun. She looked incredibly bored and held in her hand a leather ball that she’d been bouncing around the cell when they approached.

Laying on the ground was Jezebel’s wife, Lara, sprawled out like she was trying to cover as much of the floor as she could, and she was a tall but slender woman, with brown hair to match her wife’s attire but not her own, dressed in a jumpsuit that looked like a technicolor death pattern, colors running in every possible path without any shapes or even organization to the madness. If Jez was short and compact, Lara was tall and lanky. The two made an odd, mismatched pair, but something about the duo just seemed to fit together naturally, as if they each complimented the other’s ragged edges.

“Ladies, you’re getting out of here,” the sheriff told them. “Somebody’s willing to pay more to get you out of here than I want to keep you here.” He turned and looked at Sketch. “Although you do owe me one piece of information first,” the man said to him, as he opened the gate.

Sketch chuckled and then pointed his chin over towards the weapon on the man’s hip. “You’re using Defron pistols, but you’ve clearly never been under real stress when you’ve had to use them before, otherwise you’d have calibrated it for a variety of biofeedback profiles. Your heartrate was elevated, which affected your body temperature, which meant your gun didn’t recognize you, so for your own protection, it went into safety mode.”

“My own gun wouldn’t let me shoot it... for my own protection?”

Sketch shrugged with a little smile. “I’ve never much cared for Defron firearms,” he said to the sheriff. “They think they know better than their operator, and that’s never a place you want to be, arguing with your gun to have its permission to fire it. Safety features are one thing but refusing to operate under pressure’s something else entirely.”

“You’re the person my mom sent to get me?” Jezebel asked him. “You don’t much look like her normal type of flunky.”

“That’s because I’m not,” Sketch said. “I’m an independent contractor.”

“So, a *competent* flunky,” Lara added.

The three of them walked out of the jail and back onto the dusty street as a heavy ore transport blazed down the street, kicking up loose dust around them, and Sketch suddenly understood the appeal of all brown attire, as dirt and mud caked on his legs to his annoyance. “Your last captain must’ve *really* hated you to just ditch you here. I mean, booting a medic is one thing, but losing your pilot is something much worse, and usually isn’t a decision made lightly.”

“What do you mean ‘lightly?’” Jez said.

“He means pilots are usually only lost if they quit or if they die, Jez,” Lara told her. “But it doesn’t hurt if the captain’s a capable pilot himself, or at least knows how to fake it well enough.” Lara

craned her neck to one side. “You’re recruiting us for your ship.”

“I’m *considering* it.”

“Wow, mom must either *really* like you or *really, really* hate you to try and pawn me off onto your crew,” Jez sighed. “I don’t think I caught your name, or the name of your ship.”

“I’m Sketch, and my ship is *The Praeteritus*. She’s a former Tropage vessel.”

Lara let out a sharp whistle of appreciation. “Don’t see too many of those around these days.”

“You know how to fly one?”

“Yeah, which is more than I can say for ninety-seven percent of the pilots you’re likely to encounter these days. I have about three months flight time operating one during a cross system mine out over at Dempsy’s Pit, simply because the Tropage ship they had, *The Emeritus*, had the kind of cargo hold that could keep everything total still. When you’re hauling renzium ore, the last thing you want is a rough ride, but *The Emiritus* was one of the smoothest rides I’ve ever had. How many modifications you made to yours?”

“Plenty, just because I’m not as tall as the Tropage are.”

“Were,” Lara said.

“They’re not entirely wiped out yet.”

“Might as well be,” Lara sighed. They reached the docks and the two new recruits caught their first sight of *The Praeteritus*. “That is one *hell* of a ship.”

“You want to take a shot at piloting her for a bit?”

“*You* know we’re a package deal, right?” Lara said, pointing at Jez. “I realize her skillset might not be as immediately obvious as mine, but she goes where I go, for better or worse.”

“Let’s get on board and we can talk about it further.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Jezebel had been remarkably quiet for most of the walk but as soon as they got on board the ship, the doors safely protecting their conversation from nearby ears, Sketch figured out why. “You’re the ex-Storm that my mom employs, aren’t you?”

Sketch turned his eyes to focus on Jezebel, and he was so tempted to give her a shove down one of the paths for the impertinence of asking such a question head on, but he resisted the urge for the time being. “I’m not an *ex*-Storm, no. I’m a Storm in hiding because my religion’s been hunted to extinction by the Starless Dominion. And that’s what my ship is for – moving things that need to stay hidden. In terms of your mom’s smuggling operations, I’m one of her best.”

“*One of?*”

Sketch clicked his tongue in amusement. “I don’t know all the others, so I can’t say for *certain*, that I’m better than they are, but I’d like to think that I am. Everyone on this ship has a few secrets, so if you think that’s going to be a problem, I can just ferry you back to your mom now. Or, if you think that’s the kind of environment you can thrive in, I can give you both a test run and we can see if you’ll fit in around here.”

“How big’s the existing crew?” Lara said. Sketch was a little surprised they hadn’t run into Serena and Aliara yet, but suspected that maybe they were being watched, the two wanting to stay hidden until they’d determined how much they could trust their new potential shipmates.

“Four or three, depending on how you count. In addition to me, and Helen, the ship’s AI, I’ve got two other members, one for security and muscle, the other for linguistics and culturalism, both of whom are involved with me sexually, so if that’s going to be a problem—”

“It isn’t,” Jez cut him off quickly. “You going to demand to know our secrets?”

“I need to know what I’m protecting you from.”

“Who says you’d be protecting us from anything?”

“According to your mom, I’m probably protecting you from yourselves.”

“Your mom’s not wrong,” Lara said as Jez rolled her eyes. “Jez has PTSD, so she’s been using carabel to manage that, but you know how careful you have to be with that for it to not slip into

addiction, I imagine.”

“I’ve met some carabel addicts in my time,” Sketch said.

“Yeah?” Jez sneered. “Well, I ain’t one. I’m using it for its given purpose and never more than I need as determined by a licensed physician.”

“I thought doctors weren’t supposed to self-medicate,” Sketch said.

“Well, I thought all the Storms were supposed to be dead, so here we are,” Jez grumbled. “I’ve had a couple of episodes where I overdid it, but mostly I’ve got it in check, and when I don’t, Lara knows how to call me on it and dial it back.”

They made their way up to the bridge, Sketch still not finding either of his two crew members there, to his annoyance. “And you, Lara? What have I got to worry about in your background?”

“Nothing you don’t already have to worry about, sir,” Lara said. “If you’re trying to keep your background from getting noticed, doing the same thing for me should be easy enough. I don’t want the Starless Dominion looking at me too intently either. I’m certain they wouldn’t recognize me on sight, but if they needed to do a bit of digging, they’d probably stumble across a past where they’d much rather I was dead than alive.”

“Any reason in particular?” Serena said as she and Aliara walked onto the bridge.

“Your majesty!” Lara said, dropping to one knee, lowering her eyes. “I had no idea you were still alive! Larana Cherinum Pizzicato, at your service. I was one of the transport ship pilots for the House of Sanada, but we were, of course, familiar with all the royal houses.”

Serena looked at Lara with caution in her eyes, something he was pleased to see. “And who was your shift captain?”

“Captain Andreesan, ma’am.”

Serena looked up at Sketch and nodded. “I say we give ’em a shot.”

“Very well,” Sketch said. “You’re now ‘auditioning crew members.’ That means you technically work for me, so you best treat me as the captain first and foremost all the damn time. I hesitate to describe our next mission as a milk run, because that means we’d be guaranteed all sorts of complications, but as it stands, it’s supposed to be light in difficulty. We’ve got to go pick up a pregnant woman on one planet, smuggle her offworld and over a few planets to she can have the baby, then return her, sans baby, to where we got her. Should be a decent test of both your abilities. Let’s get skyward, then.”

There was a moment where everyone just stood still, except Sketch, who sat down in the captain’s chair. Then it dawned on them, and Lara scooted over to the pilot’s console. A few minutes later, they were bathed in stars again and on their way.

Chapter Ten

The planet was only a couple of ring jumps away, but it might as well have been like traveling back in time, Sketch thought, considering just how primitive and backwater the planet they were going to was. It wasn't as though they didn't *know* about technology; it was that they refused to *use* it voluntarily, for what they claimed were religious reasons. They didn't have a problem with people bringing them food, building them shelter or even providing them protection, but they weren't allowed to travel off-world, they weren't allowed to accept medical help, they weren't allowed to use technology themselves and they certainly weren't allowed to do anything that went against all the obscure, arcane and frankly, ridiculous religious precepts they clung to.

The planet was called Jeratine, the religion was called Exovitism and the practitioners were among the stupidest people Sketch had ever been forced to deal with.

He'd been to this planet once before and had sworn he wouldn't come back unless it was for an exceptionally good cause.

Cola was lucky Sketch had a soft spot in his heart for unwed mothers.

Pertixi was a young woman who belonged to the Exovites, and her husband had died in a mining accident a month before the wedding. As it turned out, Pertixi and her late fiancé weren't *so* good of Exovites that they had followed the rule banning premarital sex, and when Pertixi's husband-to-be had been heavily wounded in a farming accident, because they forbid 'outsider medicine,' he had died and left Pertixi alone, and with an in-utero child.

Cola had sent word that Pertixi hadn't been born into the Exovites, but had converted when she'd come of age, having gone to study them as part of her university studies and having fallen in love with Dwaliel, her late partner. And Pertixi had sent word to her sister via an actual physical *letter* that had arrived a few weeks after she'd sent it, begging her sister to find a solution for her predicament.

That solution had let her to Cola which had led her to Sketch.

"I fucking hate this rock," Sketch grumbled from his captain's chair. It felt strange being sat there, since until recently he'd always just been over in the pilot's seat most of the time, the seat Lara now currently sat in.

"You've been to Jeratine before?" Lara asked. "You don't strike me as the religious type." The two of them were the only ones on the bridge at the moment, so they'd been making small chat on and off for the last few hours.

"I'm not, but their coin spends as good as anyone else's," Sketch sighed. "And last time I didn't really have a choice. It was very early on in my career working for Jez's mom, and I didn't really have the luxury to say no to gigs that I didn't like. And it was shipping them food, so it didn't really even feel much like smuggling," he laughed. "But as it turns out, it was, because there was a trade embargo on at the time forbidding anyone from bringing food onto the planet. The local government had said something that had pissed off the local Starless Dominion constable, and as such, she'd decided to let them have a year without getting food imports, to 'teach them some manners.'"

"Fuckin' hell, Sketch," Lara laughed. "How'd you get past that one?"

"Argued I was returning a thousand reams of fabric that they hadn't screened for pervasive infestations before giving it to me, so I was returning the fabric and demanding a replacement," Sketch said. "The fact that I was basically leaving with nearly the same weight I arrived with delighted the constable, although she demanded to see the textiles on the way out, so thankfully I had set up about a dozen reams to form a false wall, and that was good enough. Had she wanted to really get in there and count them all, I'd have been fucked, but nobody wants to do ten hours of work when two minutes is good enough 95% of the time. That's one of the ground rules of how us smugglers get things where we want to take them."

"Think that'll buy you any good will with the local harbormaster?"

"Not really," Sketch said. "They nearly tried to run me off the planet in the middle of my delivery. It's one of the reasons I stopped doing in person hand offs for a long while."

“Why? What happened?”

“Kid, barely in his teens, was coughing constantly while they were unloading the food, so I gave him a jab of nanocells, nothing permanent, just enough to clear up the case of tuberculosis that he’d picked up and likely was going to be spreading to the rest of the colony,” Sketch said. “Thought I did it quick enough that nobody would’ve seen me, but the guy in charge of the parish did, and he threatened to kill the boy unless I undid what I’d just done to him.”

“How do you *undo* fixing someone?” Lara asked him.

“Truthfully? You don’t. But you can *convince* someone who doesn’t know shit about tech that you did,” Sketch said with a chuckle. “I gave the kid a placebo pill, told them it would nullify the medicine I’d injected him with, and they were none the wiser. I was told if I ever set foot on their planet again, I would be greeted with ‘open hostilities.’”

“And we’re still going back there?”

“They didn’t mean it, or at least we better hope they didn’t,” Sketch laughed. “Of course, the turnover for parish leaders there is so constant, we could be on that guy’s fifth replacement by now. Anyway, even if he’s still angry, I’ll figure it out and find a way to get him to back down.”

“I gotta ask you, while it’s just the two of us here, boss,” Lara said to him, “you’re *really* involved with them *both* sexually? Even the Princess?”

Sketch shrugged slightly. “My Storm abilities were out of control until recently. That figures into it, some. The Princess hit on me first, and then we picked up Aliara, who used to be part of the royal guard, when she was on border patrol and Serena basically pushed me into using my abilities on her. And then Aliara renounced her place among the Starless Dominion, faked her own death and joined my crew.”

“So if you’re captain, I’m pilot, Jez is doctor, Aliara’s muscle, what job does the Princess fill?”

“Cock holster,” Serena said bawdily as she walked onto the bridge. “If Sketch wants someone to fuck, I should always be his first choice. I’m a better fuck than anyone else on this damn boat anyway.”

“She’s certainly the most confident, anyway,” Sketch said.

“Who was having trouble walking this morning?” Serena asked as Sketch turned his head to shoot her a confused look. “Okay, fair, we *both* were, but I very much had a hand in that!”

“I don’t think it was your hand that was getting the most use there, your majesty,” Aliara said as she moved onto the bridge to join them. “Or did you forget I was spectating for much of it?”

“*Only* spectating!” Serena stressed, mostly for Lara’s benefit. “I got my man off the hard way, with blood, sweat and tears!”

“I dispute two of those three claims,” the P’nox laughed. “But I will allow the sweat claim to stand.”

“You’re way less fun than I thought you would be, Aliara,” Serena said as she moved to sit in one of the open chairs on the bridge.

“Only when you aren’t allowing me to do more than spectate, your Highness,” Aliara said smugly.

“I can’t believe you turned the Princess O’Quincy into a slut,” Jez said as she walked onto the bridge, the last to arrive for the meeting.

“Turned me *into*?” Serena said, glaring at the slightly older woman. “I’ll have you know that nobody makes me do anything I don’t want to do.”

“Technically that isn’t true,” Helen’s voice said from all around them, “as Sketch’s Storm abilities were definitely affecting you when you arrived on board the ship.”

“But they haven’t been for a while now, Helen,” Serena countered.

“Approximately three weeks,” Helen offered by way of retort.

“That might as well be a lifetime in our business,” Serena snorted.

“Look at you, adopting the role of the smuggler so quickly, your highness,” Lara chuckled.

“Adapt or die.”

“Death isn’t everything it’s cracked up to be,” Sketch said, reinserting himself to the conversation. “Take it from someone who spent several lifetimes basically dead.”

“So, what *is* the story with that, Sketch?” Jez asked.

“I’ll tell it to you another time,” he said. “For now, we need to concentrate on the mission. We’re only a couple of hours away from Jeratine and I would much rather have a plan going into this than just trying to stumble our way through it.”

“Stumbling our way through things seems to be our standard operating procedure, Cap’n,” Aliara said with a grin. At first, Sketch had thought the change from Y’bari to P’nox was going to be mostly a cosmetic thing, but it turned out that the longer Aliara had been loose from the yolk of her oppressive masters in the Starless Dominion, the more swaggery she had become. The new attitude had a certain appeal to it, but also gave him cause for concern. The last thing he wanted was twitchy muscle operating in his defense. Maybe he would be able to help calm her down, or, better still, maybe she would only get that way when dealing with Serena, because the Princess was a shipload of mischief in a bag a hundred times too small.

“So maybe let’s try something else for a change,” Sketch said. “You know, just to try it on, see if we’re feeling it or not.”

“Tell you what I’m feeling,” Serena said, “and that’s bowlegged.”

“Enough, Serena,” Sketch said.

“That’s what *I* was saying last night, but…”

“One more sexual innuendo before this briefing’s done, Serena, and I’ll make *you* spend the next two weeks watching *me* enjoy Aliara while *you’re* all tied up.”

“That actually sounds kinda fucking hot,” Lara said with a laugh, leaning back in her pilot’s chair, folding her hands behind her head.

“Don’t *you* start,” Sketch sighed. “One sex addict on this boat’s enough. Right. The mission. We need to get onto Jeratine, get a woman from there back to our ship without anyone knowing we’re doing that, get the ship off planet and over to neighboring Reltbex, help her deliver the baby, then get her back onto Jeratine, *then* get off with nobody noticing anything changed the whole time.”

“How the hell does no one notice she’s pregnant, Captain?” Jez asked, and rightfully so.

“That part we don’t have to worry about,” Sketch said. “She’s technically been in quarantine for the last three months, passing it off as her fighting off an infectious disease.”

“How do they not know that’s bullshit?” Serena asked.

“Medicine’s not allowed on the planet, so they tend to be pretty jumpy and superstitious,” Sketch said. “Someone says they’re sick, everyone else is happy to stay away and let you either get better or die.”

“Real loving bunch of folks, these people,” Serena grumbled.

“Look, you don’t have to tell me twice,” Sketch sighed. “I happen to agree with you, but at this point, it’s a problem we don’t have to solve for, and I’m willing to look at any of those as a blessing rather than a curse, how about you?”

“Yeah, okay Boss,” Aliara said. “So we just need to get her to and from the ship twice without anyone seeing her. That doesn’t sound all that difficult.”

“They aren’t going to let us bring a vehicle inside of the town’s borders.”

“Now you’re upping the level of difficulty.”

“Wouldn’t be fun if there wasn’t a challenge involved,” Sketch said with a grin.

“You could try an Uncle Istvaan?” Helen suggested.

“Nah,” Sketch sighed. “They’d only be suspicious about any wooden construction we made.”

“A Rubber Daisy?”

“They don’t care about foreigners dying.”

“A Left-Handed Spanner Wrench?”

“Again, Helen, technologically impaired people.”

“Trading Places?”

“We’re doing that anyway,” Sketch said. “It still doesn’t get her to or from the ship.”

“Ooo! Long Lost Cousin Harriet!” the AI suggested, clearly enjoying running through her list of tricks Sketch had used on other jobs.

“That’ll get *us* to and from the ship, so I suppose that’s a start.”

“What if the will had to be read in person at a certain location?”

“No, they still aren’t going to let us take her off planet.”

“You’re missing it, boss,” Helen said patiently. “Like, it had to be done under a full moon on a mountain top or something equally ridiculous.”

“Okay, alright, I like it. I can work with that. That’ll get her out of the house under cover, especially if we’re using pack animals to move around, saying we have a good distance to travel.”

“You said these people are technologically unsophisticated, right boss?” Aliara asked, interrupting the back-and-forth Sketch and Helen had been doing.

“Sure, why?”

“Couldn’t you just use an optical projector?”

There was a very long moment where Sketch was silent before he spoke again. “Huh.” He was silent another minute or two. “We have one with the visual acuity to fool the naked human eye?”

“If you don’t have one on the ship, I’ve got one on my dart,” Aliara volunteered. “It should do the job.”

“Won’t we need two?”

“Not if we stop by the ship ‘for supplies,’ before we sent ‘our recipient’ out to the mountain top or something.”

“And, what, I leave you and Serena behind to wear the masquerade?”

“Maybe just Serena?”

“No,” Sketch sighed. “I’m not leaving one of my crew behind alone. It’s the two of you, or it’s one of you and Lara, and I fly the ship, but that defeats the purpose of this being a trial run for both Lara and Jez.”

“You’re going to need me on board in case the woman goes into labor mid transport,” Jez said. “Unless any of you have experience in delivering a baby.” She waited for the silence and got it. “Great. So, Serena and Aliara remain behind for a few days giving them the runaround while we’re taking the woman to another planet. Which planet are we going to?”

“Elkin,” Sketch said.

“Oof,” Lara grumbled.

“Problem?”

“They’re not fond of me on Elkin.”

“Then don’t get off the goddamn boat.”

“Yeah, okay boss.”

“Why aren’t they fond of you on Elkin?”

“I may have slept with the mayor’s daughter.”

“Was she an adult at the time?”

“It was on the night before her wedding. I thought she was just any other piece of ass in the bar. I was in town for one night. What are the odds I’d pick up the one person I shouldn’t?”

Sketch inhaled a deep breath and then very slowly let it out. “You’re killing me, the lot of you. Not one of you understands the definition of the word ‘low-profile’ do you?”

“Low-profile: to remain—” the ship’s AI began to read out.

“Thank you, Helen. That’ll do for now.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“The target’s sister is waiting over on Elkin, and she’ll take possession of the child once it’s delivered, and then we’ll return the target back to where we took her from, retrieve our people and

Bob's your uncle, mission complete."

"Shall I repeat your longstanding note about claiming missions are easy before they're done to you once more, Captain?"

"No need, Helen."

"If you say so, Captain."

"Jez, how long do we need to wait after she gives birth to relocate her back to where we got her?"

"A day or two would be best, but if time's absolutely of the essence, we can get by with half a day. If her time table is about what you say it is, I can induce labor mid route to Elkin. We could probably even have her give birth en route if that's helpful. Is time really that much a priority?"

"The longer Serena and Aliara are running the smokeshow, the more likely it is someone's going to come in and test the resilience of that cover story, and it won't hold for shit if someone wants to actually *talk* to someone who's off planet. You see my concern?"

"Roger, Captain."

"Well," Lara chuckled, "just don't *talk* to anyone while you're down there."

"That won't exactly be up to *us*," Aliara replied.

"Good lord, Sketch," Serena grumbled. "This feels more like a test of *us* than it does of *them*."

"Not at all," Sketch countered. "I already trust you and Aliara. That's why I'm leaving you two by yourselves for a bit. I don't trust these two yet."

"I'm a little annoyed by that remark," Jez said.

Sketch glared at her for a second. "Helen, how many times has Jezebel counted our carabel supplies?"

"Since her arrival? Twelve, captain."

"I retract my annoyance," Jez muttered. "But all I've *done* is counted."

"I know," Sketch said. "Because the minute you do anything more than that, Helen's going to let me know, and then I'm going to consider how long you went in between doses, and whether or not that constitutes an 'addiction.'"

"You're not a doctor, Sketch."

"No, but I am the fucking captain of this ship, and right now, you need me way more than I need you." He hadn't originally intended to be so blunt and direct, but he wanted to make sure the hierarchy was established well in advance, and if that meant he had to be a little dickish about it, so be it.

"Understood, Captain." The last word had more sarcasm inflected on it than Sketch would've liked, but he decided to let it slide. "I can make half a day work if you're worried about Serena and Aliara's time on Jeratine. Induce en route, birth on the way, drop off the newborn and we're on our way back, Bob's your uncle."

"Good," Sketch said. "Do that. That's the plan. Any questions?" Serena put her hand up, so Sketch pointed at her. "Yes, Princess?"

"Any tips on how we avoid getting our asses into trouble while we're skirting around Jeratine?"

"Sure," he said. "Pick someplace distant, remote, and keep constantly moving. They're going to expect that since one of you is pretending to be a sick woman that you're going to be dragging ass, moving slow, but all the information we have on Pertixi is that she's highly capable and self-reliant, and that she isn't going to be slowed down by anything. So make it look like it, otherwise they're going to know something's up."

"Great, a couple of days hard backpacking," Aliara chuckles. "It'll be good for you, Princess."

"Fuck you," Serena grumbled. "But fine, we'll sell our end of the cover."

A few hours later, the ship was in orbit around Jeratine as the comms sprung to life and an unwelcome familiar face appeared in the holo projection before him. "Sketch, I thought I told you that you were not welcome on my planet anymore," Nikolai said to him.

“And as *I* recall, Nikolai, I told you that while you probably ruled the parish, you couldn’t rule the whole planet,” Sketch said with a little laugh. “Besides, you’re in violation of Exovite laws by using a holoprojector, so clearly you’re not in charge of the parish now.”

“No, what I am is still the harbormaster, a position that is now permitted by Exovite law to use communications and regulatory technology in order to keep people from bringing things on or taking things off our planet when we don’t want them to.” Nikolai said to them. “Things like you.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve got a will I’m delivering,” Sketch said, “and as far as I know, you guys stopping mail delivery would result in getting a few Starless Dominion ships in orbit around here so fast your head would spin. So if you want to, I can—”

“I need the Starless Dominion in my orbit like I need a boil on my dick,” Nikolai sighed. “Who’s the will for?”

“Pertixi Duntin. Her uncle died.”

Nikolai looked down and clicked his tongue. “Shit. That girl’s had a hell of a time. Is it an easy will or does it have complications?”

“The Uncle was a Finninite, so it requires being read in a specific type of place and a specific moon phase, but relax, Nikolai,” he said with a chuckle. “I’m just going to leave my P’Nox associate here to take Pertixi to the place for the reading of the will while I’m off running another errand. Then I’ll come back and pick her up a few days later. I’ll be on your planet two hours tops each time.”

“You going to follow the rules this time?”

Sketch raised his hands. “Relax. No meds, no artificial transportation. We can even ride a couple of those damn lizards to and from the woman’s house.”

“They’re called stevirds, and they’re faster than like 60% of the ground transports that the Starless Dominion uses.”

“Whatever, Nikolai. We’ll follow your rules.”

There was a long pause but moments later, docking coordinates popped up at Lara’s terminal. “You’re cleared to land, *Praeteritus*, but you best pray if you’re trying to fuck me again that you don’t get caught, because I will fucking ruin you if you are.”

They landed half an hour later, and Lara agreed to wait at the ship while Sketch, Serena, Aliara and Jezebel climbed atop the oversized geckos called stevirds that the Exovites used to get around. Jez had been told not to bring her med kit with her, despite her wanting to have at least *something* just in case there were complications with Pertixi’s pregnancy.

The ride was only about twenty minutes, although it certainly did take them outside of the main settlement. They were stared at a lot, mostly because of Aliara, the Exovites not accustomed to seeing either Y’bari or P’Nox riding through their village, with or without their Starless Dominion masters. That meant there were people pointing and gossiping, almost afraid they were an invading force.

All the buildings were basically held together with spit and twine, no tech used beyond their initial construction, which was done for them, and they had been forced to do all repairs with as little as possible. The people were wearing clothes that had been worn a few years too long, in desperate need of patches, if not outright replacement.

Most of the town was fairly close to each other, the buildings usually built only a few dozen paces apart from another, as if they drew strength from their numbers and hoped it would be enough to protect them against their attacker’s aggression, even though the planet was under Starless Dominion oversight, and invaders were a near impossibility.

Not the building they were looking for, though, oh no. It was beyond the outskirts of town, halfway up the side of the nearest mountain, and despite the fact that they were travelling on stevirds, the lizards had to be careful to weave and dodge between the thick tree foliage, no real path having been blazed up the mountain towards the cottage.

The cottage on the mountainside looked like it was bordering on heretical. The construction materials used were still basic wood, brick and mortar, but Sketch could see the concrete holding the

wood and stone together looked a little *too* refined to have been done with Exovite techniques, and wondered if because the cabin was built so far away, that was why nobody had noticed that it didn't strictly adhere to their rules.

As the stevirds pulled up outside of the cabin, a rifle blast emanated from one of the windows and picked off some wood just off to the left of Sketch. "Hold it right there, trespassers!" a voice shouted from inside of the cabin. "I got no idea who you are or what you want, but I don't need it, I don't want it, and—"

"Your sister, Loanaxa, sent us," Sketch yelled back and then patiently waited.

It felt like a very long time, although it probably wasn't that long.

Probably.

The front door opened but no one stepped out. "You, male. You come in alone." The voice said.

"I don't like it, boss," Aliara said. "Maybe I should—"

"Just be cool, Aliara," Sketch said. "We can handle this just fine." He slowly climbed down off the stevird, tossing the reins of it to Serena, as he began to slowly walk towards the cabin. If things got truly out of hand, he could just start broadcasting calm at the woman, and defuse the whole situation, but for the moment, he wanted to just hold at talking. "She got your message, Pertixi, and that's why we're here, to help you with your issue."

Each step brought him closer towards the open door and finally he stepped up the two stairs and then entered the house, his eyes having to adjust to the sudden change in lightning, as the inside of the home seemed like it was being kept quite dark. Once inside, he let his eyes do a preliminary sweep of the place for threats and hazards, but for the most part it was just a nicely decorated cabin with well-crafted furniture and decorative art. But over by the window was a tiny, *very* pregnant woman, not even five foot tall, but swollen in the belly to the point where it would be impossible to conceal it. Her brown hair was braided up in rings around the top of her head, but the braids looked like they were starting to lose coherence. She was dressed in a gingham dress that hung loosely over her very swollen belly, and she hadn't taken her rifle off him yet. "You said my sister sent you. That means you'll know the code phrase."

"Right, it's uh, uh... Barney Appalachia."

Pertixi sighed, lowered the gun barrel. "Thank fuck," she grumbled. "Tell me you're here to get me out of here?"

"That's the plan," Sketch said. "Get you off this rock, over to meet up with your sister, deliver your baby, then get you back here without anyone any wiser."

Pertixi looked at him, as if she wanted to say something, but the words passed unsaid, as she set down the rifle. "How're you going to do that?"

"Optics projector's going to make you look like a member of my crew, and make a member of my crew look like you," he said. "We'll use it to make you look unpregnant first. You'll ride back with us to the ship, take off, and then we'll come back a day or two later."

"You think the folks in town will believe it?"

"As long as nobody attempts to *touch* us, it'll be fine," Sketch said. "Hopefully you can still ride?"

"Course I can still ride," Pertixi said to him. She certainly was rugged and frontiers-y, with a certain level of swagger that Sketch had to admire. "Long as this child doesn't start to make its way out on our trip. I can only give you an estimate of my due date, but I suspect I'm already a day or two past it, so if you don't mind, can we be going instead of yammering?"

"Yes ma'am." He helped her grab a bag with her things, walking with her outside of the place, as Aliara was fiddling with the projectors. He moved over to stand next to her, his voice quiet, the conversation just between the two of them. "We just about ready?"

"I'll need a minute or so to change our vidcopy of her," Aliara said, gesturing toward Pertixi, "unless you want everyone knowing she's with child."

“That sort of defeats the whole point, don’t you think?”

“That *was* my line of thinking, Boss.”

“You know, you’ve gotten *real* mouthy since you’ve changed from Y’bari to P’nox, Aliara,”

Sketch chuckled.

“Sure, because you *like* me mouthy, boss,” Aliara said with a smirk. “You can try and hide it from the others, but when I got bonded to your genetic template, I started getting slowly morphed bit by bit into your ideal fuck partner.” She adjusted a dial on the projector, and Serena’s image turned into an exact match of Pertixi. “And you fuckin’ love a swearsy woman, boss, so better get the fuck used to this, because I know that it turns you on, which makes you happy, and I’m going to do everything I can to make you happy any chance I get now that I’m your bonded bitch.” She tapped the dial and gave it a couple more spins, and the image of Pertixi around Serena morphed to lose the swollen belly.

“I’m sorry about tha—”

Aliara grabbed him by the back of his neck and pulled him into a firm kiss, her not letting him draw back for a good moment before she felt like she’d made her point. “Look, boss. I know it’s weird. I get it, okay? But you *need* to understand, I’m happy. Happier than I’ve ever been in my entire life. Because before I met you, I wasn’t *allowed* to be happy. I physically *couldn’t* be. And yeah, bonding with you has a couple of weird side effects that I didn’t fucking expect, but I can actually *feel* now, and I accept that this is the cost for that. So don’t be gone too long, because the Princess and I don’t like being away from you whenever we can help it. Makes us fucking anxious the longer you’re away from us. We can manage. We just don’t like it.” She glanced over at the two Pertixi’s. “Don’t tell her I said anything, though, okay? She’s still getting used to it. Taking her a little longer than it did me, but she’s coming around.” Aliara grinned. “She’s still mostly new to this whole fucking love thing.”

“Is that what this is?” Sketch asked her.

“Sure fucking seems like it,” Aliara said with a giggle. “I’m enjoying the fuck out of it.” She stood up and moved over to the non-pregnant Pertixi. “C’mon, Princess, we need to get moving.”

“The illusion’s incredible,” the actual Pertixi said, looking at the other version of herself.

“What’s the downside?”

“The downside,” the non-pregnant Pertixi said with Serena’s voice, “is that this version of you can’t talk and can’t be touched, or the illusion breaks.”

“So don’t *do* that,” Pertixi said.

“We should’ve thought of that,” Sketch said smugly. He turned off the illusion on Serena and pointed it at Pertixi, concealing her current state. “Now you don’t look pregnant. We’re going to swing back by our ship and then split up once we’re there. Saddle up.”

When they rode through town this time, they paced themselves, letting people get a good eyeful of Pertixi’s non-pregnant form before they reached the ship. “This is your ship?” she asked, looking up at it. “Looks kinda... dumpish.”

“You insult my ship again, and I’m going to drop the cover and just leave you here to solve your own problems.”

“My apologies,” Pertixi sighed. “I’m sure it’s... it’s a fine ship.”

“Okay, everyone on board the ship for just a second.” Everyone made their way into the cargo hold as people shifted around. He glanced over at Serena, who was settling in on the stevid with Aliara. “Be vigilant, you two,” he said as he tossed Aliara the projector.

“Like the last centurions at the garrison, boss,” Aliara said, turning the illusion on Serena, making her appear as Pertixi, before they rode back out of the cargo hold and headed up towards the hills at high speed.

“Get her strapped in somewhere safe, Jez, and check on the status of the baby.”

“Will do, boss,” Jez said. “And you?”

“I’m having Lara get us the fuck *off* this hillbilly rock.”