

Before The Storm

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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!"

"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.