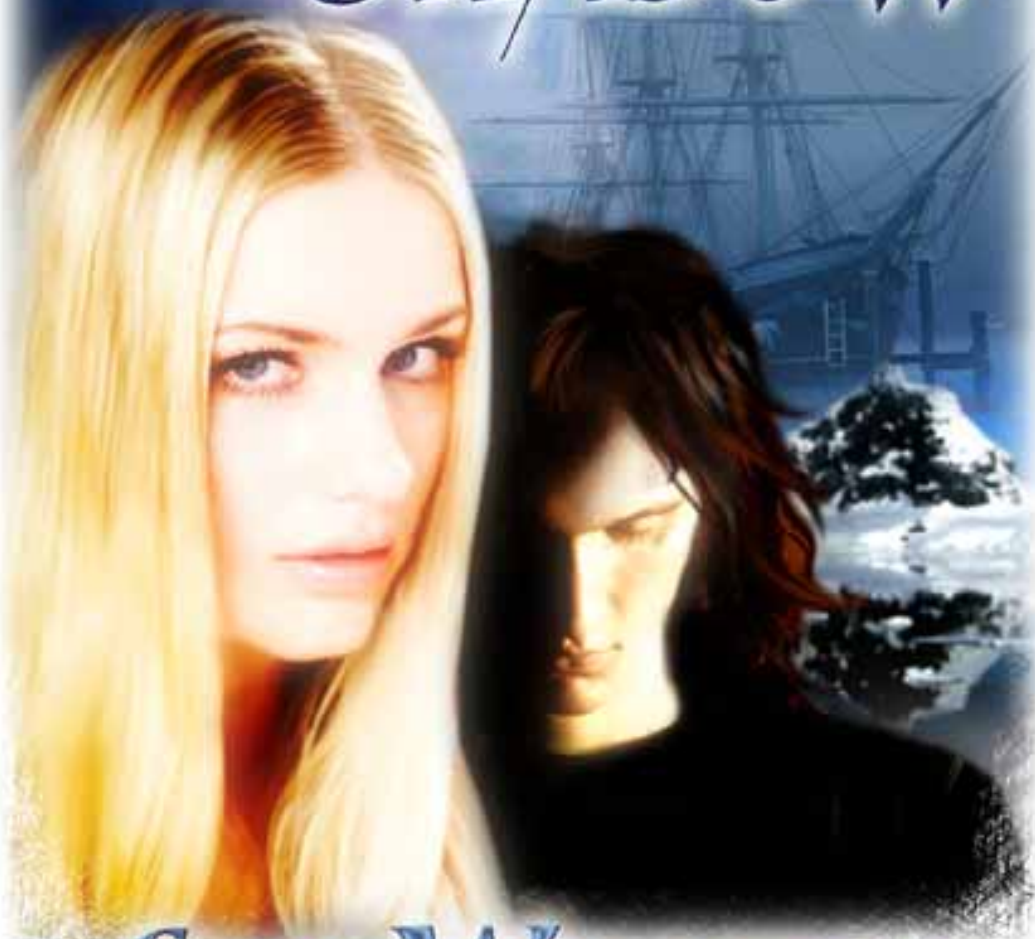


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# SWORD AND SHADOW



SAJE WILLIAMS

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# Sword and Shadow

*Saje Williams*

# Dedication

To my wife, the one and only Shaiha.

## Chapter One

His name was Raven.

He stood in the deserted square at midnight, a large black hat pulled down to shadow his eyes, his long black coat whispering around his tall frame as the cool ocean wind tugged at its edges and fog rolled around his feet. *A storm is coming*, he thought, with a glance to the west. *And it's going to be a bad one.*

In the distance, he caught the sound of boots rattling against cobblestone and he knew the men of the watch approached at last. The shadows broke and five figures jogged into view, the dull clinking of their chain mail echoing in his ears like the ringing of a thousand tiny bells.

Sergeant Goban halted right before Raven, looking him over in a brief, unconscious gesture. He knew Raven—knew Raven's hard-earned reputation as the city's chief thief-taker, but an aura swam around Raven that made even the toughest man wary.

And Goban was one of the hardest. Ten years spent as a caravan guard, then five running what some laughingly called the most elite squad in the watch had honed him to a razor's edge. The jagged, puckered scar marring the left side of his face from the corner of his eye to the edge of his mouth definitely gave him a sinister, rakish air.

Despite his unfortunate appearance, Goban was known for being as solid as the day was long, a rare find in a city as corrupt as this one, and in a profession as dirty as his was known to be.

Rather than being drummed him out of the service because he didn't participate in the graft prevalent throughout the rest of the constabulary, Sergeant Goban had been assigned to the most impoverished district, where no one had the money to engage in the game in the first place.

And there was so much crime in the poor quarter that Goban, alone of all the watch sergeants working Quinal, welcomed the occasional help from a thief-taker like Raven.

It was a fragile thing on which to build a bridge of trust, but it was all they had.

Raven let his gaze pass across the assembled watchmen, not needing any particular empathic ability to sense them shrinking away slightly. One man paled and whispered to his companion with a shudder. "T'aint natural, I tell you."

*And he, of course, is quite correct. Not that I'm going to tell him that.*

"I assume you called us down here for a reason, thief-taker?" Goban was brusque, as always.

"I did indeed. I think I've found the source of Dark Dream."

*This* got their attention. How could it not? They'd been looking for whoever was making or bringing in that drug for almost ten years now to no avail, suggesting to Raven, if to no one else, that it was most likely an out-world operation. The purpose behind it, however, remained as much a mystery to him as to the likes of Goban.

"Where?" Goban asked. "I have some favors I can call in—get us an extra fifteen men for the raid."

Raven shook his head. "I'm not sure that's a good idea. Anything overt would be dangerous as hell, and most likely get too many men killed. I believe one of the ringleaders is a warlock."

The men made warding signs and muttered amongst themselves. Raven suppressed a sigh. He hated using the term *warlock*, but that was this world's title for a rogue mage. Considering that any not okayed by the Church was declared as such the first time he or she cast a spell, there were far more unlicensed 'warlocks' here than accepted magi.

Goban snorted. "The one thing I *ain't* doing is going to the Church for help. I'm not owed any favors from *that* quarter."

Raven nodded. The Church of the Three-Fold God was as political an organization as existed here. The Church did very little for anyone that didn't benefit it directly and expand the scope of its own power and authority. Keeping the city's poor from dying in droves from the side-

effects of a particularly nasty drug apparently didn't fall under that category.

The one thing he wasn't telling them—the one thing he *couldn't* tell them—was that magic wasn't their biggest concern should they decide to raid the place. Raven had recognized the weapons some of the guards carried—weapons that, by all rights, shouldn't have even existed here. Someone was supplying this bunch with items they shouldn't have, and that sent up the biggest red flag of all.

Raven had to call in to base. He didn't want to, but he knew the rules. Hated the rules, but that was another issue entirely. He'd signed the goddam contract before he'd stopped to consider the ramifications and so here he was, playing this damnable game in a context he honestly wanted no part of. Back home, he'd been one kind of enforcer, until circumstances had made retirement an option, but now he found himself back in the thick of things as yet another. Or a spy at the very least.

Hardly what he had expected of eternity.

Now the discovery of advanced weaponry meant they'd send a TAU agent in to deal with that end of things. He much preferred to work alone, or, at the very least, be the one in charge of the operation. He'd been previously spoiled as head of the brigade in charge of chasing monsters and either conscripting them or destroying them utterly. The idea of being forced to share authority here because of these damn weapons seriously grated on his nerves. He found himself half-tempted to charge in and mop the floor with the lot of them and let the chips fall where they might.

But he hadn't survived this long by letting his irritation get the better of him. Patience was a virtue of his kind—one of the few that came naturally, to be honest. He could be patient. But someone would eventually pay for this aggravation. That was a promise he made to himself.

“So what do you want us to do about it?” Goban growled irritably. “Or did you just call us out here into this soup to tell us there's nothing we can do?”

“Not quite,” Raven sighed. “I wanted you to be aware of what was going on, and let you know that I’m working on a solution right now.”

“And what can *you* do about it?” Goban asked. “You’re just a goddam thief-catcher, after all.’

Raven’s face crept into a slow smile that revealed a portion of the predator hidden not so far beneath the surface. Even the sturdy ex-mercenary quailed before Raven’s expression. “That is as it may be,” Raven told them, “but I have a few resources you can’t begin to imagine. And this is exactly why—to handle things that you people aren’t equipped to deal with.

“Keep that in mind,” he added coldly, “and I’ll keep you informed.” Folding the night around himself, he vanished before their eyes.

Goban grunted, rubbing at his scar with the tip of a forefinger as his watchmen made the sign of the Triple God. The thief-catcher was a whole barrel of secrets just waiting to explode all over the place. But the one thing Goban knew was that he had the peoples’ best interests at heart. Whatever else he was, Raven was one of the good guys. Scary strange, perhaps, but he could live with that.

Didn’t mean he had to like it.



Raven waited until half an hour before dawn to put the call into base. It was an act of petty rebellion, but he just couldn’t resist the temptation. He’d been heading into slumber by the time the sun rose, so if they sent the TAU agent in during the daylight hours, he or she would be left cooling there until the sun set. He found the thought vaguely amusing.

It wasn’t much, but it was one way to advertise his distaste for the new rules and the status quo. He had been much happier when TAU was doing its whole time-policing thing, before they abandoned that effort and went into technological enforcement instead. Now they were meddling in long-standing arrangements like his own and the whole situation had stuck in his craw like an errant drill bit at the dentist’s office.

He descended into his basement, pressed the nearly invisible buttons, pulled the craftily hidden levers in specific sequence, and stepped into his combination crypt/communications center as the huge stone door slid back into place behind him.

He sent the message in a few short bursts, as agency protocol dictated. They definitely didn't want to take the chance of anyone intercepting the signal and tracing him back to his lair. He waited for confirmation and then went to bed. Any further details could wait until nightfall.

As the sun rose above the horizon, his consciousness drifted into a dreamless sleep.



Valerie Winn stood on the threshold of the worldgate, staring at her control agent through narrowed eyes as she irritably adjusted her skirts. "What kind of backwards-ass world is this, anyway?" she asked the elf through the slightly foggy duraplaz barrier separating the gate from its command module.

The elf, Kyubine, flashed her a brilliant smile and shrugged expressively. "When in Rome..."

"Spare me," she sighed. "This is just so confining."

He nodded. "I can understand that. The robes many of my people wear strike me the same way. Not suitable for a warrior, that's for sure. Just remember how much of a backwater world this one is and try to stay in character as much as you can. You're unlikely to be in any real danger, and, if you are, your clothes are designed to tear off down to an armored single-suit so you can fight effectively."

He beamed his elfin grin at her again. "Just try not to scandalize the locals *too* much."

She stepped through the gate with a non-committal grunt. Of all places, she materialized at the top of what appeared to be some sort of clock tower overlooking a large and dingy medieval city. She wavered for a second, her mild fear of heights kicking in, but took herself in a firm grip and went to look for a way down.

She found a trapdoor to one side of the bell-tower, slid her fingers under the handle, and lifted it gingerly. The hinges squealed, eliciting a wince as she slowly eased it open. A moment later she was scurrying down the ladder into the chamber below. Reaching the bottom, she smoothed her skirts and glanced around the small, cluttered room.

A sound from above jerked her head up and she swore silently as she saw the trapdoor being lifted above her head. Someone must have come through the worldgate right behind her. She glanced around, eyes stabbing into the gloom and dust, looking for a place to hide.

She darted into an alcove, wincing and biting back an involuntary shriek as she felt heavy cobwebs stir her hair and settle around her shoulders. She sank her teeth into her lower lip, hoping there weren't any spiders lurking there.

She hated spiders.

She could still see the ladder, and watched in silence as a pair of booted feet emerged from the trapdoor, followed by a pair of billowy blue trousers framing a tight, rounded butt, a slim waist, a belt with a sheathed rapier attached, and a dark gray, equally billowy shirt.

The figure turned and she stifled a gasp. *A woman?* She smiled to herself and resolved to spend a few moments thumping her control about the head and shoulders for sending her here in this getup. *If that creature can get away with wearing normal clothing, why the hell am I crouching here in a goddamn dress?*

The woman stepped into the middle of the room, brushing midnight hair from around her heart-shaped face with a casual sweep of her glittering hand. *Jeez, lady, have enough rings?* Val thought.

Another figure descended the ladder—turning at the bottom to reveal a roughly handsome face and a wave of long dark hair cascading over wide shoulders. His eyes seemed to glow with a strange orange light as his gaze shot through the gloom and impaled her where she stood.

*Oh, shit,* Val thought.

“Well, what have we here?” the man asked in a drawling voice straight out of the heart of Texas. “It seems we’ve caught ourselves a pretty little bird. What do you think we should do with it?”

## Chapter Two

Val didn't know who they were, or what they were doing there, but she was willing to bet they weren't authorized agency personnel. She didn't recognize them, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. Over the past few years, the population of Starhaven had grown exponentially, and only the shopkeepers and agency heads had any idea how many people there were under contract between all of the agencies.

She knew they weren't TAU and seriously doubted they were Sash. They didn't have the style. One thing you could say about Sash agents—they could accessorize a black and crimson tiger-striped sash with nearly any outfit...even though most of them settled on basic black.

She'd tucked her own agency symbol, the ankh, into her bodice, and thanked the fates she'd done so. Whoever they were, she was willing to bet the symbol wouldn't carry much weight with them. In fact, if they were who and what she actually suspected they were, the damned thing could well have gotten her killed.

She'd be best off leaving them to think she was a local who'd wandered in here by accident. They looked arrogant enough to swallow it. *That's me, kiddies. Just a local bimbo looking for a place for an assignation with an illicit lover.* She backed away, showing fear that was not entirely feigned.

"My apologies, milord, milady." she said, hoping that her translator implant had supplied the correct accent. "I dinna expect to find anyone here."

"And what are you doing here?" the man asked gruffly, even as his female partner laid what Val took as a restraining hand on his shoulder.

“My beau was supposed to meet me,” Val said. “We thought it would be a good place to have a tumble.”

He gave her an odd, lopsided grin. “Well, we’ll have to ask him when he arrives—as long as you two don’t mind an audience.”

The man and woman exchanged message-laden glances. Val decided instantly that whatever had passed between the two in this moment of silent communication was something she really didn’t want to know. “He’s not supposed to be here for a while,” she told them. “I was just in having a look around beforehand.”

The woman smiled sweetly and took a long, gliding step closer. “How unfortunate,” she murmured. “We make a much better audience than we do participants. But...” She paused, dragging a heavy gaze up Val’s body as if she could see straight through her clothing.

Val blinked as her stomach squirmed. She felt like she was suddenly swimming through a pool filled with pig manure. She hadn’t opened her telepathic faculties to these two yet, and was quite glad she hadn’t. Whatever their game, she could be reasonably certain she wanted no part of it.

The woman, surprisingly enough, was the aggressor. She flowed toward Val, chattering about nothing in particular as she sliced half the distance between them. Cursing the dress the idiot had made her wear, Val darted past her for the door on the opposite side of the room.

Laughing, the woman lunged out and caught her by the sleeve. “Oh, it’s far too late for you to run, my—“

She staggered back, blood rushing from a split lip as Val withdrew her fist and smiled sweetly. “If you’re going to touch me again, *bitch*, you’d better have your thug sitting on me at the time.”

The woman whirled back at her, lifting her own right hand, not into a fist, but as if she snatched something out of the air. As a burst of adrenaline rushed through her, Val swept forward and smashed the heel of her hand into the woman’s nose, twisting her wrist and dragging her fingers across her eyes even as she stepped back and fired a low kick to the back of her knee.

The woman toppled and, even as the male lurched forward, Val snatched the rapier from the woman's belt and spun on him. "One more step and you're eating steel."

"Who are you?" he growled, watching in perfect stillness as she laid the edge of the blade against the woman's neck.

"I think you've got this backwards," Val said with wry amusement. "I've got your companion under the sword—I get to ask the questions now." She spun the rapier, nicking the woman's neck. "And if you even *look* as though you're going to cast a spell, witch, I'll cut your throat and let you bleed to death in front of me. Keep your hands on the floor."

*Question is*, she thought with a dry internal laugh, *how long can this stand-off hold?*



Raven's eyes snapped open and it took him a moment to orient himself. It always did. He stirred slightly, then willed himself to rise. His feet were silent against the stone floor as he tread to the communications center. A quick check revealed that his message had been received, and a confirmation sent. A TAU agent was on the way.

*Wonderful*. He looked at the time and frowned, then switched over to the active monitoring system he had set up for the rest of the house. He assumed that the agent had been given directions, so by all rights he expected to find a stranger waiting in the living area or the kitchen.

The house was empty and, for all he could tell, had been so since he'd gone to bed at dawn. That struck a sour note and he walked to the door with a frown. He keyed it open and stepped into the hallway beyond, senses tuned for any sign of trespass.

He'd have smelled if anyone had entered; the only human scent he picked up was that of the maid, who came by once a week, and even those traces were faint. He did expect the agent to be human, though it was at least vaguely possible they'd send an elf with predominately human features. He considered it unlikely, but, in an infinite universe, even the most unlikely event was entirely possible.

Something indefinable told him that he should be concerned. Groaning in irritation, he fired up his contraband water heater and took a quick shower in the small stall secreted in his hidden room. Being in a technologically disadvantaged world didn't mean he had to live like a savage, regardless how TAU might perceive it. He'd paid good money to have the water heater brought here and anyone who might suggest he get rid of it would have a serious fight on their hands.

He quickly dressed, threw on his hat and jacket, and strolled out into the night after securing his safe room from accidental discovery. The chances of that were slim indeed, but he made it a habit regardless. He'd decided long ago that it was better to do certain things without fail than take the chance of forgetting the one time when it would make all the difference.

He smiled at the memory this thought conjured—a recollection of his mother explaining why she used her turn signals even in a grocery store parking lot. *The body remembers even if the mind does not*, she'd told him.

He hadn't thought about his mother in years and felt vaguely guilty at the realization. He didn't even know if she was still alive. *Some wonderful son I am*, he thought. It wasn't a good sign, really. The one thing his kind could not afford to lose was any connection to their former humanity. The fact that he'd not thought of her for so long didn't bode well in the long run, though he could attribute at least some of that to the fact that this job could be so damned demanding.

But, in all fairness, he hadn't been there for but a fraction of the time that had passed since he'd last spoken with his mother.

Pushing the guilt aside for the time being, he glanced around, assured himself that no one was watching, then vaulted to a nearby rooftop. He scanned the darkened streets from three stories up, then turned and made his way toward the clock tower where they'd originally located the worldgate. If the agent had arrived as expected, that would be the first place to check.



Val was ready to drop. She ached from head to toe. Her arm had begun to shake nearly two hours ago, leaving tiny cuts on the woman's neck. The man had obviously grown tired of standing, and had lowered himself to the floor. He'd stretched out, staring at the ceiling and pretended she didn't even exist. *Weird bastard.*

By the fates, she was exhausted.

She'd asked these two who they were a number of times, only to get icy glares from the woman and snorts of derision from the man. *Note to self—we need handcuffs, or a reasonable facsimile thereof. This is freakin' ridiculous. We need some sort of restraining device.*

She glanced at the tiny, opaque window in the far corner of the tower, noting that it had finally gotten dark. *This has to be one of those times it's just easier to be a killer,* she thought grimly.

She let out an involuntary gasp as the shadows in the corner coalesced into a human figure in a dark coat and what looked to be a cowboy hat of all things. Inexplicably, his boots made no sound as he approached.

The hat tilted back and she found herself staring into the queer emerald eyes of a man who looked not much older than the middle teens, youthful features revealing the potential for stunning looks caught half-formed and frozen there.

He took in the scene with an amused expression and shook his head. "That can't be comfortable," he said, nodding toward her. "You can take the weapon away from her neck now. She's not going anywhere."

"I don't know who the hell you are," she snapped back. "For all I know you're *with* them."

"Hardly," he sighed. "I've never seen them before, but I'd hazard a guess they're not from around here. Neither are you, judging by the way you know one end of that rapier from the other. There are very few women in these parts with any weapon skill at all."

The dark haired woman shifted her gaze, her lethal glare bouncing off the hard shell of his disinterest.

"Put it away," he told her. "I don't give a rat's ass if you hate me."

Val snorted. "And you would be...?"

“Raven,” he answered. “You TAU?”

She nodded. “You’re Sash?”

He returned her nod. “Don’t let my lack of that damn swatch of fabric fool you.” He rolled his eyes. “I have no need for the thing, and it would just draw unwanted attention.” He turned his radiant gaze on her two captives. “So what’s with these guys?”

“They came through the gate behind me. I don’t know who they are, but *what* they are is a couple of pretty twisted characters.”

“Huh. Well, if they came through the gate, I assume they fall under our jurisdiction. Do you want to run the interrogation, or should I?”

He smiled, revealing long, gleaming canines. She stifled a gasp and her eyes grew wide.

She’d never met a vampire in person, though she’d always been curious about them. She sent a tendril of mind creeping outward, only to have it rebuffed violently before it ever reached him. He had the strongest shields of anyone she’d ever encountered.

That fact in itself she found terribly intriguing.

A strange cracking sound came from the vicinity of the floor and she glanced down at the supine man to see him writhing there, his face oddly distended and shifting around like something else was trying to break free of his flesh.

Raven let out a particularly vitriolic curse as his hands dove inside his trench coat, emerging an eye-blink later with two chrome-plated *contraband* weapons. The one in his left hand spat fire at the figure writhing on the floor while the other simultaneously shifted to cover the woman. The roar of the pistol filled the tiny room like a bolt from heaven and Val backed away, wincing.

She felt outrage welling up and did her best to stop it from spewing forth but wasn’t entirely successful despite her resolve to keep her mouth shut. “What in the *hell* do you think you’re doing?” she spat out at him.

Raven turned a cold gaze on her as he leveled both pistols at the captive woman.

“Dealing with a lycanthrope the best way you can,” he replied in a chilly tone. “You have a problem with that?”

“Actually, I do!” she snarled at him. “Those are banned weapons!”

This provoked a bored look as he slid one of the pistols home under his jacket. “Uh-huh. They’re also the most efficient way to dispatch a lycanthrope. What did you want me to do, wrestle him into submission?”

Val blinked at him in something akin to shock. Then she began to put the pieces together in her head. When he’d identified himself as ‘Raven,’ she’d felt a glimmer of recognition, but the fact that he was a vampire, added together with the twin pistols he’d used with such ruthless effectiveness, told her exactly who he most likely was. That they hadn’t bothered to warn her who and what she’d be dealing with went a long way toward alleviating the awe she might have otherwise felt. She was too pissed to give a damn whether or not this renegade Sash agent happened to be the legendary Raven from Earth Prime. “Actually,” she said, flashing him a too-sweet smile, “I would assume that you’d have no problems doing precisely that, considering who you are.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “And who do you think I am?”

“Name’s Raven, you’re a vampire, and you’re carrying twin automatic pistols. A dead giveaway, when you get down to it.”

“No pun intended.”

“Hah-hah. Funny man.”

“As amusing as this is,” the woman cut in, “I’d like to—“

“Shut up!” they snapped in unison.

## Chapter Three

Raven rolled his shoulders and let out a heavy sigh. “As with most legends,” he said. “My prowess is somewhat exaggerated.”

“Yeah. So you say,” Val said. “You’re the Raven who headed Earth’s Paranormal Action Response Division, who commanded troops against the Cen during the Siege of Earth, who reportedly single-handedly took out a whole crèche world to bring the war to a grinding halt. Am I wrong?”

He shrugged, quite aware that the dark-haired woman was staring at him with an odd expression on her face. “No, you’re right...as far as it goes. I’m also the man who lost his commanding officer and one of his best friends to an act of unnecessary sacrifice, who watched as thousands of his own troops threw themselves against the bitter blades of the enemy and fall, and who sacrificed untold innocents by ‘taking out’ that crèche world to bring the war to a halt.”

“Let me tell you, legendary status is overrated. And if that hand comes any farther off the ground,” he warned the captive woman in a mild tone, “I’m going to give you a lethal dose of lead poisoning.” She sneered at him in response, but put weight back on the hand. *Sometimes having a reputation as a killer is a good thing*, he mused.

She was beautiful, he decided, but the lines of avarice and cruelty marring her otherwise perfect features told a deeper tale than her obvious beauty could have told. Though already annoying him, he found the TAU agent’s prettiness far more enticing than their black-haired captive’s. The blonde reminded him somehow of a cheerleader or a debutante, but he knew enough about TAU to know that her appearance

could be nothing but deceiving. Beneath that fresh exterior lay a foundation as hard as a granite slab.

Too bad she was being so damned irritating, standing there with her hands on her hips, giving him the evil eye. Figuratively speaking, of course. Even *he* was not immune to a real evil eye, though his status as one of the undead gave him some level of protection. It was a fey ability, and usually only showed up in those elves with particularly strong bloodlines, but he'd met a few vampires who could knock someone for a loop with nothing more than a gaze.

He, unfortunately, was not one of them. He had to do this the old-fashioned way. By scaring the crap out of their captive.

A good sniff told him that his initial fear that she, too, was a 'throe had turned out to be false. She was a human mage, which was bad enough, but at least she wasn't going to go fuzzy and try to chew their faces off. He slid the second pistol home and turned back to the blonde. "It's not as though anyone else is going to get their hands on my weapons," he told her. "And I know that's the primary reason you folks don't like advanced weapons on these primitive worlds."

"The other being that we don't like how easily they could be abused," she shot back with a telling glance toward the body currently leaking blood and less savory liquids through the hole in the base of its skull.

"Are you suggesting I shouldn't have shot him—that it was somehow an abuse of the weapon to kill him like that?" It sounded ludicrous to him, but it was hard to say exactly what someone like her would find reasonable.

"Now you're just being obtuse. It's a moot point anyway, if you get right down to it. You're already so much more powerful than the average native that the firearms don't throw the balance off much. It's still in violation of the contract between your agency and mine, but I'm willing to overlook it in this particular case."

"That's convenient," he muttered. Especially since he didn't have any intention of giving up his pistols no matter what she had to say about it. Her agency's reason for existing didn't have a damn thing to do with him, as far as he was concerned, and he liked it that way. Contract or no

contract. No one asked *him* if he was willing to set aside his pistols while in the field.

Not that he would. They were just too damned useful, particularly if he ended up facing a lycanthrope or another vampire. He had other ways to kill them, but none as simple as a bullet to the brain. Magic tended to be unreliable with regards to both paranormal types, and it wasn't something he wanted to overuse here anyway. The last thing he needed was to attract the Church's interest. A running battle with a bunch of mage-priests wouldn't do anyone any good, and would screw up his mission faster than anything else.

Even than the unwelcome intrusion of a pesky—albeit lovely—TAU operative. *Definitely fits the definition of an 'attractive nuisance,'* he thought with an inward chuckle.

He turned his attention to the captive brunette, who, despite the straits in which she found herself, hadn't set aside her arrogant demeanor. By looking at her, one might think their positions were reversed—that *she* were the one holding *them* captive.

Which suggested to Raven that she might simply be insane.

Val took a deep breath. She wasn't sure what to think at this point. She couldn't believe Raven. Legend or not, the man was just rude. Her agency's whole mission was to prevent technological contamination and he had the unmitigated gall to draw a pistol and fire it *right in front of her*. She was furious.

And, as she said, there wasn't really anything she could do about it other than include it in her end-of-mission report once all this was over.

What really got under her skin, even more than his apparent disregard for her position and whole reason for being here, was that she had to fight to keep her eyes off of him. She'd already jerked her gaze away more than once, and her deepest fear at this point was that he'd been able to read her mind or emotions and sense how absolutely fascinating she found him.

His apparent youth—and, yes, he did look remarkably young—was offset by the absolute faith he seemed to have in himself and his

decisions. Even if those decisions were totally screwed up from her point of view.

“So,” said their prisoner, with annoying aplomb. “Are you going to do something with me, or am I going to have to stand here all night watching you two undress one another with your eyes?”

The look Raven gave her could have stilled magma. “Watch your mouth.”

“What are we doing with her?” Val asked him, with a pointed glance at the dark-haired woman.

“You have a gate module on you? I left mine at home.”

“That’s smart.”

“I don’t carry the damn thing every where I go,” he said. “We’ll dial up Starhaven, send a quick burst through telling them what’s going on, and toss her through after it.”

She nodded and threw the rapier in a corner, turning her attention to the silver bracelet dangling from her wrist. “You going to haul her up the ladder?”

He shook his head. “Not necessary.” He did something with his hand, grabbed the woman with one hand and Val with the other. An instant later, they were standing next to where the gate had opened. Val suppressed a shiver even as she reoriented herself. Magic always made her a little queasy—probably because she had no mage talent at all and it all seemed so damned mysterious to her.

“Do it,” he told her.

A flick of her finger activated the worldgate, which unfolded in a great burst, materializing into a door-shaped cascade of silver light like a radiant waterfall. She lifted the bracelet to her mouth and murmured a quick message, then tapped the tiny protrusion that sent the message home in an encrypted capsule. “It’s ready. Send her through.”

As Raven went to grab the woman, she ducked away, faster than he would’ve expected. Even as he moved to intercept, he dialed up his magesight, cursing silently as he saw a glowing sigil expanding from one of the rings on her right hand.

He snatched a generic counter-spell from the spell web orbiting his body and hurled it into the midst of her expanding spell, the spells meeting and exploding into a mass of wrestling silver strands as he lunged to stop her from activating her next little surprise.

Again, she was a little quicker than he was; a single strand of force shot out from her fingertips, stabbing straight through the center of his chest and hurling him with immense force into the bells lining the center of the tower. A great ringing peal ripped through the city as Raven fell to his knees, gasping from the pain.

A second spear of power lanced from her fingers and caught the TAU agent unawares, effortlessly swatting her to the floor. The woman gave Raven a mocking salute and threw up another mana strand, this one expanding into a transit tube like the one he'd used to transport them from the floor below. "It's been fun," she said, yelling over the clang of the pitching bells. "We'll have to do it again sometime."

She stepped through and vanished.

"Son of a bitch!" Raven struggled to his feet, wincing. He glanced down at his chest and saw the wound from her blow knitting itself together, but his shirt had been darkened by a copious amount of blood, probably ruining the black silk garment entirely. *Figures.*

He walked over to where the blonde agent lay and knelt down beside her. He could hear her pulse, and sense her breathing, so he knew she was in no immediate danger. He gently lifted her, glanced at the gate, and shrugged. It would collapse on its own within five minutes, long before any local authorities could arrive, but it still bothered him to leave the area with a worldgate in active mode. No telling what could find its way here even in that short span of time.

He didn't know how to work her gate module. He'd never even seen anything that sophisticated. Technology had jumped ahead again even in the ten years he'd been here.

His own was nowhere near as subtle in appearance, which was why he didn't tend to carry it with him. If it should fall out of his pockets, it would really raise questions among the natives, the sort he didn't even want to consider the possibility of them asking.

His initial response would have been to create a transit tube of his own and get them the hell out of there, but there was still the issue of the active worldgate he wasn't willing to abandon. *How do I get into these messes?*

And, of course, his rebellious brain supplied him with the obvious answer. *By underestimating the resourcefulness of a mere mortal*, it told him.

*Oh, shut up.*

He waited, listening to the sounds from the streets below, until the gate finally collapsed. Breathing a sigh of relief, he 'tubed them out to his secret chamber.

The church mages would have fits when they saw how much unlicensed magic had been thrown around the place. They'd tear the city apart trying to find out who was responsible. He had no intention of being in their line of sight anytime soon. And, with any luck, he'd be able to keep them off his trail in perpetuity.

He was, after all, a much more experienced mage than any of them. *If I can't dodge their dumb asses, it's time for me to hang up my hat and retire.*

Assuming his boss would let him. And that was quite an assumption in itself. And the question remained, what the hell would he do if he retired anyway? It wasn't as though he wouldn't be around forever unless some unforeseen calamity happened to claim him. All he'd really have to look forward to would be an eternity of boredom.

## Chapter Four

Raven watched as Val threw herself into one of the over-stuffed chairs in the ‘sitting’ room back at his house. “That’s ridiculous,” she snorted, referring to his offhand revelation regarding the Church’s attitude toward magic.

He shrugged. “That’s the way they look at it. I didn’t invent it.”

Val tilted her head and read the line of his lips. “You’re serious. That’s crazy.”

“I’ve always thought so.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You’re not just screwing with me.”

“Absolutely not. You can’t practice magic without a license. It could get you killed. Right now the clock-tower would be a very unhealthy place to be, considering that it’s crawling with constables and Deacons.”

“And a Deacon is?”

“That’s the magic branch of the Church. They follow the Defender aspect of the Three-Fold God. God’s Hounds. They defend the church from evil magic, which they define as any magic that’s not theirs. They’re very good at hunting warlocks.”

“Not very good at hunting you,” she observed.

“True. But they’re not practiced at hunting vampire warlocks.” He flashed a quick grin. “Especially one who’s immune to any kind of location or detection magic.”

“That’s not all,” she said with a grimace. “You seem to be impervious to psionics, too.”

“You noticed, did you? Tried to read me or something? You’re TAU and you’re not a mage—it’s a good bet you’re a psi. How powerful?”

“That’s right,” she sighed. “You *were* an investigator, weren’t you?” She turned away, shaking her head. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Raven knew guilt when he saw it. “There’s a guest bedroom upstairs you can use. I’m afraid the larder’s bare, but you can visit the market in the morning. In the meantime, I’d suggest you stay here. I’m going to go look in on the watchtower crowd.”

He knew she wanted to object, but guilt kept her silent. She simply nodded.

He turned, snatching a thread, and snapping it out into a transit tube. The Deacons ignorance of that particular trick made his life infinitely easier, he thought wryly, as he traveled nearly a mile with a single step.

He dropped silently on the peaked roof of the clock-tower and crouched there for several minutes, listening to the murmurs of the men roaming inside. He focused his vampiric senses and listened in on a few of the conversations.

They were clueless, as he expected, but one of them *did* mention something he found slightly alarming. Apparently the Church had stumbled across some of the smuggled weapons, and had put enough of everything together to find *some* connection between them and whatever had happened at the tower. They were still speculating wildly regarding what that may have been.

*Good. So far they’re operating on complete guesswork.*

They probably weren’t able to get anything off the dead lycanthrope...at least not yet. They’d have to ship the body to Migar and the Church’s alchemical laboratory there, before they’d be able to discover anything about him. It would be a week in transit, three days in autopsy, and at least a day for the information to return to the locals—assuming they discovered anything of value in the first place. Their knowledge of chemistry surprised him, but they were still swimming in dark waters when it came to anything like genetics.

Well, it seemed the first thing he and the blonde—*I really need to get around to asking her name*, he mused—needed to do from here was to track down the church’s cache. They’d be transporting it to Migar as

well, if he didn't miss his bet, quite possibly with the lycanthrope's body. Their wisest course would be to destroy the body and steal the weapons, leaving them with nothing.

He liked that thought. He really didn't like the Deacons much. Frustrating them would be a definite bonus to the whole thing. And it would give his new partner something to send back home to make her bosses happy.

Which, as far as he was concerned, would go a long way to alleviate her anger at him for shooting the damn 'thrope in the first place. Even *if* it had been the right thing to do. *And why is it so important she thinks well of you, Raven?*

That voice was back, asking questions he didn't want to answer, even in the privacy of his own head.



Val woke suddenly, clawing her way out of the chair and facing the shadow standing across the room.

Raven doffed his coat and hat and turned his eyes to her. Something fluttered in the pit of her stomach. *Just hunger*, she told herself, not really sure if she was being completely honest or not. The guy irritated the hell out of her. There was no reason for her to be having this sort of reaction to him.

Then he shocked her by stripping out of his black shirt and tossing it across the back of another chair. His slim, muscular torso gleamed like polished ivory in the dim light from the gas lantern in the corner. His chest was hairless, and completely unscarred, she noted. He drifted from the room without a word. A moment later the shirt vanished from the chair. She stared at the spot it had vacated.

*What the hell was that?* she wondered. Why wouldn't he change his shirt in privacy? Why peel it off right in front of her?

Unless, of course, he hadn't even noticed she was there. Maybe he *was* that distracted.

He walked back through the doorway about ten minutes later, chest sheathed in a tight blue linen shirt. His hair looked wet. “That was a quick bath,” she observed.

He ran fingers through his hair and shrugged. “Guess so.”

“Sounds like a good idea to me. Where’s your tub? How do you get hot water to it? You don’t have a staff here, do you? Do you use magic? Isn’t that risky, considering the Deacons might spot you working mana?”

He just stared at her for a long moment. “I have a shower. With a water heater.”

Her jaw dropped. “Hidden, I suppose.”

“Buried about a hundred feet below the house. I plumbed this place myself—believe me, magic makes the job a *lot* easier. But I’m sure you’d rather use a water closet than a chamber pot. Am I wrong?”

“Water closet?”

“Old Earth term. Means a toilet.”

“We’re trained to handle—“

“—*handle* has a different definition than *appreciate*. Sure you’re trained to handle primitive conditions. Doesn’t mean you have to do it when an alternative is available.”

She frowned. “Okay, sure. So why would you include toilets in your plumbing plan if you don’t need to use one?”

“Sheer perversity. Seriously? Because this is a dimensional station—and if I get company from anyone not a TAU fanatic, they’d appreciate being able to use decent facilities.”

“And what makes you think I won’t?”

“You getting your panties in a bunch about my shooting that ’thrope, for one thing. I gotta say, TAU’s brainwashing techniques are pretty damn impressive. Nearly every TAU agent I’ve run across is a damn freak for technological purity. I’m not sure why. The worst thing that might happen is that some fifty years in the future, after I’ve been reassigned and the house has fallen into disrepair, someone might come along and accidentally unearth the water heater. The wizards will debate its purpose for a few weeks and forget all about it. It won’t contaminate shit.”

She opened her mouth to object and snapped it shut again. “You have a point.”

“Glad you think so—“

“What the hell is *that?*” She pointed past him at a huge shape taking up most of the doorway behind him. “Is there a pony in the house?”

“Nope,” Raven answered. “That’s actually my dog, Cerberus.”

Cerberus grinned at her. He was a huge beast, easily two hundred pounds, with short black hair and a wide, wedge-shaped head. Unsettling intelligence stared out of his black eyes. He lifted his head to stare up at Raven, uttering a murmuring grunt.

“Cerberus, this is—umm...” Raven looked at her. “What the heck’s your name?”

“Valerie Winn. Everybody calls me Val.”

“Cerberus, this is Val. You don’t have to eat her, okay?”

She could have sworn the dog nodded and said “okay.”

What if it had? It wasn’t as though it was impossible. Not in this day and age. But it sure made her curious. “Hi, Cerberus. Are you a good dog?”

The dog uttered a grunting moan that sounded suspiciously like a question aimed at Raven.

A shocked expression flitted briefly across the vampire’s face before it smoothed itself back into undead passivity. “No,” he said emphatically.

The dog chuffed.

Val snickered. “Now that’s low.”

“What?”

“Lying to a dog is about as low as you can get.”

“What makes you think I was lying to him?”

“He sure thinks so,” she answered. “Look at him.”

Raven glared down at Cerberus, who remained unruffled. It was hard to intimidate a two-hundred pound intelligent canine, even despite its inherent tendencies to follow pack order. The big lug had a sense of humor, and liked very much to give the boss a hard time when the situation called for it, regardless of the fact Raven was the pack alpha.

He groaned inwardly. There was no way in hell he was going to translate the dog's comments for Val. *He* wasn't sure how to take them—he definitely didn't want to find out what *her* reaction would be.

"You're a weird guy, Raven."

*A weird guy. When I was a teenager that would have been insulting. Now it's a compliment. Funny how these things change.*

*A lot changes over the course of a couple hundred years.*

"I'll show you to the shower, if you like."

"I'd like."

Raven set her up with a shower and wandered back to the sitting room, sinking into a stuffed chair with muted groan. The arms and corpse were likely being shipped out, either tonight or with the tide in the morning. The morning seemed most likely. They'd be put on a galley headed for Migar, which would take about a week to get there.

It would most likely follow the coastline closely, and drop anchor at night, so he'd have no problem slipping aboard and liberating the items. His only real concern was what to do with Val while he was working that end of things.

That goddamn gown had to go, he decided. It was decidedly absurd to expect a female agent, particularly a TAU agent skilled in armed and unarmed combat, to wear those damn constricting things just to blend in. That was one reason he really didn't approve of sending female agents in to places like this in the first place.

Nothing sexist about it...women expected to conform to local styles and mores were at a distinct disadvantage when it came to being able to protect themselves, or to perform half the physical tasks the typical mission might entail. He thought the whole thing demeaning and dangerous, and lobbied against it every time he had the opportunity.

He leaned forward, rubbing his chin. There *was* a way he could circumvent all of this, but the chances of her going for it were pretty damn slim. He'd been experimenting lately with transformational magic—probably one of the most complex of all the disciplines—and he thought it quite likely he could alter her appearance far enough to allow her to

pass as a male. He could do a complete transfiguration, of course, but he seriously doubted she'd go for *that*.

Then they could hire a couple of horses and ride up the coast. Might run into a few bandits, but he considered bandits to be nothing more than a chance for a little exercise.

His head snapped up as he heard someone coming down the long walkway in front of the house. It took him less than half a second to reach the door, gazing through the self-installed peephole to see who it was.

Cerberus barked from somewhere out in the yard.

Sergeant Goban and his sole companion froze mid-step as the big dog's warning reverberated through the chill night air. Raven grinned. Yes, Cerberus could have that effect on people. *Stand down*, he thought to the dog, and the barking stopped.

He opened the door with a innocuous glance toward the eastern horizon. The way he figured it, he had a couple hours left until dawn. He needed to talk Val into the transformation and affect the spell; he really didn't want to chit-chat with Goban. "Do you know what time it is?"

"About two hours before the cock's crow," Goban grunted. "I need your help."

"Really? You have no idea how busy I am right now. This is a very bad time."

"Not my idea," the watch sergeant grunted. "This comes straight down from the Provincial Governor."

*Oh, really?* That piqued Raven's interest. "Come in."

Goban responded with a quick nod and turned to his companion, a young freckle-faced constable. "Stay here. I'll be out in a moment."

The man saluted and turned to stand in the middle of the walkway, fisting the pommel of the sword at his waist and sweeping the front of the property with his gaze.

Once inside, Goban waited for Raven to shut the door. "You have anything to drink?"

The vampire thought about it. "Yes, actually. I don't usually keep alcohol in the house, but I happen to have a bottle of excellent wine left

by a visitor some time back. Have a seat and I'll retrieve it and a glass for you."

"Would rather have whiskey," the constable grumbled, but he made his way into the sitting room. Raven ignored his comment and went to find the wine.

Val could almost feel the steam pouring from her ears. She'd emerged from her bath to find that her gown was missing, and that it had been replaced by a pair of linen trousers and a white silk shirt. Obviously both garments were Raven's and it surprised her that he'd even have noticed they'd be about the same size.

But her surprise didn't outweigh her pique. She was supposed to be dressed in local clothing—which meant those damned confining dresses and gowns. Yes, she hated them, but she had the distinct impression she'd hate being labeled a witch and killed even more.

She ran straight into Raven in the hall as he emerged from the room mockingly referred to as a kitchen. He held a bottle in one hand and a single glass in the other. "Let me guess," she said. "That's not wine."

He looked taken aback at her tone. She deflated a little, plucking at her shirt as she stared at him. *We look directly eye-to-eye*, she realized, startled that she hadn't noticed that before this moment. Admittedly, she was tall for a woman, and he had never had the opportunity to reach his full height, but it still surprised her. No wonder his clothes fit her. "What's with the outfit?" she asked him. "I can't go out dressed like this."

"I have an idea, but I'll explain after my guest leaves."

"You have a guest? Who is it?" She leaned past him to look into the sitting room. A very rough-looking individual in some sort of uniform stared back at her curiously. "Ah, crap," she murmured. "He's going to assume I'm a witch, isn't he?"

"Warlock," Raven corrected. "And, no, not necessarily. I don't think he's particularly superstitious."

"Good."

## Chapter Five

Raven glowered at Goban over his shoulder as Val brushed past him and entered the sitting room. The constable rose to his feet in an almost involuntary reaction as he gaped at the shapely blonde woman dressed in a man's clothing. For the first time since Raven had known him, the ex-caravan guard looked completely stunned.

Val walked straight up to him and stuck out her arm. "Hi. I'm Val."

Goban glanced at her hand, then back up at her face, seemingly at a loss for words.

Caught between amusement and a twinge of jealousy, Raven decided to come to his rescue. "She's a rather unique friend of mine, Goban; recently arrived in the city. Val, this is Goban, an associate among the local constabulary."

"Associate, eh?" The sergeant looked a little dubious about that. He bowed with very little grace. It was obviously not something he did very often. "Pleased to meet you, Lady Val. And may I say, that's quite a fetching outfit you have on."

Well, it seemed the man had found his tongue. And Raven didn't like what he was doing with it. "Can we possibly get down to business?" he asked curtly, telling himself that he was just annoyed because this was taking up valuable time better spent on other things.

*And nothing to do with the fact that Goban is putting more effort into charming her than you even bothered to consider.*

That damned voice in the back of his head had a nasty habit of being right.

Val lowered her hand. She should've known better. Men here simply did not shake hands with women. That required an ability to view them

as equals, and that just wasn't going to happen. Not here. The man, Goban, seemed far from scandalized by her clothing, however. He stopped short of leering at her, but not by much. "I would offer you a snack, Sergeant," she said. "But it appears my old friend dines out far more often than he eats here, so his kitchen is embarrassingly bare."

Goban shrugged. "I'm not hungry. Thank you, though." He glanced at Raven. "So you want to talk business, do you? Fine. There's a ship heading for Migar with the morning tide—the *Capricious*—and the Governor wants a piece of its cargo retrieved."

"Oh? So what's that have to do with me?"

"Don't try to bullshit me, Raven. You hate the Church as much as I do. The whispers you've heard of contention between the Governors and the Church are true—they want to lead a revolt against Church authority. Well, weapons they acquired for that purpose have fallen into Church hands. We can't let them take them to the Defenders hall and figure out how they work. We have to get them back. You're the only one I know who has any chance of getting it done."

"I'm flattered you have this much faith in me, but that's a tall order."

"I know you're a warlock, Raven. I've had my eye on you for a while now. But I think you're trustworthy, and you'd be a damned good man to have at your back in a fight. I need you—your province needs you. Are you willing to stand with us?"

Raven opened his mouth and said nothing for a long second. Talk about a rock and a hard place. Now he knew who'd purchased the weapons, and why. Good intelligence to have, but there was no way he could scratch their backs in this instance, as much as he wanted to. That would put him at odds with TAU, who required the weapons either be destroyed or transported to Starhaven.

He didn't like either choice. He wanted the Provinces to be able to rise up against the Church with some hope of actually defeating it, not ground under its heavy, magical boot. He didn't think their prospects would be too good if he confiscated the guns. *Dammit.*

His jaw snapped shut and he uttered an inarticulate growl.

Val turned to look at him, eyes widening, and he stared her down. *Fucking meddling bastards*. He wanted to yell it out loud, but didn't think that would go too well with Goban, who seemed to be sizing Val up for pedestal placement somewhere. "I...can't." He shifted his gaze back to the watch sergeant. "It's not as though I don't want to," he added, "but I just can't."

Val looked stricken, he noted with some satisfaction. She'd caught the nuances as well, and at least had some idea what her agency's policies were creating here. Without the guns any attempt to rebel against Church authority was most likely doomed to fail, and the aftermath would be terrible to behold.

Goban glanced at the bottle of wine in Raven's hand and sneered. "On second thought, I don't think I'll take that glass of wine after all. I really must be going." He nodded cordially to Val and strode past Raven without a glance. "I'll show myself out."

He managed to refrain from slamming the door as he left.

"Well, that sucks," Val muttered. "I had no idea."

"I had a suspicion," Raven growled. He glanced down at the bottle of wine in his hand and lifted it for a long pull. He doubted it would have any effect, but he could always hope. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "This is worse than you can imagine. I've put a lot of time into gaining Goban's trust, and this could well have destroyed all that work. I can't carry out my duties if I'm forced to abide by your rules."

"They exist for a reason," she told him, jaw tightening around the words.

"Like most rules, they exist to screw the weak," he snarled back. He drained the bottle and stormed out, tossing it aside as he stepped through the door. He vanished it before it hit the floor.

Val stared after him, resisting the urge to follow. She understood why he was angry, but wasn't sure what she could do about it. All she had to do was imagine if *both* sides got a hold of the weapons. It would be a bloodbath. From what Raven said, he suspected these were semi-automatic assault rifles. Muskets would be one thing...AK-47's were a horse of a different gender entirely.

She wished there was something she could do.

*Then again, maybe there is.*

She poked around the place for several minutes, coming up with a voluminous cloak, sword belt and scabbard to use for the weapon she'd liberated from the black-haired bitch. She also located an old pair of boots that fit reasonably well. Thus clad, she stepped out into the night.

Raven lifted his head and sniffed. Someone had opened the front door. Frowning, he emerged from his private room and tread silently through the house, coming to the entryway after a moment of looking around for Val. It seemed pretty obvious she'd gone out—not something he would've recommended until he'd had the opportunity to talk to her about the transfiguration. She was dressed as a man and who knew what sort of chaos would ensue if any of the locals spotted her.

Not that it was that big a danger at the moment. In the hour before dawn, usually even the ruffians were abed. *Damn her eyes! What is she playing at?*

He followed her into the pre-dawn morning, using the scent of her tracks to lead him along her trail. At one point he lost her, so he called in Cerberus to help. The big dog came loping from the direction of the house and quickly sniffed out her path.

It took another fifteen minutes before he realized she was heading for the district watch-house. *Looking for Goban?* He was curious how she'd taken off directly toward it; there was no way she could have learned the route since she'd been here.

*Nothing weirder than a psi,* he decided.

*Coming from a vampire and a mage, that's rich.*

Now his little voice was trying to pick a fight. *Oh, shut up.*

Val knew they were there long before they made their move. She sensed two pinpoints of anticipation off the street ahead and smiled to herself. A couple of footpads, looking for a last score for the night.

She felt like kicking a little ass. She almost felt sorry for them.

She walked down the center of the street until she was about thirty feet away, then dodged toward the wall on their side. Panicked by this sudden maneuver, they rushed out of the mouth of the alley, skittered around the corner, and rushed her.

A thought scream—like a sonic bolt spearing from her mind outward—dropped the first one like he'd been struck in the face with a wrecking ball. The second dodged past his falling comrade, and brandished a long dirk.

She drew her rapier. And smiled.

His eyes grew wide as he realized he was facing a woman. Val made a few flourishes with the sword, then a come-hither motion with her other hand. And she smiled some more.

He turned and fled, leaving his unconscious companion behind without a thought.

“Well, that wasn't very much fun,” she informed the abandoned thief at her feet. “You guys are truly pathetic.”

“They are Argos and August Conn,” Raven's voice cut in from behind her. “That's August there. Dumb as a soggy pretzel. His brother's the one with the brains, but only in comparison to August.”

“I'm surprised they're still alive.”

“Frankly, so am I.”

She nudged the sprawled-out Conn brother with her toe and glanced over her shoulder.

Raven stood some forty feet away beneath a gas light, arms folded across his chest. He peered at her with hot eyes from beneath the brim of his cowboy hat.

“So why are they still on the streets?” she asked.

“They haven't done anything bad enough yet for the watch to take an interest. There are hundreds of little alley-rats like them lurking around—as long as they don't rob the wrong person, or kill anyone in the process, they are free to scurry around to their hearts' content.”

“And Goban is a part of that?”

“He tries—which is more than I can say for some of the bastards in the upscale districts. You don't get away with murder down here. Goban

won't tolerate that. In other parts of the city you can pay your way out of a murder rap before the blood's dry."

"Nice place."

"Not much different from Earth throughout much of its history," Raven said with a shrug. "The worst thing we agents can do is lie to ourselves about the worlds we visit. Ones this far out on the chain are the weirdest, since not even the place names or even the tribes of man are quite the same. Celts in the Americas, Native Americans in Africa, Blacks in Southeast Asia, and the Germanic peoples practically non-existent. It's an unrecognizable Earth, but all the landmasses are the same. And so are the people. Humans just like us."

"You still consider yourself a human?" she asked.

He snorted. "What else should I consider myself? A God? A hero? Hardly. All of *this* is about real heroism—about the guy who gets up every day and labors at the docks, or grinds himself away in a mill somewhere. About the woman who raises ten children, keeps a house, gardens, and takes in laundry on the side. I'm outside of all of that. The best thing I can do is protect humanity from dangers it's not even aware of."

He took a step forward and, for all she saw of it, materialized less than five feet away from her. She suppressed a shiver. That wasn't magic. That was vampire. "You know what pisses me off about this whole gun thing, Valerie? What pisses me off is that those weapons can give an ordinary person a fighting chance against someone like a Deacon—someone whose innate power makes them equal to five or ten men—or against a lycanthrope, or even a vampire. Nothing else would but magic, and we don't have the means to teach that to them."

"Christ, Val, the people in this province—hell, all the provinces—are exploited by both the Church and their leaders, and there's not a damn thing they can do about it. Does that seem right to you? If the Deacons were out-world mages doing this, Sash could step in. If they were using banned technology, TAU could step in. But who helps people when they're being ruled over by a bunch of corrupt pigs they have no way to fight back against?"

He was almost in tears. Val stared at him. She didn't know how to respond to this. He was absolutely right, but everything she'd been taught told her that he was dead wrong. And the two thoughts could not reconcile themselves inside her head.

"That this governor is willing to risk himself by purchasing these weapons in the first place says that the people have caught a break," said Raven. "The Church props up the civil structure as long as the civil structure props up the Church. It's astounding to see someone challenging that. And we have to go and *fuck that up.*"

Raven shook his head and turned away. She didn't need to see him cry. Besides the fact it was just undignified, it was also a bit...creepy. Most mortals seem to find blood tears to be unsettling. He had no reason to believe she wouldn't be the same. "You shouldn't be out here right now. We'll find Goban tomorrow. I don't know what I'll say to him, but I figure it out. Maybe I can lend myself to their cause in some other capacity."

She reached out and put her hand on his shoulder from behind. "If I have to, I'll help, too. We have to make this right."

He glanced up toward the east. "Better do it tonight. Right now I need to get home before the sun comes up and blasts me into my component atoms."

## Chapter Six

The night unfolded above him and his eyes snapped open. Raven lay in his bed for a long moment, staring up at the ceiling, listening to the sound of his house humming with a hundred new footsteps and voices he did not immediately recognize.

He pulled himself out of bed and went to take a shower. Once he was finished, he quickly toweled off and dressed, listening at the hidden door for any sign of unseen watchers. When he was certain it was safe, he opened the door and slipped out.

He made his way to the sitting room, where he found Val, Goban, and a young man he didn't recognize sitting around sipping wine and chatting amiably. He wiped the scowl from his face and walked in. "Didn't know we were planning a party," he observed dryly.

"Sometimes parties just happen," Val answered sweetly. "They've got another offer for us—this one I think you'll like."

"Really? Do tell." He smiled, wanting desperately to grit his teeth. How *dare* she bring people into his house while he was sleeping? Didn't she realize how dangerous that could be?

And where was Cerberus?

Curled up in the corner in front of the fireplace, basking in the heat from the flames. Raven shook his head in disgust. *Some guard dog you turned out to be.*

The dog flopped over on his back, lolled his head off the hearth, and peeled open one eye. The mouth slowly parted into a grin and he kicked one back leg idly.

*Ah, yes. Canine for 'fuck you.'*

“Who are you?” he asked the young goateed man, determined to ignore the dog’s response entirely.

“Bryon Beard,” he replied, in the clipped tones of Muraz—the great southern city, said to be the birthplace of the Provincial Alliance itself. The mightiest of the city-states at one time, Muraz’s navy was still legendary.

“Should I know the name?” Raven asked, aware that he was being rude and not really giving a damn. The man shouldn’t have been in his house without his permission.

This earned him a hesitant smile. “I’m the seventh son of Jamus Beard, Governor of Muraz.”

Raven glanced at Goban. “Another Governor? This is beginning to look like a conspiracy.”

This actually caused Goban to glance around suspiciously. Raven stifled a laugh. The power of suggestion was an amazing thing. “This is big, Raven,” Goban murmured. “Bryon here has come bearing the tale of a powerful artifact, buried in the frozen land at the bottom of the world.”

“And this is important because...?”

“We want to retrieve it,” Bryon answered smoothly.

“What’s this artifact supposed to do?”

Raven glanced at Val. That was a good question. The notion of traipsing around the Arctic really didn’t make him want to cheer, but locating a powerful artifact could be the only way they could tip the balance without betraying TAU in the bargain.

He’d have to reach that ship and destroy the weapons before he went anywhere else, though. That was a given. If the rebels couldn’t have them, there was no way on this or any Earth he’d leave them to the Church.

Bryon’s lip twitched slightly. Raven was probably the only one who caught it. But whatever he was about to say was only part of the truth. “It’s referred to in texts as the Fist of the Redeemer, the unknown face of the Three-Fold-God—the one who has yet to come. The one who will reconcile humanity with the other faces of God and usher in an age of wonder.”

*Great. Kid sounds like a religious fanatic.* But Raven had to admit what he was hearing was a damn sight better than anything the Deacons had to say. He'd never bothered to delve too far into this religion of theirs. Religion had long struck him as a dangerous business and one hell of an efficient way to screw your head sideways. *Thinking that you know things you don't really know is a recipe for disaster stew.*

"But that's not all, is it?" Val leaned forward, her gaze suddenly predatory. "There are other artifacts you believe you'll find there, aren't there?"

The young man shrank back in his chair, eyes widening so far Raven was afraid he was going to injure himself. "How...how did you know that?"

Raven coughed just loud enough to catch Bryon's attention. "Valerie is a woman of singular talents," he told him. "Now how about you tell us about these other artifacts too? Pretty please?"

"Okay." Bryon took a deep breath. "I've been studying the text for the past five years, and I think I've been able to piece together how the stuff got there and what it might be. I'm sure you know the legend of Black Crag."

"Sure," said Goban.

Raven and Val exchanged glances. "We're not from around here," they said in unison.

"Oh. Well...Black Crag was a warrior—one of the Avenger's Holy Knights. He led the battle against the frost giants and reportedly chased them all the way back to their home. He died in battle, even as he thrust his sword through the ribs of the very last giant. They fell together in the midst of a storm of fire and when it abated, the other Knights could find no trace of him or his gear. They surmised that he'd been dropped through the ice into a crevice, one so deep they couldn't hope to retrieve him. They performed their service there and returned home in mourning."

"So what kind of artifacts was he carrying...reportedly?" It was easy to tell this guy had spent most of his life living in books. He didn't know

the value of a short descriptive phrase. Raven stared down at him and he fidgeted in response.

“The Fist of the Redeemer, which we assume is some sort of mystical mace, plus something called a ‘soul gem.’ It allowed Black Crag to steal some of the powers of those he faced, weakening them and strengthening him.”

“Anything else?”

“Maybe,” the young man squeaked. “We’re not sure. There’s something about a Horn of Worlds but we don’t know anything about that one.”

“Uh-huh.” Raven clapped his hand down on Bryon’s shoulder. “Thanks for leveling with us, kid.”

“Kid? I’m older than you are,” Bryon objected.

“Don’t bet on it,” Raven replied. “Fine. We’ll go find these artifacts of yours. Maybe we’ll stumble across this Redeemer of yours too.”

“Maybe you will.”

“We’ll need to be outfitted. I can handle the cold, but she can’t. We’ll need the best cold-weather gear available.”

“I have a hundred gold Seals for just that purpose,” Bryon said. “Do you know where we can get the equipment you need?”

“Absolutely. If you’ll give us a few...” He gestured to Val, indicating that he’d like to talk to her. She nodded and followed him down the hallway.

He spun on her. “Don’t bring people into my house when I’m asleep.”

“What, you don’t trust them? Or don’t you trust me?”

He leaned in within inches of her nose. “I don’t trust *anybody*.”

“That must be very lonely for you.”

*That* stopped him mid-rant. “What?”

Val tilted her head and gave him a penetrating stare. “It must be lonely to be the only person you feel you can trust. Like being locked inside a box with knives sticking through it.”

He shook his head rapidly as if it had suddenly become shrouded in cobwebs. “I’m not lonely.”

“Yeah, right. Raven, the big, bad vampire...the killer of monsters. So bad-ass he doesn’t want or need anybody. Well, you’re wrong, Raven. You’ve been hurt, sure. But we’ve *all* been hurt. Nothing unusual about that.”

“You can’t read my mind.”

“No. I can’t. But I know people. I don’t rely exclusively on my gifts to figure people out. For one, it’s not necessary, and, for two, it’s rude to read other agents. I know I tried to read you once and it was wrong. You just had me so confused I didn’t know what to do.”

“You always leave me that way,” he told her. Then, without warning, he leaned forward and pressed his mouth against hers.

Val felt her knees buckle slightly and thought for a moment that she was trying to melt into him. Something electrical pulsed between them and her heart began to skip to a whole new rhythm.

She pushed herself back and out of the kiss. She’d actually been trying to push him away, but found in that moment what the word ‘impossible’ meant. Or the term ‘immovable object.’ “What did you do *that* for?”

“I wanted to. Now—shall we lead these two to the outfitter’s shop?” He turned and walked away, grabbing his jacket from the coat-rack by the door.

The whole way down the hall Val found her gaze glued to his butt. *Could an ass actually be perfect?*

She wouldn’t have thought so before meeting Raven. Now she was certain of it. Why had he kissed her? Why did she like it so much? They were always at odds. Maybe that was part of the chemistry between them.

*Forget about that*, she thought, annoyed with herself. *We’ve got more important things to concentrate on, dammit. Like a trip to the North Pole.*

She still couldn’t believe he’d kissed her.



The trip to the outfitters didn't go badly, but Val could tell Raven wasn't happy with the revelation that both Bryon and Goban were coming along on the expedition. His distaste for the scholarly Governor's son was palpable. If not for the fact the young man seemed so socially inept, Val was certain he would've picked it up himself.

Goban certainly had. He exchanged more than one amused glance with the vampire as they explained the use of this or that item in the outfitter's shop.

The proprietor, a spindly, long-limbed man with the habit of craning his neck so he looked a bit like a vulture sitting on a gnarled old tree waiting for something to die, watched with something approaching complete disinterest, despite the fact that they obviously intended to spend money on his wares.

Raven seemed to take this in stride, which suggested he was used to this fellow's demeanor. Val wanted to grab him by his buzzard neck and shake him, but thought that would be a little extreme. Apparently he was the only complete outfitter in the city, or the only one Raven trusted for whatever reason.

The whole operation took less than half an hour. The proprietor called into the back of the shop and a couple of sizable lackeys loaded their purchases aboard the wagon as the party looked on. Catching a few moments apart from the others, Raven ghosted up to Val. "I'm going to need you to distract them somewhere up the coastline, give me a chance to find the ship without them catching on."

She nodded. "How are you going to deal with the you-don't-work-in-the-daytime factor?"

"They don't have vampires here," he reminded her. "No suspicions to raise—they don't make connections between night and evil, thankfully. We can pretend it's some strange curse."

"You're pretty used to this, aren't you?"

He shrugged. "This isn't the first world I've been undercover on—just the first one where being what I am doesn't equal an automatic death sentence if they figure it out."

“Assuming they can pull it off,” she remarked absently. “How are we going to transport you?”

“Didn’t you notice? I ordered a six foot, airtight crate. An unusual request, you’d think, but apparently the Church Deacons have a standing order for one just like it once a month.”

“Once a month? What the hell for?”

“That’s a question I’d dearly love to ask them,” he replied. “I’ve included it on my list.”

“You’ve got a list of questions you want to ask them? That’s rather sad, don’t you think? It’s not as if they’ll ever be answered.”

He gave her a dirty look and shook his head, taking a step away as the others approached.

“What’s the crate for?” Goban asked curiously.

“You’ll find out,” Raven replied off-handedly. “So are we ready to go?”

The watchman glanced toward the moon and calculated. “Uh-huh. Bryon has hired us a ship to take us to the northernmost port, where we’ll hire several sledges and dog teams to take us farther north. All we have to do is load up and we can sail with the morning tide. Sometime about dawn, I would think.”

At this news, Raven smiled. That would put them, at the most, one day behind the ship they were pursuing, Val noted mentally. At least he’d come fully on board with the idea that the weapons needed to be destroyed, and she knew he’d find some way to get it done.

At least she could trust him that far. In other respects she still hadn’t figured out exactly how far she could trust him. Hopefully this venture, odd as it was, would give her the answers to that particular question.

## Chapter Seven

“Where’s Raven?” Bryon asked, sidling a little too close for comfort as Val stood with him on the *Rakehell’s* poop deck. He seemed a decent enough guy, but he’d grown entirely too friendly since she’d emerged from her cabin a few hours earlier. Allowing her to accompany them on this mission with few questions asked had given her a rather prejudicial view of how progressive they actually were, but the truth remained that a woman who dressed in men’s clothing and engaged in predominately male pursuits was enough of an anomaly that certain things were clearly taken for granted.

Maybe the assumption was that a woman who voluntarily took a man’s role was of loose morals or character and would be easy pickings for the likes of Bryon, or maybe he just found her that attractive. Or maybe he was just that friendly.

She could find out for sure, of course, but she was hesitant to read him. It was one thing to use one’s talents in pursuit of the mission, but quite another to mind-probe someone who was ostensibly an ally for personal reasons.

The day had dawned thick with fog, but by mid-day they found themselves sailing under a bright and sunny sky. The crew swarmed the rigging, trying to catch every breeze to their best advantage. Val knew almost nothing of nautical things but had some wild imagining that she would learn something of value on this journey.

The sailors, being a superstitious lot, as she had been told sailors often were, avoided her as if she were a plague carrier. She’d been afraid that they’d make assumptions about her due to her manner of dress,

but, so far, they'd done everything possible to even avoid even acknowledging her existence.

*If only I was so fortunate with Bryon*, she thought. Though, she had to admit, that was rather unfair. He hadn't done anything overt, and it would be easy to assume that he had nefarious designs on her body.

*What does it say about me that I detect lecherous intentions where they might not exist?* she wondered, even as she inched carefully away from him. She nearly laughed aloud at herself. It said that she had a well-reasoned suspicion of male motivations, even though it *felt* like a knee-jerk reaction. *It might not be true that all men think with their little heads, but the damn things have entirely too much influence in general.*

She once read a theory that penis size, and the lack thereof, had a startling effect on diplomacy as a public policy. She wasn't entirely certain how accurate it was, but she found it amusing to contemplate regardless.

*Gunboat diplomacy as an exercise in penile projection. Why doesn't that surprise me?*

"So where are you from?" Bryon asked her. She winced inwardly. That was one of the worst questions for an agent to receive unless he or she had already developed a plausible cover story. She hadn't had the opportunity yet—she knew far too little about this world to come up with something believable. "I'd really rather not talk about it," she answered.

Unfortunately this didn't appear to be an acceptable answer. "Your accent says you're from one of the Southern provinces—Talmar or Jesepha, maybe? I've never been to either, but I'm curious. Is the weather really pleasant all year long?"

She had a sudden sense that this wasn't as innocent a line of questioning as it first appeared. He was fishing for something—looking for some misstep on her part? Just because she couldn't simply dive into his mind and extract the information she wanted didn't mean she couldn't take advantage of the emotional context he was broadcasting as they spoke.

She thought back to the map she'd seen briefly before going through the worldgate. One of the two provinces mentioned wasn't in the

southern regions at all—it was in the north-eastern region which would have corresponded to the Balkan states on Earth. The other one was on what would be the Mediterranean Sea—Greece, Italy, and part of what might be considered the Middle East. Or, as one of her instructors had called it—the ‘Muddle East.’

She gave him a dubious look. “I can only assume you misspoke. Talmar is a northern province. I was born in Jesepha...though the circumstances of my birth and upbringing aren’t something I want to discuss. The weather *is* pleasant, though.”

She’d been fortunate enough to travel to Earth itself as part of her training, so she’d actually visited the climes they were discussing. She’d spent a month working in the olive orchards while there, learning about the region and its history at the same time.

They tried to do that with every graduating class, but at times the political atmosphere on Earth Prime grew too contentious and the agencies refrained from including such field trips in their regimen.

The aftermath of the Cen War had changed Earth’s political landscape in some respects, but some regional conflicts still cropped up from time to time. The Mediterranean region had been the focus of a great number of religious conflicts over the past several centuries and old hatreds died hard. The Adjuster’s Office troops did their best to contain these conflagrations but occasionally they flared out of control anyway.

Much of the agency’s teachings were vehemently anti-religious and they used such things as the ongoing brushfire conflicts on Earth Prime to provide an example of why religious sentiment was a dangerous trend in human affairs and why *all* revealed religions should be regarded with suspicion. There were other examples on various other Earths, of course, but Earth Prime provided some of the best examples. The agencies had arisen, after all, from Earth Prime and its explosive history, and the agents were steeped in Earth Prime culture from an early age. In fact, most—but not all—of the agents were originally from Earth Prime in the first place, so, in fact, many were the direct inheritors of the religious and regional prejudices that provoked these conflicts in the first place. The agencies—both TAU and the Crimson Sash—did their level best to

train their agents away from any consideration of their origins with respect to their dealings with one another. Val herself hailed from North America, from the western side of the former nation of Canada, so had never been introduced to any of the more extreme ways of thinking that prevailed in some of the other regions.

*And all of this, she thought, is completely beside the point at the moment.* She was trying to get inside Bryon's head, not take a lengthy journey through the maze of her own mind.

He showed a level of religious fanaticism she found truly disturbing, and wanted nothing more than to find some way to disrupt it—to shock him out of what she saw as his superstitious assumptions.

Bryon now laughed sheepishly, though she definitely had the impression that it was an affected response. He wanted her to believe it had been a mistake, but her feelings told her something totally different. He'd been trying to trip her up, which made her wonder what his intentions were. Why would he assume she *could* be tripped up in the first place—unless he had some suspicion that his world had been infiltrated by operatives from somewhere else entirely.

Possible, she admitted to herself. He worked for his father, who'd helped finance the purchase of out-world weapons, so it was actually likely that they'd put two-and-two together to determine that the circumstances on their world were being influenced by at least one outside agency. If one, why not more?

This was not a line of reasoning she had any interest in fostering, though she had no idea how to nip it in the bud. If she continued to try to evade his questions, he'd simply grow increasingly suspicious, which was *also* something they wanted to avoid. If the locals started suspecting their motives it could only spell trouble for their mission in general.

At first she'd been fooled by his vapid, rather foppish exterior, but looking in his gray eyes now she determined that the exterior masked a rather insightful, devious mind. His attempts to get the truth from her had been clumsy, but she had no reason to suspect that they weren't deliberately clumsy. After all, what could it possibly hurt to let her know specifically that they suspected her of being some sort of out-world

operative? Every bit of pressure they brought to bear on her would make it that much more likely she'd slip up and reveal something she was trying to keep hidden.

It would be easy to assume these people were unsophisticated savages, but nothing could be farther from the truth. People in these cultures often learned the ways of intrigue early, especially if they themselves had political connections. In some ways they might well be *more* advanced in these areas than the typical agent, considering that they had to contend with merchant houses, foreign governments, and spies within their own ranks.

They lived within wheels within wheels, dealing with influence peddlers, self-promoting sycophants, and deceitful courtiers from almost the moment they left their mothers' teats.

She herself was probably extremely naive in this respect when compared to him. She didn't care for that realization in the least. *Of course, that's why there's a big difference between trained agents and experienced ones. All the training in the world can only prepare us to gain the experience we need—it can't replace it.* "I'm not feeling so good," she said, standing abruptly. "I think I'm going to go lie down for a while."

He looked as though he was about to object, but seemed to shrug inwardly. "As you wish."

She could feel his penetrating stare following her as she descended the ladder from the upper deck and disappeared from view. Something told her that this was going to be a trial in more ways than one.

## Chapter Eight

Upon awakening, Raven found himself instantly reminded why he hated sea travel. He no longer had the capacity to get seasick, but the rocking motion left him unsettled nonetheless. The ship was at anchor, he noted, which explained the rhythmic undulating motion he found disturbing. He pushed open the casket lid and climbed out onto the hold's deck.

The smell of fresh water mingled with the salty brine of the sea and, after a moment, he heard the drops of rain hitting the decking above him. It was raining; probably one of the reasons they'd pulled up and dropped anchor for the night. It was a common practice regardless, but they'd paid for an express service, which should have precluded nightly stops. The Captain most likely wanted to avoid any chance of running into one of the nasty squalls that occasionally struck during inclement weather such as this, uncommon as they were. Raven couldn't blame him for that. Some of those storms were fierce, and could damage a ship even as seaworthy as this one. They weren't paying him enough to risk his livelihood.

While he understood why, it didn't make him any happier with the situation. He needed to catch up with that other ship, and that wasn't going to happen if they stopped every goddamn night because of the weather.

He could always use a little mojo to make the weather more compliant to his needs, but he'd learned to be very hesitant to engage in weather manipulation. He might fix it here to suit his needs, but the chain reaction from it might devastate some other region and kill hundreds in the process. He didn't find that chance acceptable.

And it wasn't as though he didn't have other options anyway. They'd just require a little more planning and a lot more work. He could live with that a damn sight better than he could live with the thought of killing untold numbers of innocents. Laziness made a poor excuse for callous indifference.

The upper deck seemed empty when he climbed out of the hold, but he could both hear the heartbeats of the sailors and smell the rich scent of blood rushing through their veins. This served as a reminder that he'd gone a little long since last feeding and that he'd best find a source of fresh blood before the Thirst did it for him.

They probably appreciated the downtime, come to think of it. Running twenty-four hours a day had to put a strain on the men. Chances were the bunch of them were holed up somewhere tipping back a few quarts of grog and cursing the crazy passengers who wanted to work them to death and blessing whichever facet of the Threefold God who'd sent the storm.

All the better. Raven reached out and snuffed one of the lanterns and drew the shadows around himself, cloaking himself in darkness. Again, he became aware of the spell web around him, the flowing matrix of energy in which he'd hung all his prepared spells. It was, of course, invisible to anyone who was not a mage. He wasn't, however, after one of his prepared spells this time. He would be working with the raw material of probability, the strands of mana that wormed through time and space, leftover energy from the creation of new universes.

He began pulling threads to put together a new spell. He grasped one strand and flattened it out, forming it into a convex lens and setting it aside to float placidly in the air beside him.

He grasped another thread and fixed the lens to one end, then hurled that end skyward, hooking it downward at the last minute. He opened one end and peered through, grinning inwardly as it became clear that this little innovation was going to work exactly as he'd expected.

He used this new 'far-seeing' spell to scan the territory ahead, seeking any sign of another ship anchored somewhere roughly a day

ahead of their position. He raked the spy device across the sky, looking for any sign along the coast for a ship that might be bound for Muraz.

It took several minutes, but he found it finally in a small cove tucked deep into the continental landmass; a secluded little spot he imagined few captains even knew about. It figured that the one entrusted by the Church with the transport of their new acquisitions would be worthy of the task.

It wasn't *Raven's* fault that he was trying to protect the cargo from someone far more capable than most. Before dawn he'd whistle up some windsprites and nyads, elemental spirits of water, to increase their speed once they got going. They were a week out from Muraz, and, if they could run through the night tomorrow with 'sprites and nyads going the whole time, they'd catch up by the time it was preparing to raise anchor the next morning.

If the weather cooperated, anyway.

"Raven."

He took a deep breath, irritated that he'd been so preoccupied he hadn't heard her approach, then turned slowly to look at her. "Valerie."

"I'm not sure I like being the only one up and around during the day," she blurted, then looked surprised at herself.

"Why? The sailors giving you trouble?"

"Not them. Bryon. He's...been a little over-friendly. I'm not sure how to handle it. Ordinarily I'd just bust him in the chops and throw him in the drink, but I don't think that'll go over very well here."

"You think right," he murmured with a tiny nod. "You want me to have a chat with him?"

She appeared to hesitate, then nodded. "Don't do anything irreversible."

He gave her a dark look. "Go teach your grandmother," he snorted. "Make yourself scarce and I'll go have a talk with him about messing with my girl." He dialed his best smile and watched her face flush scarlet. "That should get the point across without having to resort to actual violence."

She gave a quick nod. "Okay."

He winked at her, drawing another blush. He nearly laughed aloud. *How can she possibly be this easy to embarrass?* She turned around and ducked into her cabin as he cloaked himself in darkness and made a silent leap to the forecastle—where he'd heard Bryon's voice even in the midst of his conversation with Val.

He deliberately materialized on the edge of the twenty foot long deck, gliding in utter silence across the planking as the mayor's son lifted his gaze from something in his hands. "How—? Where—? That's..." His face flushed nearly as pale as Raven's as the vampire pulled up barely a foot away from him. "How did you do that?"

"It's a gift," Raven replied. "I need to talk to you."

"Where have you been?"

"Sleeping," Raven answered. "I'm not what you'd call a morning person."

He reached out and grasped a length of deck rail with the tips of his fingers, curling his palm against the smooth wood. He squeezed, the weathered wood creaking in protest as his fingers began to inexorably indent the surface. "Stay away from Val unless you've got business to discuss. She's mine."

"Yours?" Bryon gave him a skeptical look.

Raven's lips curled into a feral smile and he felt the wood give, shredding away from the rail as he pulled his hand free. He handed the crumbled wood to Bryon, who stared at it uncomprehendingly for a moment before looking back into the vampire's cold gaze. "If you bother her again, I'll rip your face straight off your skull. That tends to discourage female interest, if you get my drift."

A light dawned in Bryon's eyes and he looked back at the wood in his hand, then at the rail, which looked as though a large dog had been chewing on it. The strength it would have taken to rip that chunk free was nothing short of astounding and he knew it. He reached out and clasped the rail himself, squeezing with all his own considerable strength and accomplishing exactly nothing. The look on his face told Raven he'd indeed 'caught his drift.'

"I don't want to hear anything more about it, understand?"

“Yes, sir,” Bryon breathed, heart clearly sitting somewhere in the vicinity of his throat.

He positively stank of fear. Raven turned away, almost feeling guilty. He’d intimidated other vampires for years—doing it to a poor mortal gave him no real satisfaction. But it had served its purpose. He wouldn’t be bothering Val again anytime soon. *And, again, the threat of force is more effective than the application would be. Amazing how that works.*

He knew it had wounded Val’s pride to be forced to come to him, but the social niceties of this world made it a necessity, if not a comfortable one. She could only stretch the boundaries of the sexual norms so much without making their jobs infinitely more difficult, and they both knew it.

He stopped and knocked on her cabin door. After a moment, she answered. “I’ve taken care of it,” he told her without preamble.

She nodded, then glanced over Raven’s shoulder, where Bryon was descending the ladder from the forecastle. “Maybe you’d better come in,” she said, giving him the most dazzling smile he’d ever seen on her.

He shrugged imperceptibly and followed her into the cabin, shutting the door behind him.

“And why—?” He took two steps forward and froze as the door behind them kicked back open in response to what he could only assume was her telekinetic prompting.

She whirled and pressed him into the doorframe, her face mere inches from his own. “If you’re going to tell him I belong to you, we’d best give him some reason to believe it,” she said, as she reached out, wrapped strong fingers around the back of his head, and dragged his mouth to hers.

“What are you doing?” he murmured against her lips.

“Do you or don’t you know when to shut up?” she replied, drawing her face back just a little. “We have to make this look good, or else he’ll never buy it.”

Personally Raven didn’t give a damn if he ‘bought it’ or not. He’d made his threat and, the way he saw it, it would take a damn sight braver person than that little mite to ignore the threat.

Of course, he thought, seeing a spark of what had to be irritation rising in Val's eyes, there was something to be said for playing a role to the hilt. He returned the kiss as if he meant to swallow her whole.



The exact instant before Val would've been forced to break the kiss herself for lack of oxygen, she felt herself being pulled away to arm's length by Raven's firm but gentle grip on her upper arms. She found herself panting slightly, the edge of her vision tickled with tiny motes of light as she tried to fill her lungs with air. *Damn. Kissing a vampire is a whole new experience.*

She saw a hard edge in his gaze as she met his eyes and she felt her heart pounding in her chest. She didn't know exactly *why* she'd kissed him, but hadn't regretted it at all until she saw the deep pool of dark fire behind his stare. "Before we start anything like this," he murmured, almost angrily, as he kicked the door shut behind him yet again, "you'd better be damn certain where you want it to go."

Taken aback by the vehemence in his tone, she opened her mouth to say something—anything—but was interrupted by a loud explosion and a sudden sideways lurch of the deck beneath their feet. "What the hell was that?" she cried out, her originally intended words snatched away by shock and fear.

"Cannon fire," he replied through a clenched jaw. "We're under attack."

"By who?" she asked, instantly realizing how stupid the question was. If she didn't know, the chances of him knowing weren't one hell of a lot better.

He ignored the question, spun and ran for the ladder leading to the deck, little more than a blur as he burst through the door and vanished from sight. Cursing, she grabbed up her rapier and dashed out behind him.

*Who on this world has cannons?* was the crazy thought that careened through her head as she ascended the ladder. *And who gave them to them?* One way or another, it was her job to find out.

Emerging on deck, Raven must have looked like a good target. A bandy-legged little man wearing a bandanna and a leather cuirass charged at him with a naked rapier. Moving like light made flesh, Raven danced forward and plucked the blade from his hand, dealing him a back-hand blow that lifted him bodily from the deck and hurled him over the rail into the sea.

Raven glanced around, instantly measuring the distance between their ship and the pirate ship off the starboard side. He caught a flash out of the corner of his eye and something nipped at the collar of his jacket, humming like an angry bumblebee as it passed. His vastly superior night vision spotted a lone figure in the rigging of the pirate vessel, fiddling with something in its hands.

Raven turned and vaulted the thirty or so feet between the two ships, landing lightly and scurrying up the rigging with uncanny dexterity. He snatched the shooter up with one hand, shaking him violently until the weapon fell from his grasp to thud heavily on the deck beneath them. Allowing himself a wry grin, he threw the pirate up toward the mainmast before leaping back down to where the gun had fallen.

His feet struck the deck without a sound and he bent down to scoop up it up. He turned it over in his hands, frowning. It was some sort of muzzle-loaded pistol, its design one he didn't recognize. Certainly nothing smuggled in from Earth.

Someone yelled close by and he whirled, ducking a wild slash and smashing his fist straight into his assailant's face. Bones crunched and blood flew. He stuffed the weapon into his jacket pocket and lifted the pirate, raising his gaze high above them.

A moment later they stood in the crow's nest, the squat, muscular pirate blubbering in terror as Raven held him casually out over the deck with one hand. "Sorry," he said, not sure if he meant it or not, a mere second before plunging his fangs into the man's corded neck.

He barely gave himself a taste before dropping his victim at his feet. The man curled into a fetal position inside the tiny cup of the 'nest, sobbing aloud. He winced. *I hate it when they do that.*

He wanted more, of course, but knew he couldn't take another draught without the risk of infecting him. He could always simply snap his neck when he was finished, but Raven wasn't a fan of cold-blooded murder, no matter how much some might think men like this pirate deserved such a fate. Once they were incapacitated, he simply couldn't justify killing them any more than he could justify making them what *he* was.

Some sixty feet below he could see more pirates scurrying about, firing their strange weapons, and screaming to one another as their intended victims began to fight back. The air filled with arrows and a couple of the pirates were smashed down where they stood.

He spotted Val leaping between the ships, a prodigious jump for a mortal, and trading blows with a pirate for a brief second before she cut him down. She was damn good with that sword, he noted, but that only made sense. There was no such thing as an unskilled TAU operative. Psi powers were all well and good, but sometimes their job came down to sheer brute force, blade against blade. As far as he knew no TAU agent had ever been bested by a single native warrior on *any* of the client worlds.

Then he saw her beset by two pirates at once and nearly jumped to her defense, only to discover in short order that she didn't really need his help at all. She circled to the left of the one in the lead, forcing him to step into his comrade's way, and handily skewered him the moment his attention wavered.

The second pirate offered even less of a challenge than the first. In less than an eye-blink she was stepping over their bodies to engage another. She skipped to the side, evading the man's initial lunge, then whipped her trailing foot up into his face. His head bounced from the deck as she strode forward and, with a casual sweep of an invisible hand, used telekinesis to toss another pirate over the side from fifteen feet away.

He hesitated longer, admiring, but could hesitate no longer as he saw a pair of men stealthily moving up on her. He vaulted the side of the

crow's nest and willed himself toward them. This short flight was not beyond him, and he alighted without a sound on the deck behind them.

He surged into the space between them, arms shooting out and fingers like steel spikes embedding themselves in their clothing and flesh. He gave a sudden yank and smashed them into one another with bone-crushing force. They bounced away from him and each other, shattered and bleeding, as he made it to Val's side in a single, ground-eating leap.

The men would live, but not comfortably. *That* notion didn't trouble his conscience in the least.

She turned and thrust reflexively, but he leaned away from the point and slapped the rapier down. "Watch where you're sticking that thing," he said with a grin, then swept the deck with his gaze. "Looks like that pretty much took care of them."

"Maybe," she murmured, frowning at the carnage around them. "I sure the hell hope so."

## Chapter Nine

Despite the fact that a concerted sweep revealed no living pirates, Val couldn't shake the feeling that they were missing something. All they could find were bodies. At least all the pirates were either dead or disabled, yet, thankfully, most of their own crew was alive and mostly uninjured. By all reports, their friend Goban had given a good accounting of himself aboard their ship—and even Bryon had turned out to be more effective a fighter than anyone had expected. The pirates asked no quarter and gave none. Val was just glad the butcher's bill wasn't higher on their end.

The purpose behind their attack, and how they were able to creep up so close without being detected, remained a mystery. Raven murmured something about a theory, but refused to elaborate when she pressed him for details. "I'd just as soon have some sort of verification before I say anything more."

He ignored her icy glare and continued poking around the corsair vessel. "I smell a warlock," he muttered, glancing around what they'd assumed to be the Captain's cabin. Expensive rugs littered the floor, and inside they found the only real bed aboard the ship.

Goban stood in the cabin doorway, shaking his head. "I didn't see one."

"You weren't supposed to. I do ask—where's the Captain? I'd be willing to guarantee that the Captain and the warlock I'm sensing are one and the same."

"A warlock pirate? There's a scary thought." The watchman fingered the hilt of his sword. "Makes too much sense though," he added, scratching his three-day-old beard growth. "So where is he?"

“Not *he*. Recognize that scent?” Raven asked Val, who sniffed experimentally.

She nodded. “Very familiar. Spicy, but not too heavy. What is it?”

“The perfume of choice of the woman who greeted you on your way into town.”

Val took another deep sniff. “I didn’t smell it then.”

“You didn’t smell it now until I pointed it out. You don’t have my senses. To me it’s as though she bathed in the stuff.”

“That would be an interesting coincidence, wouldn’t it?” she asked him and received only a shrug in response. He was being rather closed-mouthed, to the point it was starting to piss her off. “Do you think she was after us in particular?”

He nodded curtly. “Quite likely.” He began to cast about the room with his gaze, then reached up and plucked something she couldn’t see from the air. He repeated this a few more times, and then appeared to weave something invisible between his outstretched hands.

Magic. She shivered. There was something deadly enticing about the magical arts—though her own gifts were unique and powerful in their own right. But magic—she’d always been curious, but never had the opportunity to learn anything about it. TAU recruited her straight out of college on Earth, just a backwoods bayou gal from Louisiana with a strain of the meta-bug that turned on the switches in her brain.

She wasn’t even particularly powerful as a metapsi. Her strongest talent was her telekinesis—known commonly as TK or ‘Teek’—but she had a smattering of telepathic, empathic, and precognitive talents as well. They were occasionally useful, but involved a lot more ethical considerations than simply smashing someone in the face with a telekinetic fist.

She was a powerful Teek, but it was an exhausting discipline. Physically lifting and throwing an average-sized man had left her pulse pounding and tiny lights going off in the corner of her eyes. She’d damn near overdid it on that one. *One or the other, Val—maintaining a inertial shield or throwing pirates around. You can’t do both at the same time.*

She came back to the present to realize Raven was staring at her, and he'd said something. "Sorry. What was that?"

"This is no time to be woolgathering," Raven told Val with narrow eyes. "Be ready and observe."

"Huh?"

He tossed the spell out, watching through magesight as the first arm of the spell reached out and swept the room. Another strand reached out of thin air and tried to brush it aside. Then his spell reached out with its second arm, spearing directly for the point from which the opposing thread had originated.

A column of white light shot from the floor to the ceiling—a blinding flash he alone out of his whole party could see—and, swathed in a swirl of what looked like white smoke, a human figure appeared in their midst.

*That*, everyone could see. Before the figure—the woman—could move, Val had her rapier resting comfortably on her shoulder, the point just barely pricking the side of her neck. "Wouldn't try anything, witch."

"Warlock," Raven growled. "They call them warlocks."

"Males and females?"

"The word our translators turn into 'warlock' is a word that simply means 'traitor' in Church Low Tongue."

She shrugged. "Not that I care."

He nearly sighed. He found languages pretty fascinating—he no longer relied on the translator implant to communicate with the natives here...he'd learned another important thing about being a vampire. Vampires learned fast. After over a hundred years roaming his own Earth, and nearly another hundred leaping from universe to universe, he now knew seventy Earth languages and sixteen the natives of his Earth would never recognize at all. "Being an agent is more than just roughing up the bad guys," he said, leaning close and whispering in her ear.

Her eyes shot sparks at him. "I know that," she whispered back. "And I resent—"

“I see you two are still getting along famously,” the mysterious out-world woman remarked with remarkable aplomb for someone literally millimeters away from death.

“Do you *want* to die?” Val asked her incredulously, more fascinated by the woman’s attitude than angry at her for it.

That provoked a grin. “Not particularly. But you’re not going to kill me.”

“And why not?” Val asked her, twisting the blade slightly, feeling the blade bite barely into the woman’s neck.

“Because I know things you don’t.” Her smile bordered on mocking, but fell just short of it. Not that it bothered Val. She’d developed thick skin working with her training agent, one of the most abrasive human beings she’d ever had the pleasure to meet.

Raven laughed aloud. “You’re a bold creature, aren’t you?” Then, moving so fast he was barely a blur, he bypassed Val and stopped mere centimeters away from the woman. “I usually find that intriguing in a woman, but, in your case, it’s tedious. What’s your name?”

The woman stiffened. Val’s gaze flicked between them, unable to shake the feeling that there was another conversation entirely going on beneath the surface of their exchange. And she found she didn’t like it. It wasn’t overtly sexual, but there was a certain quality that lent itself that sort of mystique. The woman’s breasts heaved and her eyes fell upon Raven like two neutron stars—gravity wells that drew his gaze inexorably into her own.

They were both magi, so they shared something Val herself could never understand.

And, at that moment, she hated the woman with pure white passion.

She was jealous, she realized, and that realization nearly made her laugh. Why should she be jealous? She and Raven had shared nothing but a kiss, and even that he’d taken as an excuse to berate her—or question her motives, at least. This woman had tried to kill him, but maybe he was one of those who found that sort of thing...enticing. She knew that many men did, for some inexplicable reason. The few days

they'd spent together had really told her nothing about the man who lived within that ageless teenage exterior.

His spirit was often as cold as the vampire flesh that housed it, yet she had felt some sort of heat and passion rising from him as well. He remained an enigma, for all intents and purposes, and yet, without even seeming to make the attempt, he had somehow seduced her into an attraction she hadn't even recognized before it had come upon her.

She needed this aggravation like she needed a sledgehammer upside her head.

"Your name, woman," Raven hissed through clenched teeth. He'd nearly run out of patience with this one—she found the act of defying him entirely too amusing for his comfort. She was right, in one respect—he had no real intention of killing her. But he wanted to know what she did, and she wasn't about to give up that information freely.

Not for the first time he wished he had some of the mental powers of his progenitor, or even a fraction thereof. But the psychic gifts granted to Renee Fontaine were not his. Val had a measure of them, of course, but a glance in her direction spoke volumes—if he allowed her a few moments alone with their prisoner, he'd be lucky if she wasn't returned in this world's equivalent of a body bag. The blonde TAU agent's eyes were focused on the other woman's face like twin laser cannons armed and ready to fire. The hand holding the sword at the woman's throat whitened with the strength of her grip.

The cabin fairly stank of animosity and sheer unadulterated jealousy. *What the hell?*

He despaired of ever understanding the 'gentler' sex. Had he been an ordinary man, the look Val was giving their prisoner might have frozen the blood in his veins. If she didn't want her dead, he knew nothing of women at all.

"I'll have your name, and the name of whom you work for," he insisted, reaching out and wrapping ice-cold fingers around the woman's pale throat. Nails that glittered like mother-of-pearl dug into her smooth skin as he dragged her away from the edge of Val's blade.

This earned him a dark look from Val, which he ignored. Just as he ignored the painstakingly crafted look of boredom on their captive's beautiful face. He could read the tint of fear hiding behind the jade lenses of her eyes.

She attempted a smile and he squeezed his fingers together just slightly, cutting off most of the air flowing to her lungs. "Maybe you're right," he said. "Maybe I don't want to kill you. But there's nothing stopping me from making you *wish* I was going to."

Despite all the legends surrounding Raven, it wasn't until this exact moment that Val saw even a glimmer of the deadly predator hidden beneath the innocuous exterior. *This* was the creature that had so cowed the early vampires of Earth—the one who struck terror into anyone even considering an existence as a rogue outside the rules he himself had designed.

The cold-blooded killer. The monster who hunted monsters. He turned his suddenly burning gaze on her and she flinched back. "What the fuck use is a psi," he asked, "if you can't ream what we want out of her mind?"

"I'm not that powerful a telepath," she replied in much the same tone. "And she's adept at shielding—more than any non-psi has any business being."

"Excuses," he snarled, lifting the woman from the deck and suspending her at arm's length. "I'm getting really sick of this woman. I'm sick of her interference, I'm sick of her attitude, and, frankly, I'm sick of her face."

"So just kill her," Goban murmured from the doorway, his weathered face a mask of studied disinterest. "If she's out of our hair, what does it matter if we don't know where she came from?"

"You've got a point," the vampire said slowly, uttering the words ever so slowly around his vicious and feral grin. "I'm beginning to see it that way myself. If she won't talk, she's useless to us."

For her part, Val believed this threat to be a real one. His anger was so real it had literally dropped the temperature in the cabin by at least a

few degrees. He radiated cold like an angry mortal might radiate heat, the product of an icy fury so deep that it might've been drawn from the northern ice-flows themselves.

“All right, damn you!” the woman gasped finally, after a few seconds of tearing at his wrist with both her hands to no avail. His grasp was far too strong to be broken by the likes of her.

He tossed her aside like a rag doll to lay panting and wheezing against the nearby bulkhead. “So talk,” he said coolly. “Before I decide you’re better off as fodder than as a living prisoner.”

Val found herself wondering how long it had been since the vampire had fed. Long enough, obviously, that whatever reticence he'd felt about revealing his nature to the others had begun to fade. Some of his apparent anger might well have been the by-product of vampiric hunger and, all things being equal, she much preferred the notion of him dining on the dark-haired bitch than anyone else in their party.

“I’d do what he says,” she said warningly. Her mouth twisted into an evil smile. “He’s looking a little thirsty.”

## Chapter Ten

The woman gasped for a steady breath, finally, and groaned as she sat up, pressing her back against the bulkhead. "I'm after the weapons."

"What weapons?" Goban asked, frowning for a moment before revelation struck. "We don't have them."

Raven threw him a look full of dark fire. "She didn't need to know that."

Goban winced, looking abashed. "Yeah, you're right. Maybe you should question her."

"Maybe so," the vampire grunted. He strode over, crouched in front of her. "What did you want with the weapons?"

"To return them to those who'd purchased them," she said, shifting slightly. "I think you broke something."

"Too bad. What does it matter to *you* who has them?"

"We made a deal. We honor our obligations."

"Who's *we*?"

"I'm not going to tell you that," she replied, shaking her head. "Even if you beat me to death."

Raven's smile was thin enough to shave ice. "Not necessary." He reached up, grabbed a specific spell in his 'web, and hurled it into her as she sat unsuspecting. At the last second her eyes snapped wide and she cried out, but by then it was too late. "That should keep you from getting any ideas."

"What did you do to her?" Val asked, moving up next to him and staring down at the suddenly stricken woman with an oddly concerned look in her eye.

“I warlocked her,” he replied, turning away. “Put her in the hold, Goban. Let her stew there a while, see if she feels more cooperative once she’s had a chance to think things over.”

The watchman nodded, looking a little puzzled. His use of the word ‘warlock’ in that context had thrown the man. “What did you do?”

“I blocked her magic,” the vampire replied. “I think she has a fractured rib or two as well, which should keep her from doing anything too energetic.” He glanced over his shoulder at Val. “Coming?” Without waiting for a reply, he strode from the cabin, not bothering to see if she followed. If she did, they’d continue the conversation the attack had interrupted. If she didn’t, well, there would be another opportunity soon enough.

He wasn’t sure he really gave a damn right now. His mind was churning with other things—like who or what the woman represented. He found himself wishing he could ask questions of the leaders of the rebellion. How had they contacted these people, and what deal had they made?

The question burned inside him as fiercely as lust had burned within him when Val had pressed her lips against his.

He shoved away the comparison angrily and strode across the gently shifting deck, stepping out onto the bow and staring down at the dark water pooling below.

Val stared after him, mouth hanging open for a moment, then met the woman’s eyes as Goban helped her to her feet. “You never told us your name.”

Her full lips stretched into the first real smile Val had seen out of her. “It’s Cassie—short for Cassiopeia.” She allowed the watchman to assist her to the door and halted, turning to gaze back at Val for a short moment before speaking. Her face was a mask of pain. “If you think you can awaken love within him, think again. He’s a dead thing—his heart a shriveled mass. He’s walked in the shadows too long to allow that light to shine on him.”

Goban half-carried her out onto the deck, snarling something into her ear Val couldn’t catch. *What does she know?* Val thought to herself,

stepping out onto the deck once they'd gone, her gaze scanning the deck until she spotted the single dark shape on the bow, coat flapping against his legs like the wings of a dying bat.

She approached Raven slowly—she might not have been able to sense his mood empathically, but he fairly radiated tension simply by the way he stood, like he was carved out of wood and placed there by the shipwrights who'd built this vessel.

*Has his heart withered?* She remembered the feel of his hands on her arms as he'd pushed her away after she'd kissed him. There had been passion there; he'd felt something when she'd kissed him, whether he wanted to admit it to himself or not.

He didn't turn to look at her as she walked up on him. "When I was first turned, I was afraid of becoming a monster. The one who turned me seemed callous, uncaring, though honorable in his own way. The vampire he made me to fight was a madwoman, a dark queen in truth. But before I'd been a year dead I made a deal with a devil, and made vampires at his whim.

"I became a monster's monster. I secretly hunted those I created at his command, and destroyed them. I took their lives and then killed them. I'm not even sure I regretted a bit of it. I was Raven, the hunter of the night, death to the undead. I was the vampire bogeyman. I was the thing that the fearsome feared."

He uttered a bitter laugh, his voice wafting over the deck of the ship as if abandoning any concern for keeping his secret. "I don't even know how many I destroyed. I lost count. One thing an uneducated vampire does is propagate...making more vampires comes as naturally to us as breathing does to the living. We feed and spread the virus.

"I was only fifteen when I was turned. I was a kid. I played a game that featured vampires as the protagonists—I thought I knew what it would be like. But I didn't. Not really. I didn't know what it would be like to watch the years roll on, to see the world changing as I remained the same.

“These hands...” He raised them as if in illustration, so pale they seemed to be glowing as he held them aloft. “...should be stained scarlet. But they’re not.

“I thought I was in love once. Briefly. She was a lycanthrope, the child of a powerful mob family who’d repudiated everything her family stood for. She saw me for what I was, finally, and walked away without looking back. She knew a damned thing when she saw one.”

Even as fitful as her sensitive psi talents were, she could still sense him there like a black hole in her awareness, radiating pain she could not feel. She could hear it in his voice and it left bleeding wounds in her psyche nonetheless. “If you were truly damned, it wouldn’t tear you up like this.” She spoke softly, knowing he’d hear her.

“The woman told you her name,” he said out of the blue. “I heard her.” He whirled, leaping the distance between them and landing silently in front of her. “I wish she was right,” he said. “I wish my heart was a withered thing, unable to feel. But it’s not. She’s wrong. But she’s right about one thing—I’ve walked in the shadows a long time. Maybe too long.”

“There’s no such thing as *too long*,” Val whispered, reaching out, grabbing him by the back of his head and pulling his face to hers. Their lips met, tentatively at first, but with growing heat as she felt a tingle run through her. Her legs threatened to buckle, but his arm, strong as stone, wrapped across her back and held her to him.

She fell back a moment later, gasping for air. “Whew. No one ever warned me what kissing a vampire would be like.”

He gave her a thin smile, eyes dancing with something approaching humor. “When you don’t need to breathe, it makes a difference.”

“No kidding.” She sighed heavily, leaning against the iron strength of his embrace. “But that’s not all, is it? When you’re kissing me, that’s *all* you’re doing. Every bit of what you are goes into it.”

He gave her an odd look, then shrugged. “I suppose that’s true. What of it?”

“Do you realize how rare that is?”

“No, I didn’t. Why—how rare is it?”

She had to laugh. She couldn't help herself. "One of my senseis had a theory about something he called 'the hundred percent rule.' We mere mortals have to expend some of our energy on things like breathing, and keeping our hearts beating. Subconsciously, perhaps, but it still subtracts something from the whole. No matter what we do, we can only put so much into it because of all the other things we must expend energy on. When I'm kissing you, I have to think about breathing, and keeping my legs from collapsing under me, and, at some level, how we're going to succeed at this mission. But not you. When you're kissing me, everything you are is about kissing me. That's just amazing."

He shrugged. "I'm still not sure this is wise."

"Wisdom be damned." She met his eyes squarely. "Sometimes being human is about thinking with your heart, not your head. And, since your heart isn't really a withered up thing in your chest, try to listen to it from time to time."

"Hmm. I'll consider it. In the meantime, maybe we'd best get back to thinking about the mission. I need to get rid of those weapons. Do you know how to sail, by any chance?"

"Not part of my training," she replied. "Why?"

He nodded toward the vessel sitting some yards off the starboard side. "If you did, we could take that ship and have a little privacy."

"Probably not a good idea. Admittedly, I don't know a lot about it, but I'd guess we're going to be heading into some heavy weather soon."

He nodded. "Could be. I can handle that...at least at night. We're still a few weeks from the North Sea, but we're also coming up on the time of year when the storms start getting worse."

"I have a really weird question."

"Only one? Shoot."

"Where the hell are we? I mean in relation to the places I know on Earth Prime. Everything's different here."

"No kidding? I hadn't noticed."

She punched him lightly in the chest. It was a bit like hitting a marble statue. "Ow."

"Don't do that." He lifted a brow sardonically.

“I’m serious.”

“Right now we’re off the coast of China.”

“No. You’re kidding.”

He shook his head. “I know it’s weird. But the tribes of man didn’t migrate the same way on this world... We’re hitting the North Pole via the coast of what would be Russia.”

“How are we going to get this thing through the ice once we get up there?”

He smiled enigmatically. “Leave that to me.”

“Like I have a choice?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Raven!” The voice jerked his head around and his eyes narrowed as Bryon came strolling up the deck toward them, radiating something Val couldn’t quite place. It felt a little like fear, but also carried with it an undercurrent of—was it hope?

She wasn’t certain.

He was nearly vibrating with it, she noted. Raven met her eyes for a quick second before releasing her waist and moving to intercept. “What can I do for you, Bryon?”

“You can answer some questions.” The words came out in a rush. “I need to know.”

“Need to know what?”

“Are you the Redeemer?”

“What? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You bear the signs. ‘And he shall shun the light of day, and his power shall fall upon the night like a web of life.’”

“Coincidence,” the vampire grunted. “I don’t believe in prophesy.”

Val wanted to interject something here, but thought it better to keep her mouth shut. She had no choice but to believe in prophesy—she’d met her share of precogs, and knew all too well how accurate some of their visions could be. The fact that Bryon had suddenly connected Raven to the third aspect of their Three-Fold God gave her pause, but she was fairly certain she didn’t want to get involved in *this* particular discussion.

“He shall come from another world, and have been called both hero and monster by his own people.”

*Now this is just getting creepy*, she thought, as a chill ran down her spine. What if Raven *was* the Redeemer of prophesy? What did that mean, exactly? She set a mental note to herself to discuss the whole thing with Bryon at a later date. She needed to know more about all this before coming to any conclusions about it.

## Chapter Eleven

Two nights later Raven stepped out of a transit tube onto the unfamiliar deck of the Church's warship, cloaking himself in shadow as he did. He could sense living beings moving about the ship, one nearly close enough to touch. He drifted closer, recognizing the man as a Knight of the Church, one of the magically enhanced warriors that served as part of a Deacon's honor guard.

The man strode past him, completely unaware of his presence. Raven breathed a silent sigh of relief, only then realizing how concerned he'd been that their enhancements would allow them to detect him. He shouldn't have worried. His vampiric nature had granted him partial immunity to magical attack, and his own particular gift had given him the ability to pass undetected even amongst his own kind.

He heard the rapid approach of footsteps as another knight burst through a hatch and emerged on deck, naked steel gleaming in his hand. "Deacon Shalz has detected an intruder!" he cried out.

*Then again...* Raven slipped past them as they criss-crossed the deck, looking into every shadowed alcove. *He must have warded the ship and sensed my arrival via transit tube,* Raven realized, feeling slightly foolish. He should have jumped in above the ship and dropped to the deck rather than arrogantly assuming he could simply stroll into their midst unnoticed.

Either way he thought it unlikely he'd have to fight his way out. Once he'd found the weapons, he could take care of them and vanish without the Churchmen ever knowing who or what walked among them.

His first step, of course, was locating the weapons. Ordinarily he'd just send out a couple of spells programmed to seek them out, but he

knew now that activating any sort of magic on this ship would be a mistake, so he was reduced to doing it the hard way.

The hatch leading into the hold was obvious enough, but the catch was finding a way to open it and slip inside without alerting the knights. *That*, he thought with a wry grin, *requires a distraction.*

He made his way to the bow and drew one of his pistols. He removed the magazine and popped free a single bullet, which he then pried open with his thumbnail. He poured the powder into his cupped hand and looked around. The trick at this point was in leading them *away* from where he was trying to go—the cargo hatch lay in the middle forward section of the main deck. A fire on the bow would lead them past his access point, but would also risk drawing the attention of those currently ensconced in the rear cabins.

Clenching his fist around the gunpowder, he raced to the stern, blowing by the two knights as they stumbled around trying to find something they had no chance of locating in the first place. He vaulted to the poop deck and, from there, hurled himself upward into the rigging where he scampered like a monkey to the furled mizzen sail. Then he poured out the powder in a long line along the furl.

Shaking off the last vestiges of the powder, he reached down to his belt and extracted a thin silver tube about the circumference of a pencil and as long as his pinkie. He thumbed one end, activating a five-centimeter laser beam from the other that he then used to touch off the powder.

He scrambled along the rigging as the flames spread behind him, dropping back down to the deck as near to the cargo hatch as he could get. He waited for the inevitable cry, which didn't take long. There were few things more deadly at sea than a fire.

The knights, seeing the blaze flaring along the furled sail, took up the warning. In seconds, the deck was swarming with panicked sailors.

He took advantage of the distraction to roll open the booby hatch and drop into the hold. The darkness within didn't faze him in the least; his vampiric senses allowed him to see in the gloom as well as a mortal might under an overcast sky.

He saw a number of chests strewn about the cabin and it took him a few minutes to locate the right one. Once he had, it was a simple matter to draw upon a nearby mana strand and seal the chest away. He gathered up the newly created dimension pocket, tied it to him with another thread, and grabbed a third to facilitate an escape.

He cast one end out, aiming it toward his own vessel, and willed the near end to open just as he heard someone drop through the hatch behind him. He didn't even bother to look. He knew that as soon as he started casting they'd be on him, and he didn't really have any interest in sticking around to play.

He leaped through the transit tube, landing hard on the pitching deck of his target vessel, whirling in place to grab the end from which he'd just emerged before anyone could follow. He sealed and tossed it away, watching it evaporate into mist as its energy dissipated into the night sky.

Only then did he breathe a sigh of relief. That had been a lot closer than he'd wanted. Had it been a Deacon who'd dropped into the hold, he might've had a real fight on his hands before he could make it out. Being highly resistant to magic didn't make one immune to it. He'd tensed up at the last second, expecting to feel a bolt of lightning or fire raking his back as he'd leaped away.

He'd emerged onto the *Rakehell's* main deck to find it empty except for a certain furry hulk who'd been making himself scarce for the past several days. Cerberus *really* didn't like ocean travel, and spent most of his time in the hold guarding Raven's crate. Most the crew had never even caught a glimpse of him—his powerful psychic gifts enabling him to cloud their minds whenever he chose. A good part of the time he slipped by so craftily Raven himself forgot he was aboard the ship at all.

They'd been fortunate enough to find a sheltered alcove in which to anchor within a couple miles of the Church vessel, well within Raven's striking range. The others didn't have any idea how close they'd come to the other ship and that was just the way Raven and Val had wanted it. Now all she had to do was come up with a way to prevent them from

setting sail too early the next morning and, hopefully, the church ship would be well on its way before the *Rakehell* lifted anchor.

*Unless they decide to try and track down the cause of this night's misfortune*, a niggling little voice whispered in his head. He winced. That would be bad, especially during the day when he had no means to help defend the ship.

Some of his fears must have shown on his face as he climbed up onto the poop deck and sat down, coiling his legs beneath him—Cerberus vaulted up beside him and nuzzled his hand until he scratched the beast behind the ears. “I know you’ll help protect the ship, buddy. But these guys are pretty tough. I’m not sure there’s any way they could be fought off without magic.”

A sudden creak drew his eyes to the ladder as Bryon pulled himself up into view. “Some people say talking to animals is a sign of madness.”

“And if they answer back?” Raven asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

“That’s a sign of something else entirely.”

Raven sighed and shook his head. “I’m not the person you’re looking for, Bryon. Don’t you think I’d know it if I were?”

“Not according to our Scripture. The Book of the Redeemer was banned by the Church over a century ago—the idea that its power would be supplanted by another concept of the Deity didn’t sit well with the hierarchy. I’ve spent my whole life studying the prophecies, and I’m not deluding myself—or you—when I say that you seem to fit the role.”

“I’m not sure how that’s even possible. Doesn’t the whole concept of a three-fold deity suggest a single god with three different faces?”

“That’s the reading the Church would prefer, but that’s not the way the Book of the Redeemer reads. You—excuse me, the Redeemer—is supposed to vanquish the two other Gods in epic battle. That’s rather difficult to do if you’re all part of the same deity, wouldn’t you say?” Bryon leaned closer, whispering in an almost conspiratorial tone. “Some of the passages actually suggest that the first two books were fakes—not prophesy at all, but, instead, dictated by two beings who wanted us to *believe* they were gods.”

Leaving that intriguing bit of information hanging in the air, Bryon turned and climbed back onto the ladder. “Something to think about,” he said. “Goodnight, Raven.”

Raven leaned back and stared up at the stars, considering. He was beginning to see in this whole thing a familiar theme manifesting itself. The immortals on his own Earth had also once pretended to be gods. It wasn’t inconceivable that two of *them* had found a home here and set themselves up a nice little racket by manipulating the locals.

Of course, that begged the question—what was *his* role in all of this? And despite his statements to the contrary, he knew full well that some mortals possessed precognitive abilities. One thing was certain—this wasn’t something he could chew on himself and expect to figure out. Nor was talking to the dog going to do him any good. He needed to break down and discuss his suspicions with Val.

He gave Cerberus a final scritch and sought her out in her cabin.



She looked particularly alluring in her thin nightgown, he decided, as she opened the door to her cabin and let him in, rubbing sleep from her eyes. Her blonde hair was a muddled mass spilling over her shoulders, and her pale face pink on one side from where it had been pressed against her pillow.

Even so, her sharp prettiness was like a hammer blow to his sensibilities. “It is done,” he told her.

She nodded sleepily, then, as she came more to her senses, turned a questioning gaze on him. “What did you do with them?”

“I’ve put them somewhere safe,” he replied. “We can figure out what to do with them later.”

She didn’t look particularly pleased with this answer—she’d obviously expected him to destroy them outright, since sending them back to Starhaven wasn’t currently feasible. He watched as she crossed the small cabin to the trunk in one corner, lifting the lid and popping something into her mouth. He smiled, realizing what it had been.

Since modern oral care methods were impractical on some of the worlds their agents visited, the agencies had developed small, easily hidden lozenges that cleaned the mouth and freshened the breath. The fact that she'd sacrificed her dwindling supplies led him to believe she expected this visit to involve more than shop talk.

Not that he was opposed to the idea of kissing her again, but he was not yet ready for anything more daring. Being dead, and over two hundred years old, he was no longer driven by hormones—though he could feel attraction, and even lust, he had no sex drive per se. His feelings for her were growing, but he'd learned the hard way that, for many, sex didn't necessarily equal love. He had no interest in lust for its own sake, and had reason to be wary of love. He wanted nothing more than to take his time, to learn what it was, exactly, that was developing between them.

He'd had his heart figuratively torn out of his chest once before—he had no interest in repeating the experience.

As they cuddled on the low divan against one bulkhead, he went over his plans for the next day. He immersed himself in the act of kissing her, and feeling her warm flesh flowing like water over his icy skin, but, the moment things grew too heated, he found a way to throw a distraction into the mix. No sex. Not yet.

Though, he admitted to himself, at least, his resolve was weakening with every day he spent with her.



As it turned out, Val didn't have to stall to postpone their leave-taking. One of the crewmen, spotting a small herd of deer in the woods off the small cove, had talked the Captain into allowing them a few hours to acquire some game—their on-board stores were still fully stocked, but once they reached the Arctic Sea, they'd no longer be able to hunt for supplemental provisions.

Six men disappeared over the side into the small rowboat they'd already lowered, and rowed smartly to shore.

Val knew little about hunting, but surmised that the venture would take at least four to six hours. Now that Raven had caught up to the Church ship, they were in no particular hurry. As long as they managed to avoid the nasty winter storms that would be coming along within the next few weeks.

Raven didn't seem too troubled about them, but Val took note of the Captain's concern. He'd weighed the men's request for fresh meat against the calendar and had apparently decided that they could afford a short delay.

Which was fine with Val. Raven hadn't offered any particularly viable excuse for her to give to the Captain to delay their departure time.

Sometimes fate intervened, however, and she was quite happy that this turned out to be one of those times.

## Chapter Twelve

The rest of their journey northward turned out to be mostly uneventful, except for the brief excitement of the sighting of a pod of orcas off the port side as they were skirting the string of islands that, on her home Earth, would have been Japan.

Here, apparently, the islands were avoided as if they housed the very gates of hell. Or whatever similar underworld legend these people possessed. The sailors swore that they were home to a race of giant one-eyed cannibals and that no ordinary man who ever set foot there had been seen again.

Val kept her thoughts on the matter to herself, other than to veto the notion some of the crew had about setting rowing their prisoner ashore and leaving her there. The way she saw it, the bitch would keep until they were finished with their mission and had the time to deal with whatever secrets she held.

The ship had also been fortunate enough to dodge rough weather so far, for which Val remained quite thankful. She heard and gave thought to the crew's whispers as to how odd it was not to have ran across a heavy storm in this late season, but could not explain it herself.

As they began to encounter icebergs and long, wide ice flows, the Captain and crew's trepidation grew more apparent. One good strike by one of the icebergs would shatter the vessel into so many toothpicks.

Raven, when apprised of this one evening, simply smiled and shook his head. "I've protected the ship against such things," he said enigmatically, gaining himself a dark look from the Captain, who didn't entirely trust him. That came as no surprise.

“How?” asked Goban, who trusted him, at least to a certain point, but obviously wanted to know more.

“You wouldn’t understand it even if I explained it to you,” Raven answered back with a knowing smile. The ex-mercenary threw up his hands and stalked away.

“I trust you,” Bryon told him, quite unnecessarily. His attitude hadn’t fallen into worship, but it hadn’t missed it by much. The Governor’s son clearly couldn’t believe that the culmination of the prophesy his people had awaited would ever leave them vulnerable to such a mundane threat as an iceberg.

As the sea thickened and the ice flows grew more numerous, Val caught Raven doing something on the bow of the ship late one night, actually scrawling some elaborate pattern of interconnecting lines on the deck itself.

She watched in silence as he stood, raised his hands to the sky, and began to do something she could only describe as a dance, his hands weaving in the air as he moved.

The purpose of this mysterious ritual became clear the next morning when they emerged onto the deck at the cry of one of the sailors to find the ship encased in a brilliant sheath of red, suffusing the very air around them with warmth, but also rolling outward from it and burning away the surrounding ice with far more intense heat.

They sailed through the waters like this for nearly five days. On the sixth morning they woke to find the ship nestled against the ice, the bubble of invisible fire apparently drawn back to the ship itself. They were as warm as ever, but the reaching effect that melted the ice away had disappeared.

But their eyes were drawn past the bow of the ship, to the mountain of red-tinged ice some miles away, reaching boldly into the sky. The thing was all sharp planes and vaulted spires, clawing their way toward the heavens.

She still recognized it instantly for what it was, and fear warred with fascination within her breast. It was a starship, at least as large as

Earth's great mage ships. They all stood in the utter stillness, shocked into silence by the awesome sight.

"What *is* it?" murmured Goban by her side, in the quietest of tones, as if he was afraid that to question its existence would awaken it and seal his doom.

She faltered as she tried to come up with an explanation that would somehow fit into his worldview. "It's a kind of ship," she finally answered. "But a kind that sails between stars rather than the seas."

He stared at her, shocked beyond words. "What's it doing here?"

"Now *that* is the question, isn't it?"

"The legends say nothing about this," Bryon said.

She smiled at that. "Legend' is often just another word for a 'load of bullshit.' You know what we have to do, don't you?" she asked the two of them. "We have to make the trek across the ice to that thing, and try to find out what it is and what it's doing here."

Bryon nodded slowly, eyes suddenly filling with naked fear. With good reason, she decided. She was afraid as well, maybe as afraid as she'd ever been. "Shouldn't we wait for Raven to awaken?" he asked.

Val shook her head. "He'll catch up." She had the sudden feeling that they were running out of time, that they needed to reach it as soon as they could. She wasn't worried that the vampire wouldn't be able to make the journey alone.

The crew lowered them over the side, outfitted with the gear Raven had gathered before they'd left. The great beast Cerberus joined them, leaping without hesitation from the deck to the ice far below and waiting for them to descend with an obvious air of impatience.

He stood patiently as they fumbled their way through attaching the sled to him, his muzzle stretched into what she could only perceive as a patient doggy smile as they buckled the harnesses to his massive frame and loaded the sled with their equipment.

They'd only gone a mile or less before the daylight faded into twilight, then into nightfall. Goban and Bryon stopped in their tracks, staring at the sky with matching looks of terror spreading across their faces. She laughed gently and did her best to explain that they'd reached the top of

the world, where the winter sun only rose slightly above the horizon before sinking back into obscurity.

She was the only one not surprised when, out of the blowing ice mist, came a solitary figure, long coat swirling around his calves, black hat firmly in place. He wrapped an arm around Val and stared with her at the great mountain of icy alloy stretching into the sky. “You know what this means, don’t you?” he asked, clearly amused by something.

“No. What?”

“It means that if there are weapons aboard that craft, they rightfully belong to Goban and Bryon.”

“How so?”

“Right of salvage,” he answered casually.

She pulled herself out of his embrace and stared at him. “You expected this, didn’t you?”

“*This?* No. But something like it, sure. Most of the time legends are based on something, and the fact that these legends of this place specifically mention weapons...well, you get the point.”

She couldn’t argue with his logic. The agencies were not responsible for artifacts that preceded their very existence, which, she could only assume, this one did. Maybe she and Raven had made this journey possible, but whatever they found inside most definitely belonged to the natives. “You do realize that we can’t teach them how to use what we find.”

His answering glance told her very clearly how he felt about that dictum. He had no intention of following it, no matter what she had to say on the subject.

She sighed. “Fine. Do what you’re going to do anyway.”

“Thank you. I will.”

Even bundled against the cold as they were, the bitter winds began to slash through their clothing and drain their strength. Only Cerberus seemed unaffected.

Being immune to the cold himself—clearly quite comfortable in his normal garb—Raven performed some minor bit of magic that not only

shielded them from the cold, but also returned some of the energy they'd lost.

For his part, Bryon seemed to see this as just one more piece of evidence that the vampire was the savior he'd been awaiting. Goban thanked him gruffly, and Val herself rendered him a grateful smile as they trudged onward.

After several hours Raven called a halt and sent them to bed. When they arose, with the first peeking of a semblance of dawn, he was nowhere to be found, but as soon as darkness returned, so did he.

They pushed on.



It took them three days to make the trek, but, finally, they came to a halt at the base of the monolithic construct. They halted some hundred yards away, gazes caught by the sheer immensity of it. She'd been wrong to compare its size to that of a mage ship, for it dwarfed even those formidable constructs. It stood as tall as one of Earth's great skyscrapers—the Transworld Tower, for example—but massed as much as ten of them all jumbled together into a great edifice of crimson alloy.

“So where's the door?” she asked in hushed tones. Speaking too loudly seemed unwise for some reason, though she thought herself a bit silly for buying into it. Raven was the only one of the four of them who didn't seem awed to whispers by the damned thing.

“We're going to have to get through the ice to figure that out,” he replied, quirking one feathered brow at her and mocking her gently for her fear. As near as she could tell, the vampire wasn't afraid of anything.

Except maybe love.

“Can't you just throw one of your transit things in and let us go in that way?”

He gave her a curious look. “Yes, but I'm not sure that would be the wisest course. An actual entrance of some kind would give us access to whatever security system there is inside. I am fairly certain that to enter without first disabling something like that might be would be a grave mistake.”

*Vampires shouldn't use terms like 'grave mistake,'* she decided. It just didn't sound right. The argument, however, was sound. "Fine. Then I guess the ball's in your court."

He gave her another look, this one tinged with surprise. His face, she realized, was prone to more expression than she'd been led to believe vampires usually displayed. In many respects, he was among the most human of his breed. Whether this was deliberate, or simply an aspect of his personality, she couldn't begin to guess.

He motioned for them to step back and began to do his thing. In moments, water ran from the construct in growing rivulets, the thick layer of ice melting away at the touch of his magic. Some other effect forced the water to flow away from them, forming something of a moat as it ran in deep rivers around the sides and vanishing behind the massive vessel.

She hadn't ever wanted to feel awed by his power, but it was at times like these that she found she couldn't help it. She wasn't really frightened of him, but it was occasionally closer than she would have liked.

"There is a chance that the main door is buried beneath this sheet," he said, once he'd cleared away the ice. "But I have a feeling that there are multiple egress points."

On something that large there would almost have to be, Val thought. Perhaps a hangar bay door for shuttles or something similar, and multiple entrances for docking with space platforms and other vessels. Her only question was whether they'd be able to identify them. The ship's alien origins seemed obvious—it would be a mistake to consider it from a wholly human perspective.

"There." Raven pointed to a darkened indent some fifty feet above them. "That looks like a hatch to me."

She nodded. It did to her, as well. "I assume you can get us up there?"

"I can," he replied with a frown. "But I'm going to investigate it by myself before I do."

That made sense. If it reacted violently, he had a much better chance of avoiding or surviving the attack than any of them. It still chilled her to think of him putting himself in danger. He was fast, tough, and oh-so-dangerous, but he was not invulnerable.

“I’m afraid I can’t let you do that,” came a booming voice from somewhere behind them. Cerberus, whom they’d already released from the harnesses connecting him to the sled, growled menacingly. “Call off your dog if you do not wish it killed.”

They all turned to see a pair of particularly large human figures standing some fifty feet away. Both had flowing blond locks and the thick, sturdy frames of warriors. They were also dressed in such a way to indicate they had no reason to be particularly concerned with the cold, in rough-cut tanned leathers and matching fur coats hanging around their knees.

One wore a black eye-patch and a long salt-and-pepper beard. One bare fist held the haft of a wicked-looking spear, its butt resting on the ice, its broad, leaf-shaped blade pointing at the sky.

The other was clean-shaven, with a piercing, hawk-like gaze. Loosely in his right hand he held a sword that glittered oddly in the dim light. His other arm, bent across his chest, ended in not a hand, but a spiked ball like the business end of a brutal mace.

“You meddle in things that are none of your business,” said the bearded one, his voice the same as the one that had spoken originally. “If you leave now, we will not be forced to kill you.”

“We will decide what is and is not our business,” Raven replied, his voice ringing out in tones as chill as the arctic night in which they stood. “You do not frighten us.”

*Speak for yourself*, Val thought, but she said nothing aloud. They frightened her very much. She had an inkling of who they were, and the notion of going up against immortals—particularly with the reputation of these two—scared the crap out of her.

As the frigid wind whipped around them one questioning thought rang like a clarion call in her mind: *What in the hell are Odin and Tyr doing here?*

## Chapter Thirteen

The vampire's words hung in the frigid air as the two immortals seemed to size him up. He had an air of competence and confidence they clearly couldn't get a handle on, and neither seemed to like it much. They had to know he was a mage, but Val would have bet dollars to donuts they didn't know what else he was. This world's ignorance about vampires, and the fact that they'd probably been here for centuries, suggested they knew next to nothing about the undead.

That gave Raven something of an advantage, but she wasn't sure how much it would be against a couple of immortals. She knew the legends about them—their history on her Earth, and how they varied considerably in terms of power and capabilities. Something told her that this pair wasn't going to be a pushover, no matter how you sliced it. There was something about that spear, and the sword in Tyr's hand, that send a chill of familiarity through her. It was whispered that the only thing that could kill an immortal was something known as *high crystal*, and that it looked like colored glass to the unschooled.

There was little doubt in her mind that the weapons the immortals carried were crystal. A wave of fear crashed over her as she thought of Raven going up against them. The smartest thing to do would be to turn and walk away, but she'd learned enough about the vampire in the last several weeks to know damn well he'd never do it.

"The Defender and the Avenger," murmured Bryon, his eyes wide and fearful.

*Well, that explains that,* she thought. These two were the other 'faces' of the Three-Fold God, the ones Raven—assuming he was indeed the so-called 'Redeemer'—would be called upon to defeat. The fact that the

prophesy existed was not enough to assure his victory—just that he *might* win. Like all prophesy, it hinged on possibilities rather than sureties.

One thing she knew for sure was that if Raven fell, they'd never make it back to the ship. They'd die out here without a doubt. And, even if they did, the ship would never be able to plow its way back through the ice.

"Only the young could be so foolhardy," drawled the one-eyed immortal, hefting the spear and setting it on one shoulder as he cocked his head at Raven. "You may be a powerful mage, but you are only a child."

"Appearances deceive," Raven answered smartly, lips curving into a malicious smile.

Raven stepped forward, reaching into his coat and drawing his rapier. It was an insignificant weapon against such as these, but no less ineffective than his pistols would be. In the end, he knew, it would be his vampiric powers and magical skills that carried the battle, if anything. He too recognized these beings from the myths of Earth, and knew he faced the fight of his life.

"Kill him," the one-eyed immortal told Tyr in his booming voice. The other shook his head in what looked like sadness rather than denial. He set his feet on the ice and charged.

"No!" Raven yelled at Cerberus, who moved to intercept. He did not doubt the dog's bravery, but knew that the beast would be no match for the immortal.

Raven glided forward, putting as much distance as possible between him and the others before Tyr reached him. He allowed none of his preternatural nature to show through, deliberately moving as if he were just a mortal youth—his greatest chance of success laid in their underestimation of him. The fact that he was easily two feet shorter than the immortal went a long way toward fostering such an underestimation.

The weapon Tyr held was a broadsword, perfectly capable of shearing through his rapier as if it didn't even exist. Tyr raised it over one

shoulder as he barreled toward him, his expression an odd mingling of regret and cocksure certainty.

The look in his eyes told Raven that the man wouldn't play with him—all business. He'd try to cut him down in the first few swings. There was a certain nobility in that, and in that moment, he decided that he'd be honored to show him the same courtesy.

He also recognized the material of the weapon for what it was, and understood instantly that his best hope of defeating both immortals would be in gaining that weapon for himself.

The sword swept up, pulsing with an inner light as if it were a living thing. Raven waited for it to begin its descent, a diagonal slash coming from his left with enough force to split a normal human from neck to hip. Raven ducked under it, using only a fraction of his speed, and drove the point of his rapier through the immortal's instep and deep into the ice.

Tyr screamed. Raven straightened, using every ounce of strength in his legs to bring him up, closed fist slamming into the nerve cluster located between the forearm and the elbow. The impact flung Tyr's fingers open and sent the pommel of his sword arcing skyward as the vampire pivoted his hips and drove his knee into the immortal's calf muscle.

Thus deprived of any semblance of balance, Tyr rocked backward, falling away from the weapon as Raven skated sideways and snatched it out of the air. He turned his slide into a pirouette, one foot leaving the ice as his whole body spun, the mono-molecular edge of the crystal sword slicing the air with machine-like precision before connecting with the side of the falling immortal's neck.

The body hit the ice, its neck a fountain of crimson, as the head bounced in a different direction entirely.

Raven allowed himself the briefest second of regret as the immortal's head skidded to a halt some fifteen feet away. He hadn't really wanted to kill Tyr, but knew he had no choice in the matter. He'd learned a long time ago that when someone intended to kill him, he could only respond accordingly.

Odin stared, jaw agape, as Raven lifted the weapon in a kind of salute. He felt fairly certain he hadn't really given anything away in that exchange, other than the fact that he might be a little more than he seemed. No doubt existed that he hadn't revealed even a fraction of his true nature.

As Odin thrust a hand outward, he was ready, already switching his vision to magesight. The strand slashed toward him, transforming into a bolt of lightning as Raven brought up a strand of his own to parry. Both threads leaped upward to shatter into a thousand points of light against the hull of the starship.

Then, much to his surprise, Odin snatched another passing thread and hurled it toward the ship, vanishing into its rear end in an instant.

He hadn't expected the immortal to run. *But Odin was known for his wisdom, was he not?* The thought carried a bitter taste and he turned away from the corpse at his feet and looked to Val. The only one of the three mortals who didn't look shocked was Bryon, who was smiling and nodding as if all his suspicions had been confirmed.

And maybe they had been.

"Go back to the ship," he told them.

Val was the first to shake her head, but the others joined in willingly enough. Only Goban hesitated, and only for a second.

Snarling under his breath, Raven turned, snatching a passing strand, and whipped it across the ice between them and the starship. A thick mist sprang up, obscuring it from his sight, and he turned, walked over to the Tyr's corpse, and knelt next to it.

He reached beneath it and lifted the neck, still pumping crimson, to his mouth. He fed.

He'd been told that immortal blood was something special, and, as he drank the last draughts from Tyr's body, he realized how true that statement had been. In one respect it was like drinking liquid fire, or, as he dimly recalled from his youth, the sensation of taking a shot of tequila and feeling it thunder down his throat.

He let the body fall and stood, turning hot eyes on his companions, particularly Val. "I want you to leave," he said. "This is my fight from here on out. I'm not sure I can protect you."

"I'm not going anywhere," Val said flatly. "And I don't need you to protect me."

"Brave words," he murmured. "And a flat-out lie." He crossed the distance between them in the space of a heartbeat, halting scant inches away from her. "I want you safe."

Her ice-blue gaze met his and didn't falter. "As long as you're going into danger, I'm going with you."

"I don't have to take you with me," he told her, reaching up to gently stroke the side of her face. "I can leave you all here."

She trapped his hand against her face with her own. "And return to find our frozen bodies," she answered back without missing a beat. "If you return at all."

He couldn't win, he realized. She was the one he was worried about, and she wouldn't back down. If he left her here, she'd choose to remain in this frozen wasteland until he emerged. And likely die in the process. The only difference would be that he wouldn't have to watch her die.

"Fine. Cerberus!"

The dog loped up, fairly radiating eagerness. Raven shook his head. "Not you, too."

"We will not leave you to face this alone," said Byron. "You do this for all of us and the least we can do is accompany you."

Raven groaned inwardly. He could almost accept bringing Val along into this, if only because she was another agent, though the idea of losing her now ate at him like he'd swallowed a nest of starving rats. Goban was a veteran, and fully able to appreciate the dangers they'd face. But Bryon—he was a callow youth still, with none of the skills to survive in what was most likely going to be a death trap. But if one went, they all went. Leaving him out here to die was no more palatable than any of his other options.

“Gather up whatever gear you want to take,” he said finally, after giving them all a hard stare that seemed to have no effect whatsoever. “We’re going in as soon as you all are ready.”

Val hid her satisfied smile, knowing it would only piss Raven off. Part of her understood why he’d balked—why he hadn’t wanted her to follow him into the spaceship, though it rankled a little that he still felt he needed to protect her. She could hold her own, she thought.

No telling what awaited them inside, though she had a nasty feeling Odin was the least of their worries. They’d have a lot of hell to wade through before they confronted *that* devil. The ease with which Raven had dispatched his companion had to weigh heavily on the immortal’s mind, especially since he now had a crystal weapon of his own.

They watched as he performed whatever mysterious gestures he needed to in order to craft their means of transport into the alien vessel. “I’ll go first,” he said, once they’d gathered up their equipment. He leaped into nothingness and they hurried to follow.



The long metal corridor stretched into the distance, curving gently, its length broken by the occasional alloy hatch. The red walls seemed somehow foreboding, and the black doors even more so, but Raven ignored the creeping disquiet and bent to examine the security plate by the first one they came across.

He dug into one of his interior pockets and pulled out a small device, plugging it into the jack beside the plate and letting the tiny machine run through a series of algorithms to find the unlock code. *Interesting that they didn’t go with a palm or retinal lock on these*, he mused, as he glanced back at his companions. The technology to build a starship of this size was impressive, and even more impressive was the skill needed to make such a large ship capable of landing in a gravity well.

His knowledge of such things was limited, but not so limited that he couldn’t grasp the engineering involved.

Val came up beside him. “Where do you think this thing came from?” she asked.

He only shrugged. Once they were able to descend into the belly of the ship, they might have a chance to make that determination—the existence or absence of a gating module of some kind would tell them if the vessel was native to this universe or a visitor from elsewhere. As things stood at the moment, he wasn’t willing to hazard a guess.

Five minutes later the sound of a latch retracting inside the hatch rang through the corridor. Raven plucked the device from the jack and pocketed it again, then hefted the sword from where he’d placed it against the wall. “Everybody ready?”

He wouldn’t have been surprised to see hesitation in their eyes, but there wasn’t any. Curiosity might have killed the cat, but he certainly hoped at the moment that it wouldn’t kill these folks. He grasped the edge of the hatch and pulled outward.

## Chapter Fourteen

The crewman gave out a shrill oath and leaped away as a black shape descended from the sky to alight on the deck less than a foot away from the hatch leading to the hold. The monstrous crow or raven—he wasn't sure which it was—cocked its head and stared at him with a frightening intelligence moving behind its eyes. It hopped to the hatch and peered at the latch holding it closed, then reached out with its beak and casually popped it open. It rapped on the hatch twice and jumped away as it began to slide open.

The sailor gave a cry and drew his long knife, thinking that he'd simply kill the bird and lock the hold down once again, but something struck him on the back of the head with enough force to drive him to his knees. As he knelt there, blinking away the stars circling inside his head, a second black bird settled on the deck before him, wings rustling into position. It glared at him in an unmistakably threatening manner as the hatch flipped open and the top of their prisoner's head came into view.

She clambered onto the deck just as a group of seaman arrived, led by the first mate. "Don't kill her!" the first mate ordered, as they moved to surround her. The two birds took to the sky as she stepped away from the hole, eying them all with a distinctly disdainful air.

"You couldn't kill me if you wanted to," she told them. "I'd recommend you step back and allow me to leave unmolested."

"Not going to happen, lady. Raven said—"

"Raven's wishes are hardly my concern," she interrupted casually.

The name she'd given the vampire had been a false one, and her apparent injuries greatly exaggerated. Though he certainly had the capability of hurting her, he hadn't done her nearly as much harm as

she'd pretended, and had healed far quicker than anyone would have expected. The warlocking he'd laid on her was something of a nuisance, but she'd figure out how to unbind herself soon enough.

The first mate was obviously unimpressed. "Take her," he ordered.

She sighed. Five men with long knives against one unarmed woman. Hardly fair. *Too bad for them.* She gestured and her crows screeched as they dropped from the sky to alight on the crow's nest far above the battle—if one could call it a battle at all.

It took her less than thirty seconds to subdue all five, armed or not, tossing them into the hold one by one. Shaking her head and chuckling to herself, she set the latch and looked around. The other seven or so crew members were nowhere to be seen. Neither was the captain. She found that rather odd but thought nothing of it as she walked to the edge of the deck and leaped over the rail, dropping the thirty or so feet to the ice below without hesitation.

The cold was uncomfortable, but hardly life-threatening to her. She set out across the ice toward the red monolith, her two crows wheeling above her head in great circles as she trudged onward, grumbling. She'd be all too happy to slap that vampire upside the head once she found him. She hated it when people deliberately made her life difficult.



She found the decapitated body and crouched next to the head, turning it so she could see the face. "Oh, Tyr, you asshole. Still following Odin around like he's got a pork chop in his pocket, I see." Then she shrugged. "Well, not now you're not. I could have told you he'd get you killed eventually."

The vampire was a formidable foe, no doubt. He was easily as tough as most immortals, and utterly ruthless when necessary. Possessing that quality in abundance, the woman knew how vital it could be when one was considering the prospects of survival.

She didn't fear Raven precisely, but she knew enough to be wary of him. More than Tyr had grasped, anyway. The sight of the corpse laying there had sent a definite chill through her, because she knew all too well

what it meant. Tyr had been armed with a crystal weapon, and now Raven had it—she would be willing to bet.

Odin had no idea what he was up against here and the realization brought a smile to her sultry lips. Odin might be a hard-ass, but he had no experience with the likes of Raven. He looked like a kid. No immortal should fall into the trap of underestimating someone based on their appearance, but Odin—despite his reputation for wisdom—had never been the most perceptive of the immortals she'd known. At least not when it came to people. Situations, sure. But even Loki could read people better than the one-eyed could.

Shaking her head, she raised her eyes to scan the spires and razor edges of the ship rising out of the ice. As she threw up her arms, her two over-sized ravens dropped from the sky and swirled around her. The spell locking her away from mana began to unravel as they plucked at it with their scavenging talons. She felt a rush of heat and inner fire as the spell disintegrated.

As dangerous as the vampire was, she'd been at this business far longer than he had been alive *or* undead.

Nothing stopped the Morrigan for long.



The shambling mass swung one tentacle out as the vampire ducked, striking the bulkhead behind him with a wet *smack!* Val fired off a telekinetic punch that had little discernable impact if any against its soggy mass. “The goddamn thing’s like a bowl of jello!” she shouted.

The crystal sword lashed outward, sending a tentacle spinning away and a high-pitched keening shredded the room. This was the third monster they'd encountered, leaving Val wondering if this ship was nothing more than some mad scientist's mobile laboratory. Each beast seemed worse than the last. This one had risen up from the pool in the center of the room like some Lovecraftian horror as soon as they'd all stepped through the doorway.

Cerberus launched himself into the midst of the creature, huge teeth ripping at the dripping morass of what looked like seaweed, snarling like

a buzz-saw gone mad. One of the creature's tentacles flopped up and slapped the dog away. Cerberus hit a nearby wall with a shuddering thump and slid down to lay on the floor, unmoving.

This seemed to enrage Raven, who slashed out with a series of blows that cut great sodden chunks out of the monster. It keened like a teapot on full steam, a harsh whistling sound that cut through her ears like a razor note.

Goban leaped into the fray, sword driving for the center of the creature's mass, only to be hurled back into the hall an instant later.

Val narrowly evaded a blow, sinking her rapier deep into the creature's body. A moment later she realized she was in trouble. The blade had gotten stuck and she couldn't pull it free. Suddenly she was swept up and carried in a blur of motion to the door, where Raven set her on her feet with a dark glare. "Stay here," he told her, before spinning and launching himself at the creature once again.

The glittering sword swung out again and again as the vampire danced around the soggy beast, slashing through the wet mass with an ease Val could only envy. He'd obviously grown as tired of dealing with these weird creatures as she had. Though she had to admit, at least to herself, that he looked damned sexy dancing around with that shimmering blade in his hand, black hair flying around his face and eyes burning like violet coals.

Once he'd finished, he always had to retrieve that damn hat of his—which she fervently wished he'd leave off for a while. What it was with him and his hat she couldn't begin to guess. He always looked as though he'd stepped out of a holo-western. Or an old Bon Jovi video.

Not now. At this moment he looked like some barbarian prince, midnight hair streaming, the blade in his hand an extension of his arm, his movements sure and nearly as quick as thought as he hewed into the monster. He nimbly avoided a slash of one of the tentacles and drove the blade deep into the center of its mass.

Val leaned down and snatched the black cowboy hat up from where it had fallen as the creature, finally struck somewhere near its center,

slowly toppled over backwards like a falling haystack. She held the hat, peering down at it with a glint of mischief in her eye.

She hated the hat. She would have happily fed it to the strange beast, had it still been alive. Anything to get rid of the damned thing.

Raven turned away from the fallen creature, heaving a heavy sigh as he hefted the blade to lie across one shoulder. “That does it. No more doors,” he said with a shake of his head. “Not on this level, at least.” He held out a hand to Val, who, with some hesitation, passed him his hat. She wondered for just a moment why he seemed so unconcerned about Cerberus, but realized, as the dog raised himself from the floor, shaking his massive head as if to clear it, that Raven would know if the great beast was injured. Not only did they seem to have some uncanny connection between them, but Raven’s vampiric senses would tell him as much.

Raven placed the hat upon his head and reached into his jacket as if to check if his pistols had been unseated in the melee. He had yet to use them here. Val harbored no illusions that he restrained himself for her benefit. The crystal sword he carried now was much different in heft and balance than the rapier he’d grown accustomed to using—he needed as much practice as he could get before going up against Odin.

Or so she reasoned.

Raven knew that Val thought she had an understanding of why he didn’t use his pistols, because she hadn’t asked him. He smiled to himself. She would have been surprised to discover that his purpose for not using his pistols was many-fold. There were other things to take into consideration, such as a few issues of simple logistics. One did not fire off high-powered projectile weapons within a room entirely encased in alloy stronger than steel, unless, of course, one considered accidentally puncturing oneself or one’s companions to be a desirable possible result.

And, though she would never have believed it, he *did* take her preferences into consideration as well.

Not to mention that his 10mm hand cannons were simply too damn loud to be used in such an enclosed space.

“What do you think all this is?” she asked him, as they waited for Cerberus to pass through the doorway in front of them.

He shrugged. “More immortal meddling.” He’d long before come to the conclusion that immortals meddled in much the same way and for the same reasons that mortals breathed. It was intrinsic to their natures. Why this was he hadn’t a clue, but he found it constantly irritating.

Even the Crimson Sash, for which he worked and who deposited a large paycheck in his account every month, was run by a meddling immortal, but at least *his* boss didn’t seem to have a penchant for micro-managing. Athena, who ran TAU, was notorious for it. It wouldn’t have surprised him in the least to have her pop in to check up on Val’s progress at any point in time.

He didn’t work for Sash because he held any particular love for its goals and objectives, but because he knew *someone* with more sense than a rabid goat needed to be out here in the backwaters looking for signs of Cen influences. The bugs weren’t about to give up their quest for total domination of all the variant Earths just because they’d been beaten on Earth Prime.

Raven’s hatred of the Cen was one of the few strong emotions he allowed himself these days. Or had been before he’d met Val. The emotions she evoked in him, quite effortlessly, were strange and discomforting. Lust he could understand, and even deal with on the short term, but she fascinated him far beyond his interest in her lithe, well-muscled body. Her dedication, however misplaced, was something he could appreciate and even envy just a little bit. Raven, when it came down to it, was only dedicated to three things: the eternal war against the Cen, his own comfort, and the protection of man’s best friend. The job he did for Sash came in a distant fourth.

The oddest thing was that her arrival had provoked him into undertaking another mission, one of opposition to the Church of the Three-Fold God, primarily because her mission conflicted with the burgeoning rebellion’s need to acquire tools with which to fight the Church. His heretofore mostly ignored duty to the Crimson Sash and their alliance with TAU, however misguided, had prompted a distinct

feeling of guilt when he'd been forced to act on their behalf to throw a wrench in the rebellion's plans.

The last thing he wanted or needed were things that complicated his life. As it turned out, however, he'd been given far too little choice in the matter.

*You, Raven, are a self-absorbed bastard,* said that tiny voice in his head that had been bothering him for weeks.

*Not to mention crazy,* he replied mentally. *The minute these little exchanges turn into full blown conversations, I'll know I've lost it.* The thought worried him a little more than he wanted to admit, even to himself. He knew that some vampires *did* go insane. He just never thought he'd be one of them.

*There's insane and there's insane,* the little voice whispered, being no help at all.

Val stopped him with a hand to his shoulder as he started to duck through the doorway. "Are you all right?"

He shared with her the tiniest of smiles, a bare twitch of his lips. "About as well as could be expected."

She cocked her head at him. "That's hardly an answer, Raven."

"I'm fine," he sighed, and brushed past her. A couple of steps into the curving hallway, he stopped and turned back to look at her again. "Something is very wrong here and it bugs me that I can't figure out what it is."

She snorted, shaking her head. "You mean it isn't obvious?"

"I'm referring to things beyond the obvious," he said. "Yes, a big starship parked out here in this frozen wasteland, full of labs and strange monsters—these things are pretty damn wrong. But what is really sticking in my mind is a basic question—what the hell is it all for?"

"What do you mean?" She frowned hesitantly, as if coming close, but not quite grasping what he was talking about.

He shrugged and glanced over at the two humans, who were looking a little worse for wear. A huge dark bruise stained the side of Gabon's face like a huge ink blot pressed into his flesh. Bryon held his left arm cradled in his other hand as if his elbow had suffered some injury. "This

isn't the time to discuss it," he murmured. "We need to find someplace to hole up for a while. I don't necessarily need rest, but they certainly do."

Val followed his gaze and felt her heart lurch in her chest. Bryon's face was a mask of pain and Goban's steely resolve did nothing to veil his exhaustion. They'd had about all they could take. The monsters had not been kind to them.

Cerberus plopped over and sprawled across the floor, panting violently. Raven broke into a smile as he crouched down next to the dog and thumped him lightly along the ribs. "You okay, boy?"

The beast uttered an affirmative grunt and rolled onto his back, giving the vampire a look that said, in no uncertain terms, that he wanted his belly scratched. The vampire complied, shooting an uncharacteristic grin her direction. "Dogs."

## Chapter Fifteen

Morrigan cast a transit tube through the hull of the ship, emerging into a large, curved corridor that wound gradually around its outside edge. She glanced to either side, and then went left; trotting at a good clip down the corridor until she came to a black steel door on the interior wall shaped like a ship's hatch. She pressed a hand against the cold dark alloy, shook her head, and kept going.

Something about this place screamed wrongness, and what bothered her the most was that she couldn't get a handle on it. There was an alien aspect to it all, but nothing obvious, nothing she could point to and say 'well, of course that's not a human thing.'

It had been built to human scale, she admitted, but something about the angles, about the way everything was laid out, whispered to her of uncanny origins. It was no ship of Earth Prime. That much seemed certain. In some respects the technology seemed a bit more clunky, less sophisticated, like a starship twentieth-century humans from Earth might have constructed had they the ability.

And maybe that was it. Perhaps she was subconsciously picking up that it had been built on an Earth with technology slightly ahead of her own—or what she, as well as the rest of the immortals, had grown to think of as 'her own.' At the time, at least.

But that didn't make any sense either. This ship had been here for a while. Perhaps hundreds, if not thousands of years. It was true, she knew, that some worlds had advanced much, much faster than Earth Prime had, but the vague feeling of alien-ness made her question that assumption. Though it might look like it, she felt almost certain this wasn't a human ship.

But then whose was it? Odin and Tyr may have made use of it, they may have been protecting it, but she thought it unlikely either of *them* had anything to do with its origins, or its arrival here. It wasn't impossible, of course. Just damned unlikely.

She passed another couple of doors, pausing a moment to inspect the second of them. She frowned at the smell of something rank. She reached for the latch for just a moment before pulling her hand back. She didn't really want to go in there, did she?

Not particularly. She wouldn't find Odin down here—doubtlessly he'd fled to the top of the spires reaching skyward rather than lurking here within easy reach. He might be arrogant, but he wasn't stupid. Seeing some slender whip of a boy defeat Tyr so easily must've come as quite a shock.

Morrigan knew of Raven, though she'd never met him personally. She'd never felt the urge. There was no reason for their paths to have crossed. At the time she'd been a simple human assassin, or, at least, that was what she'd worked very hard to appear. As long as she raised no flags as a paranormal or preternatural, she was pursued by ordinary feds rather than the supernatural kind. And, predictably, managed to avoid them without much effort.

Raven had been a preternatural Fed. He'd hunted monsters, not human assassins. The vampire community had held him in something akin to awe—he may have single-handedly saved thousands of human lives by virtue of being the very creature that terrified the things that went 'bump' in the night. She'd heard enough stories to know exactly how true that was. The very mention of his name could send some denizens of the night scurrying for cover.

Then came the War. Under the guidance of his friend Ben Dalmás, Raven had trained several teams of undead soldiers as support for the regular troops. Vampires made incredible scouts, infiltrators, and assassins, and, in the darkness, nothing the Cen could field in any numbers had any hope of surviving the onslaught.

Odin, of course, knew nothing of any of this. All he would know was that he'd somehow underestimated the 'boy,' and his long-time friend

and companion lay dead on the ice because of it. The One-Eyed was probably trying to put as much distance between himself and Raven as possible until he could figure out his next move.

That's what Morrigan would do, and Odin was at least as smart as she was.

No, if Odin was still here, he'd be up as high as he could get. She wasn't about to waste time mucking around down here on the lower levels. She wanted to talk to the old bastard before Raven caught up to him.



The vampire lifted his gaze to the door at the same time as Cerberus. They both stared at the hatch for a long moment before allowing their heads to sink once more, the dog's onto his paws, Raven's onto his chest. He'd been drowsing, in some half-alert state, but he knew he'd heard the faintest scuff of feet in the corridor beyond the door.

Whoever—or whatever—had paused there had continued on its way. He was glad of it, for, despite what he'd told the others, he was flat exhausted. He required rest, both physical and mental, as much as any mortal—even if he could probably go longer than the average without any.

It was worse when the sun was in the sky above, producing a kind of lethargy that dragged down at him with the weight of all his two hundred plus years. Here, in this place, it only lasted but a brief time, but just fighting through it just flat wore him out.

He dozed.



Val woke suddenly, unsure of what had disturbed her until she pried her eyes open to slits and watched as Goban prowled the edges of the small laboratory, poking his nose into various cabinets and curiously examining a number of the vials and flasks he found within them. What struck her most odd was that he seemed to be studying them as if he

knew something about them, or at least had some measure of familiarity with chemicals in general.

*Strange*, she thought, following him with her slitted gaze. Until this moment she'd never felt the slightest bit suspicious of the man—she'd trusted him and liked him as much as Raven seemed to. But this behavior was nothing short of astounding.

She slid her gaze around to Raven and saw him also watching the former mercenary through his slitted, violet eyes.

They watched as Goban pattered around the lab, moving with stealth, but seemingly oblivious to the others in the room.

What the hell was the man doing?

Bryon rolled over with an audible groan and Goban's gaze snapped to him. He set the beaker into which he was currently peering back into its slot in a rack on the counter and crossed the room to his former position, sinking down to sit against the wall. Within seconds he appeared to be back asleep.

Raven and Val exchanged glances.

The vampire stood with effortless grace, making the very act of standing look like something sliced from a dance. He scanned the room, taking in the lab equipment and his companions with a thoughtful expression. "Okay, everyone! Time to move!"

Raven found himself distracted by the question of what Goban had been doing while he thought they were sleeping. The whole thing had seemed so out of character and it puzzled him. He led the party along the curved corridor, passing at least a dozen more hatches leading into the interior before coming upon one that was obviously different. It was a stark red the color of dried blood and fitted with what looked to be a security or control panel about halfway up the left side. The panel was dissected by five rows of five buttons each, all of which were marked with an unfamiliar glyph—most likely numbers in some alien script. Raven grunted irritably. The translator device most agents wore but he disdained didn't do anything in the way of translating text—spoken language only.

Raven's skill with security devices was questionable anyway, even without added complications. He shot a look over his shoulder at Val. "Can you do anything with this?"

She leaned forward, peered at it, and shrugged. "Possibly. It's probably based on digital technology, which gives me a good chance. If they went with some sort of quantum arrangement I could spend days at it, though." She frowned. "Why don't you just magic us through the door?"

Raven shook his head. "Uh-uh. I didn't mention it before, but this whole damn ship, from what I can tell, is lousy with wards. Something as simple as a transit tube in the wrong place and all hell could break loose."

She gave him a skeptical look but could only sigh—if he said it, she had to believe him. An alien ship into which was bound a thousand malevolent spells seemed incredible. But his eyes were somber as he stepped back and allowed her access to the security panel.

Probing at it gingerly, she looked for a latch opening into its innards, and, after a moment, had to admit to herself that it wasn't going to be that easy after all. "Nano-locked. I'm going to have to find a way to break the code."

He blinked at her, then nodded curtly. Not for the first time, she wished she knew what was going on behind those violet orbs. Not only didn't her psychic gifts tell her anything about his internal workings, but his almost utter lack of anything approaching normal human body language left her deeper in the dark than anyone she'd ever met.

The man was an enigma.

It took her fifteen minutes to break the code. She hit the last key and turned back to Raven with a grin as the door hissed open, revealing what looked to be a solid wall of black.

He flashed her a quick grin and motioned her back, then stepped into the darkness and disappeared.

She suppressed a sudden shiver. It was just a lift—wasn't it? Hesitantly, she reached out, her fingers just brushing the ebon wall. A numbing shock ran up her arm and she gasped, falling back.

Bryon lunged forward and caught her the moment her knees buckled while Goban and Cerberus looked on, their expressions oddly similar. Mildly curious but not particularly worried about anything.

Suddenly the dog spun on the shadowy portal, giving one booming bark.

It was like stepping into a vertical pool of ice, a shock so sudden it was almost painful. He strode through purposely, gritting his teeth against the pain, and emerged into some place that was *not* the interior of a lift.

His feet brushed softly against the alloy decking, ringing gently off the distant bulkheads.

His first thought was that he'd somehow stepped into one of the ship's cargo bays. And he wasn't alone. He heard something moving somewhere in the darkness ahead and sniffed at the air. His vision, while far greater in the dark than any mortal's, was equally as stymied in the pitch dark of this place.

The scent that reached him had a fierce, unfamiliar stink, a musky, biting odor that made his nostrils twitch. The sound of something heavy, something with scales, dragging itself across the deck sent him into a diving roll to his immediate left. Something struck the wall behind where he'd stood—a screech of talons scoring alloy and a shriek of unmistakable rage.

It hit the deck hard, claws biting into the alloy as it spun. *It's fast.* He could feel something massive moving in the darkness, rushing up on him like a freight-train through the infinite night of a mountain tunnel.

He started to twist away, but not quite fast enough. The creature clipped him, sending him spinning across the floor with enough force he nearly lost his balance. He crouched there in the crushing black, waiting for it to move...to do anything.

Could it out-wait him? All things being equal, it was doubtful. But, he had to admit, things *weren't* equal. He had others depending on him.

Which didn't leave him that much choice. He was screwed. *Unless...*

Shaking his head at his own stupidity, he switched to magesight, which brought everything into sharp relief. The air around him was thick with mana, far more than he would have expected out here in the middle of nowhere. The ambient light of the threads cast an eerie glow around the massive chamber, revealing a great reptilian beast blinking in the darkness as it tried to get a fix on him.

*Some sort of very primitive dragon*, he thought. Not like the few left on Earth—they were anything but primitive. He'd met a couple during the war and, frankly, they'd scared the crap out of him. This one, fierce and feral as it was, was little more than a bobcat next to a Bengal tiger. It was probably three meters at the base of its curving neck, and over ten in length, including its long, winding tail

Smiling, Raven pulled the crystal sword from the dimension pocket in which he'd stashed it, and dragged it across the floor as he sidled sideways.

The creature's copper eyes, the size of dinner plates, swiveled as it tried to focus on the source of the unfamiliar sound. Bunching its legs beneath itself, it lunged.

Raven whirled, every single nerve, muscle, and cell in his body contributing to the force he put into the blow as he drove the tip of the blade deep into the creature's side. It let out a roar that became a hissing shriek of pain as he snatched the sword back out and used its leg to vault up onto its back. As it thrashed about furiously, he danced up its length and casually lopped its head from its long neck, leaping away as it crashed to the deck.

"Nice try!" he shouted, suspecting the whole thing had been observed from a remote location. That's what *he* would have done, anyway. "What's the matter, One-Eye? You afraid of lil' ol' me?"

He heard a click and a voice replied out of the darkness. "I'd prefer to use the word 'wary.' So what *are* you?"

"Dangerous."

This produced a deep chuckle. “That much I could see for myself. I’m not interested in playing with you, stranger. I’m interested in getting rid of you.”

“Easier said than done, Odin. Better men than you have said the same thing.”

“Perhaps—but they weren’t me. I’m rather talented at getting rid of those who need gotten rid of.”

“Nice to hear.”

“We’ll have to see how well *this* works.”

Something in the tone of his voice jerked Raven’s head around, though, honestly, there wasn’t much to see. Except...

...a pinpoint of light appearing some fifteen meters in front of him, swelling slowly. Then, with the force of a hurricane, the light exploded upon him in a massive wave of force that hurled him back against the nearest bulkhead. Fire that was not fire rained over him, searing him through his skin, scorching every single cell in his body.

But he rode the wave and came through it standing as the strange light faded away. “Again...nice try,” he gasped. “But that didn’t do it either.”

He heard Odin curse softly. “That’s impossible.”

“The metaverse is full of impossible things,” Raven replied. He grabbed a passing thread and snapped it outward, forming a transit tube back to where the others waited. “I’ll be seeing you. Soon.”

Val’s hand dove for the hilt of her rapier as a figure materialized in their midst. Goban took a step forward, his own blade rising. Blinking in shock as she regarded the figure, Val reached out and slapped the ex-mercenary’s sword aside. “No.”

Reaching out with her psychic gift she felt the kind of blankness she’d only felt around one person. She blinked as her eyes scraped across his frame. The black oilskin jacket looked like Raven’s, but stretched tight across the shoulders and rode high above the wrists.

Her gaze lifted to his face and felt her stomach clench. She couldn’t mistake that face, even though it had been somehow changed. Gone was

the seemingly unfinished features of an adolescent boy—the eternal youth had been somehow burned away, leaving a face of sharp angles and radiant white planes that seemed to catch and intensify his violet gaze like a gem might direct a laser beam.

He'd been an attractive young man but now he was absolutely stunning.

*What the fuck?*

“Goban—what the hell is wrong with you?”

It was unmistakably Raven's voice and the two men froze in place, staring at him in shock. “Raven?”

He frowned back at them. “You were expecting someone else?”

Val's mouth moved but no sound emerged.

Raven's brow furrowed as he glanced at each of them in turn. “What?”

Bryon swallowed, his Adam's apple jumping as he tried to get the words out. “You're older. And bigger.” His eyes tracked up Raven's frame, widening as they went. “A *lot* bigger.”

## Chapter Sixteen

Raven shucked his jacket and tossed it to Bryon. “Looks like this will fit you better than it fits me now,” he observed dryly. He’d been shocked at first by the change wrought by the immortal’s device, but he’d long ago learned to deal with things he couldn’t change.

Bryon glanced down at the bundle of oilskin in his hands and smiled hesitantly. “If you say so.”

Raven ignored his apparent indecision and turned back to Val. “Do you know how to use a pistol?”

She curled her lip and shook her head.

He snorted. It figured. He pulled out one of the pistols, jacked back the slide, and rotated it in his hand. “It’s pretty basic. Point the big black hole at the person you want to puncture and squeeze this curved thing here.” He ran the tip of one finger over the trigger. “Squeeze...don’t jerk.”

She shook her head. “I’m not going to use a gun, Raven.”

He ignored that. “This is the safety. Push this thing up and it won’t fire. Push it down and it will. Got it?”

“Didn’t you hear me? I’m not going to use a gun.”

“If you’re within about three meters of the target or so, you can pretty much point it like you’re pointing your finger. If you’re any farther away, line up the triangle at the front of the barrel with this little groove here. This particular piece is fitted with a thirty-round clip. Keep squeezing the trigger until your target falls down. If thirty rounds won’t do it, nothing will.”

“I don’t want it,” she told him in a low growl.

“I don’t care. You’re going to do this one thing for me and carry the damned thing.” His tone brooked no argument. He glanced around and

frowned. "Where's Goban?" He didn't like it that the big ex-mercenary had managed to slip away unnoticed.

"He went back to the room where you killed that tentacle-beast to empty his bladder," Bryon replied.

It made sense. "Fine. He'd better hurry up about it. That lift is useless, so we're going to have to risk another transit tube." He pushed the pistol into Val's hands. "Just put it in your belt. The safety's on."

She did so, though he could tell it was the last thing she wanted. She pulled her jacket over it and glared at him. "Happy now?"

"Ecstatic," he said. "Can't you tell?"

She didn't bother to answer, turning instead to watch Goban as he came around the curve of the corridor and trotted up to them.

"Did I miss anything?" he asked.

"Nothing important," Raven replied casually. "Let's go."



Morrigan strode out of the darkness, causing Odin to leap from the captain's chair with an explosive oath and reach for his spear leaning against a nearby instrument panel. "Don't," she warned.

He paused, fingers mere inches away from the butt of his spear. "Morrigan?"

Her lip twitched up into what might have been considered a smile, though it had more in common with a dog's warning grimace than any expression of friendliness. "Odin."

"What are you doing here?" He didn't sound happy to see her.

Not like that was anything new to her. Most immortals weren't, for some inexplicable reason. Or maybe, not so inexplicable. She was an assassin, and had been such since long before becoming immortal. That made a lot of them uncomfortable.

Of course, she was semi-retired these days. Now she didn't kill to fulfill a contract, but to serve what she thought to be a higher purpose. She'd never killed for personal reasons. "I'm here to save your life," she answered.

“What?” He lowered himself back into the captain’s chair and stared at her. “I suppose the first question I should ask you is ‘why?’ I mean—“

“I know what you mean,” she interrupted. “And I don’t have an easy answer for that. By all rights I shouldn’t care if the kid rips you a new one, but I guess a part of me believes we immortals should stick together.”

“Bullshit.”

She raised a brow. “You don’t believe me? Why not?”

“There isn’t an altruistic bone in your body, Morrigan. If you want to keep this guy from killing me, it’s because you want to screw with *him*, not help *me*.”

She felt her jaw tighten. Odin was a bit more perceptive than she’d remembered. What he said wasn’t precisely true, but it came closer than she liked. “Fine. Let’s just say I have reason to want to keep you alive.”

He stroked his beard and nodded thoughtfully. “I can buy that. Who—or *what*—is that boy?”

“A vampire.”

His brow furrowed. “That word sounds familiar, but...”

“It’s too complicated to get into right now and, frankly, we don’t have the time.”

“No,” cut in a third voice as someone strode from the shadows. “You don’t.”

Odin’s head snapped around and Morrigan whirled to confront the intruder, only to find herself unable to move as he stepped into the light. The voice was familiar, but somehow deeper, thicker, and full of a kind of resonance she’d never heard in it before.

It took a moment for her eyes to catch up to what her brain had already told her. This was Raven, yes, but a very different Raven from the one she’d been expecting. He stopped and she studied him, noting the way his white shirt stretched tight across his chest, accented by the lines of his shoulder rig and the way his waist tapered down into his black pants. A single streak of white hung down one side of his face and he brushed it away from his eyes as his gaze seemed to bore into her skull.

This was impossible. Vampires didn't change. But somehow, this one had. He'd gone from an eternal youth to the figure of a man in his prime in a matter of days. And a particularly sexy man, a part of her realized as a low heat began to build in the depths of her abdomen.

Her gaze flicked to his feet, which she noticed were bare.

Raven let his eyes fall on the woman and sighed. "Why am I not surprised to find *you* here?" he asked her.

She shrugged. "I don't know. You tell me."

He shook his head. "I don't think so. You—Odin...move one more centimeter toward that spear and I'll gut you like a fish. I've had about as much of you and this place as I can take."

"I don't understand," the bearded immortal murmured, with a quizzical glance at Morrigan. "My cellular accelerator should've killed him."

"Your *what?*" She glanced back at him, shoulders stiffening.

He waved a hand. "Just one of my toys," he explained. "The setting should have aged him into dust, not simply added a few years to him."

Raven frowned, then his lips curved up into a slow, dangerous smile. "That was a weapon?"

"Not precisely. I use it to mature my creations in as short a time as possible. But it *can* be used to kill mortals."

"I'm not mortal," Raven told him. "As you can plainly see now." He took two long strides toward them, watching with some amusement as the woman's eyes tracked him, an odd expression on her face. He couldn't quite place it, but somehow he thought he should have recognized it. "Your name isn't Cassie, is it?"

She opened her mouth and took a deep breath, her gaze still glued to him. As he drew closer he caught a scent on the air, a sweet, musky odor that triggered an unexpected response. The woman was aroused, he realized, and her arousal was having a similar effect on him. *Weird*. He tried to shake off the sudden, uncomfortable sensation that wound through his groin.

*This woman should not be turning me on*, he thought, viciously stamping down on the involuntary response. He crossed the rest of the distance between them in a blur, wrapping his fingers around her throat. “I asked you a question, *bitch*.”

The scent of arousal faded, replaced with a sudden fierce tang he recognized as anger. Good. Anger he could deal with far better than he could deal with lust at this moment.

Odin threw himself over the arm of the captain’s seat and snatched up his spear. So Raven threw the woman at him.

They went down in a tangle of arms and legs, giving him plenty of time to draw his sword from the dimension pocket. He leveled it at them as they disengaged themselves from one another and glared up at him.

He smiled, deliberately drawing back his lips so they could see his fangs gleaming in the dim light. “I’m trying to think of reasons I shouldn’t just kill both of you here and now.” He jabbed the weapon at the woman. “*You* lied to me.” He aimed a second jab at Odin. “And *you* tried to kill me. Twice. Usually I only give someone *one* chance at it before I permanently solve the problem.”



Val crouched in the darkness, wrapped in Raven’s summoned shadows, and shuddered slightly. Now she was seeing a hint of what he’d spoken of on the ship and it disturbed her to hear him remark so casually about his urge to simply execute the two. Killing in the heat of battle she could understand, but that’s not what this was.

Beside her in the ebon fog squatted Bryon and Goban, neither of whom looked too distressed by what they were hearing. Bryon had been struck by a virulent strain of hero-worship where the vampire was concerned, and Goban—well, Goban was an ex-mercenary. He’d simply consider it a practical matter to eliminate a threat.

“I’m not sure how you broke the war-lock,” Raven was telling the woman, “but rest assured I know of other ways of keeping you from your magic.” His voice slid across them like iced velvet, almost a purr, but

carrying with it something that chilled Val to the bone. “I would prefer you alive, but we don’t always get what we want.

“You,” he told Odin, “are alive on my sufferance alone. It really pisses me off when people try to kill me.”

Then he did something that surprised Val. He tossed his sword away and it vanished into thin air scant inches from his hand. “But I’d rather talk than kill either of you, if you get right down to it.” He stepped back a pace. “Don’t get any bright ideas,” he warned them. “I can call that sword to hand anytime I want.”

The woman stood up, brushing herself off and, after a moment’s thought, extended a hand down to help Odin to his feet.

“Leave the spear there,” Raven instructed, as the immortal reached down for it. Odin slowly withdrew his hand and affixed the vampire with his one blazing eye as he straightened.

Odin returned to the captain’s chair and slid back into it with a deceptive air of calm. His single eye still roared with an internal flame, however, and, had he that much power, he would doubtlessly have sent Raven up in flames.



The vampire leaned against a nearby equipment console and folded his arms over his chest. “What’s with your church, Odin?”

“What church?”

Raven rolled his eyes. “Don’t try to play me for a fool. You know damn well what ‘church’ I’m talking about.”

“You mean that silly-ass Three-Fold God crap?” Odin asked with a frown. “Hell, Tyr and I set that up a long time ago to establish a way to get materials to us without us having to scour the damn planet for them ourselves.”

Raven closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Let me get this straight—you created a religion for no other reason than your *convenience*?”

Odin gave him an odd look. “Yeah. So what?”

Raven returned the look. “So you haven’t been paying attention to what they’ve been doing?”

“Not really. For the first few hundred years we had offerings brought up and left at a shrine we’d had built in the early years—things we needed for the lab work. We gave the natives a few miracles to get them on board and let it go. Neither of us are micro-managers, after all. *Were* micro-managers,” he added, with a muttered curse and a shake of his head. “You didn’t have to kill him.”

“He was trying to kill me,” Raven remarked dryly. “That tends to get people dead.” He didn’t waste any time expressing regret, whether or not he acknowledged it within himself. He stuck to stating that simple truth. “So this whole ‘anyone who uses magic who isn’t connected with the church is a blasphemer’ thing isn’t *your* idea, I take it?”

Odin glanced up at him, face reflecting puzzlement. “No. Of course not. What the hell would we care about that?”

“Good question. I guess now we should be asking why the *church* cares about it. Is it just a move to consolidate power, or are their reasons more sinister than that?”

“How do you mean?”

“I’m talking about your ancient enemy, Odin. The Cen—I think you’d refer to them as ‘Centians’—might be changing their tactics a little.”

“Crap—they’re still around?”

Raven nodded. What did he think, that they’d scurried away somewhere after conquering hundreds of worlds with no real opposition? “Yes, they’re still around. They tried to conquer Earth Prime a couple hundred years ago, but we gave them a bit of a whooping, so they’ve retreated and regrouped. Now they seem to be working on the fringes, threatening less-developed worlds. Which, to be honest, is one of the reasons I’m here.”

The woman—he still didn’t know who the hell she was—glanced over at him. “You’re not here because of the weapons?”

“Lady, I couldn’t give two shits about the weapons. I’m not TAU. That’s Val’s territory, not mine. My interest lies in whether the church is

a homegrown problem or if it's something sponsored from outside. By the Cen, for example.”

“But you have them, right?”

“The weapons? Maybe I do, maybe I don't. I still want to know—what's it to you?”

She smiled thinly with the tiniest shake of her head. “I'm not willing to tell you that right now. Maybe later.”

He wasn't thrilled with this answer, but ended up shrugging. “Fine.” He half turned and motioned to his companions, brushing away the black fog with which he'd cloaked the corner. “You can come out now.”

## Chapter Seventeen

The one-eyed immortal scratched at his beard and scowled fiercely. “It ain’t my business,” he grunted.

Val saw Raven’s jaw twitch slightly and suppressed a smile. When he loosened up, he almost allowed himself to appear human. *If you discount the freakishly pale skin and strange violet irises, at least.*

She aimed a frosty glare at the woman, who’d gotten a little friendlier with Raven than she felt entirely comfortable with. *He* may have forgotten that she’d led a pirate crew against them, but Val sure as hell hadn’t.

It was nice that this meeting hadn’t instantly devolved into a bloodbath, but she didn’t really have the stomach to watch her cozying up to him.

*Jealous, Val?* She gritted her teeth and turned her attention to inspecting the rest of the room.

It was a lounge filled with various pieces of slightly alien furniture—not all that different from what one might find in any household sitting room. The shapes were slightly odd, but serviceable enough.

Goban and Bryon were having a great time just poking around, closely inspecting things she and Raven would find perfectly mundane. A table lamp in particular seemed to attract a lot of interest, enough that, after the fifth or sixth time Bryon turned it on and off, the vampire turned and told him, in no uncertain terms, to ‘stop doing that.’

When it became apparent that Odin and the woman had no more pertinent information to share, Raven inquired as to someplace they could rest and the immortal pointed them toward a set of cabins down a hallway adjoining the lounge.

Raven tucked Bryon and Goban in the first, which held two bunks separated by some five or so feet of floor space, a sink, and an adjoining restroom. “Make yourselves comfortable,” he told them. “We’re going to get at least eight hours downtime before we decide what to do next.”

Bryon looked puzzled, but the ex-mercenary merely nodded. “You trust these people?” he asked Raven, as he settled his bulk down on one of the bunks.

The vampire shook his head. “Not even as far as I can throw this ship. But what it boils down to is that we need to rest, and they don’t have anything to gain by killing us right now. I don’t think the woman wants to anyway.” He shrugged. “And as for Odin? Well, he might want to get revenge on me for killing Tyr, but he’s not going to do it right now.”

Val wished she could be so certain. She’d caught the flames burning in Odin’s single orb as they’d turned to walk down this corridor. He was afraid of Raven, but he wasn’t the type to be dissuaded from trying by a little fear. Self interest, on the other hand, might prompt him to stay his hand. At least for a while.

But what could Raven have offered him? The few minutes he’d spoken to the immortal in hushed tones too soft for her to hear seemed to have had some sort of impact. She wished she knew what Raven had said.

And the woman. She still made Val’s skin crawl, though the fact that she and Odin had seemed to know each other might have had something to do with it. The way it looked to her, the one-eyed immortal had been here on this world for centuries, if not longer, which meant that the woman was most likely another immortal. No wonder Raven hadn’t been able to keep her restrained once they’d left the ship.

Of course, this was all conjecture. And at this point, that was all she really had. She wondered if other mortal agents were left feeling as much of a disconnect when dealing with the immortal crowd as she did right now. Even Raven, who she thought had some feelings for her, seemed to keeping her at a distance.

“This is your room,” he told her, pushing one of the doors open to reveal another small chamber with two more bunks. “I’ll take the next one.”

“No,” she said, grabbing his arm as he turned to leave. “I don’t trust these two. I’d feel better if you took the other bunk in here.”

His face was impassive as he turned back toward her. After a moment of his corpse-like stare, she curled her lip and gave him a hard shove. “Don’t be an asshole! What is with you, Raven? You’ve been acting even weirder than normal since we got here.”

He blinked at her, then, with a sigh, nudged her all the way inside, followed her in, and shut the door behind them. He then spent about ten minutes inspecting every square centimeter of the room. Once he’d seemingly satisfied himself that there were no surveillance devices to find, he lowered himself into a lotus position on one of the beds. “Sit down.”

She considered arguing about it, but decided against it. It probably wasn’t what it sounded like. He had to know that ordering her around wasn’t a good idea, especially now. He might have outranked her, but that sort of thing was pretty damn flexible considering they worked for two very different agencies.

Not that she had the impression he was pulling rank. Just that he was distracted and not particularly interested in social niceties. She found herself wondering if this was something he’d developed since becoming undead, or if he’d been a bit on the rude side even back when he was alive.

Well, she could always ask. The thought made her chuckle just a little. *Yeah, that would go over well.*

He raised an eyebrow. “Something funny?”

She shook her head. “Nothing in particular. And everything, I guess.”

“Good answer.” He surprised her by smiling. “I know I’ve been a pain in the ass lately.”

“That’s an understatement,” she snorted, more grateful than she should have been when he laughed aloud at that.

He seemed to think on it a minute, then shrugged. “I’ve been off-balance since we got here. I don’t know what I expected to find, but immortals were *most definitely* not on the list. I would have preferred not to have killed Tyr, but I’m not sure I had any choice. Had I done anything but what I did, Odin would’ve started throwing magic at me and that would’ve been that. Tyr would’ve used the distraction to take my head.

“Then this ship in general. Can you imagine? What the hell is this thing doing here? Old One-Eye isn’t being very forthcoming about that, but I’m sure he knows more than he lets on. And the goddamn monsters...” He sighed, and hung his head, staring at the floor for a long moment before he spoke again. “Then this...change...he inflicted on me. Pretty nasty thing—I’d hate for you or any of the crew to be zapped by it. I have a feeling that unless you’re a vampire or an immortal yourself, it would kill you. I don’t feel like myself anymore.”

“If it’s any consolation, you look more or less like yourself. A little taller, a little more muscular, and...well...strikingly handsome.”

He smiled at that. “And I was what, before?”

“Unfinished,” she admitted. “Not bad, just not all you could be.”

He shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair. “Just please don’t tell me I’m irresistible now,” he said with a smirk.

“You could be if you believed it,” she answered. “But I’d much prefer it if you weren’t. I find that sort of thing obnoxious, and, besides, I wouldn’t want to compete with that bitch out there.”

“Believe me, she’s not competition. You may not know who she is, but I’ve figured it out. She’s an immortal—Morrigan to be exact—and, until recently, she’s been the most successful and prolific contract killer in human history. She’s killed more people than I ever will, I’d bet.”

Val considered this. “She’s beautiful.”

“So? A lot of women are. If you ask me, she’s a fucking sociopath. I don’t *do* sociopaths.”

“Nice to know,” she told him. “So, who exactly *do* you *do*?”

Had he the ability, she was almost certain he would have blushed. It was a very good thing that he’d never had to use seduction as an intelligence gathering tool. He wasn’t capable of it.

He could seduce *her* any time he wanted to, if he'd only open his eyes and realize it. *What are you, Raven, a 200-year-old virgin?*

At first, the thought was amusing, then it wasn't. He wasn't a virgin, but he'd only had one partner in his whole existence, and that hadn't gone well. She wasn't even sure how she got that impression. Something he'd said, probably. She certainly wasn't reading it from his mind.

She walked over to him, stepping between his knees and threading slender fingers through his hair. He tilted his face up toward her and she thought she saw a glimmer of something that looked a lot like fear shine in his eyes for just a second.

She leaned down and brushed her lips against his, then leaned back slightly. His lips parted as he smiled up at her. Then, in a motion so fast she didn't even see it, he stood and swept her into his arms. She felt her stomach drop as he tangled his hands in her hair and lurched across the tiny room to the other bunk. He laid her down on her back and smiled down at her. "You are so beautiful." Leaning over, Raven gently stroked her cheek.

"So are you," she answered, shifting over just far enough for him to sit down next to her. She patted the cot and he took a seat. "You know, I've been waiting for this moment since I met you."

"*This moment? Why is that?*"

She stared up at him, not quite sure if he was kidding or not. His face was characteristically impassive, as if he were a robot that had been shut off. He didn't even blink.

She slapped him on the arm. "Stop that. It's creepy."

Then, like the switch had been turned back on, he blinked and broke into a wide grin. "Sorry."

"No you're not. You enjoy being creepy."

"A little. But I don't mean to be that way with you."

"You'd better not," she said. "Now get down here and kiss me."



Raven found himself on his feet before the echo of the knock faded away. Then came a loud pounding, far too loud for this tiny room. He strode to the door and threw it open.

Morrigan stood there, looking both amused and irritated at the same time. "Having a good time?"

"None of your business. What do you want?"

"Odin's gone. I don't know how, either."

"You fell asleep," Raven said with a grimace. *Or let him go.*

She shook her head. "Immortals don't sleep, nitwit."

"That explains a lot," he muttered. "So he got away from you somehow. I thought we had an arrangement."

"So did I. He was supposed to show me the ship's armory. In case you didn't notice, this place is like a maze, and I can't understand the chicken-scratch they use for writing any better than you can."

"The armory?" It made sense, actually. But what was she planning on doing with whatever she found? That was the real question.

"What's this about an armory?" Val rubbed at her eyes and padded to the door, pulling on Raven's shirt which, at this point, fit her much better than it did him. Noticing that, Raven resolved to try to find some other clothing stashed around the place. Maybe Odin had left something that would fit him, or maybe he could track down wherever Tyr had denned.

Morrigan scraped her gaze over the blonde and slowly smiled. If another guy had looked at her that way, he might've punched him. Maybe. It wasn't exactly his job to protect her honor, was it? She could do quite well on her own, he was sure.

"No telling where he's gone," he said finally. "Okay. Here's the plan. We're going to find me something to wear, since nothing I brought with me fits right anymore, and then we're going to track down the armory."

Val nudged him from behind. "What's this armory business?"

"I'm going to claim whatever weapons we find in here for the Resistance," Morrigan told her. "You got a problem with that?"

“Actually, I do. This is an alien vessel of some sort, and even if you consider salvage rights, it doesn’t mean that you get to take any weapons you find on-board and train the natives how to use them.”

“Oh? And who’s going to stop me?”

“We will.”

Morrigan glanced at Raven, who uttered a low groan. “Sorry, Val, but this is between the two of you. I can see both sides of it and I *really* don’t think it’s something I need to be involved in.”

She wasn’t happy to hear this. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No. We’ve talked about this before. She’s not doing anything I wasn’t planning on doing myself, to be honest.”

“Well, thanks for your support.” She shoved him hard, ejecting him into the corridor, and slammed the door behind him.

“Shit.”

Morrigan smirked back at him. “Trouble in paradise already? Looks like the honeymoon’s over.”

“One more cliché out of you and we’re going to brawl here and now.”

If anything, this just made her grin wider. “You might scare Odin, but not me.”

“Shows how much sense you have,” he replied, leaning back against the door and sticking his hands in his pockets. “You ever going to tell me what the hell you’re actually doing here?”

“I would’ve thought you’d’ve figured that out by now.”

He shrugged. He had some idea, but would have liked some confirmation from her.

“I’m working with someone who *really* disagrees with Athena and TAU,” she said, referring to the immortal who’d started the agency in the first place, and, as far as Raven knew, still ran it. “I know you folks at Sash don’t really buy into their agenda either,” she added. “Your babe’s going to have to figure that out sooner or later.”

“She’s not my *babe*,” he objected reflexively, though it was obvious his heart wasn’t in it. She might not be his *anything* by now, he thought irritably.

“Whatever.” She eyed him critically and, seeming to come to some sort of conclusion, nodded to herself. “I’ve been trying to figure out which one of you I’d rather bed, and I actually think you’re ahead on points.”

“Gratifying,” he replied, not meaning it in the least.

“Keep that up and you’ll never even get to first base with me, buddy.”

“I’m heartbroken,” he snorted. “Go wake the others, will you?”

She grinned in response and nodded. “You going to try to patch things up with her?”

“Are you always this nosy?”

“Actually, no. But I figure if things are tense between you two, I have a chance with one or the other.”

He favored her with a thin, clearly insincere smile. “Go away.”

Damn, the woman was hard to annoy, he thought, as she turned and walked down the hall. If anything, he found that more irritating than her overall attitude. She was damned aggravating, and he didn’t think it was fair he couldn’t turn the tables on her even a little bit.

He was beginning to think *all* the immortals were slightly off their rockers, aside from maybe Deryk Shea on Earth Prime. And even that was debatable, all things considered.

*Face it*, said the little person living in his head. *You’re a little intrigued by her as well.*

*Oh, shutup.* He turned and rapped on the door. “C’mon, Val. Let me in. We need to talk.”

## Chapter Eighteen

“We’re going to tear down the Church,” Raven stated flatly, with an icy look in Val’s direction. “And we’re going to start by distributing weapons to the rebels. Morrigan has found a locker full of high-tech armaments, and we’re going to give them out to the higher echelon members, while the rank and file will be getting these semi-automatic weapons here.” He gestured to the open trunk on the floor.

Val looked like she was going to have a stroke on the spot, but they’d already discussed it and she’d decided that she could live with the decision if it meant blocking the Cen from gaining any more influence on this world than they already had. By all rights she should contact base, but she was afraid of what they might tell her if she did.

She wasn’t going to fight him on this one. He’d already won her promise on that point, and intended to make certain she lived up to it, but she didn’t like it.

He’d put her in a tough spot, he realized. He’d given her a choice between supporting him or her agency. She’d chosen him, but he wasn’t quite certain she had what it took to turn renegade. TAU usually chose law-and-order, straight-shooter types specifically to prevent this sort of thing.

But she was falling in love with him and that always screwed their brainwashing all to hell.

Did he love her? He wasn’t sure. He was sure he liked her. She had guts, and that counted for a lot. But *love*? He’d thought he was in love once, but that had turned out to be a disaster. He didn’t like courting disaster. Not personally, at least. It did, however, seem part and parcel of his professional life.

He wasn't worried about pissing off his higher ups at Sash—even if they cared, which he doubted they would, they'd be smart enough to stand down. The only people there who would dare go against him would be the immortal head, who was unlikely to give a damn one way or another. Fenris was pretty much a law and order guy, but he also understood that there were some times when the rules just didn't cut it. He wasn't likely to step on Raven's toes. Their friendship went back since the Cen War, after all.

"I also want your father to declare amnesty for warlocks in his demesne," he told Bryon. "You think he'll go for it?"

Bryon thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "I believe he will. It would work better if he wasn't the only one to do it, though."

"What about your boss, Goban? Do you think he'll be willing?"

The ex-mercenary shrugged. "Hard to say. Especially considering how the commoners are likely to react to it. The people are afraid of magic. The Church has made sure of that."

"Are you suggesting they might rise up to support the Church, or that we might have a three way war come out of it?"

"It's possible," Goban said. "Keep in mind that Muraz is a very advanced province—it's the site of the Kobath University, after all. The others aren't nearly as...tolerant."

Raven nodded. "Good point. Let's just leave it to your father, Bryon. If one province goes that far, at least we might have a chance at forging an alliance of warlocks to help us against the Church mages."

"We're going to need them, aren't we?"

"Yeah, we are." He clapped his hands together and rubbed them vigorously against one another. "Everyone ready to get the hell out of here?"

"Is she coming with us?" Goban asked with a pointed glance toward Morrigan.

Raven nodded. "At the moment our objectives mesh. If we get to a point where they don't, we'll go our separate ways."

Goban obviously didn't like it. Raven didn't particularly care if he did or not. The way he saw it, the man was either in or out, and Raven was the one calling the shots.

He'd meant to discuss his feelings about the ex-merc with Val, but had become somewhat...distracted. The worst thing was that he knew better than to let such things interfere with his job. Or, at least, he *should* have known better. The mission first, personal issues second. That was the rule, though he'd never before had occasion to even consider it.

The others gathered up their packs and gear while Morrigan and Raven stowed the weapons from the ship in dimension pockets formed out of closed off mana tubes. "Let's go," he said finally, and they jumped out.



They made it back to the ship without incident, and, under the cover of darkness, watched as Raven set up the cone of heat they'd initially used to cut their way through the ice, and waited while the ship prepared to set sail.

Val wasn't happy with what she saw as Raven's withdrawal since their time together on the alien ship. He didn't ignore her precisely, but a barrier had dropped between them that she couldn't—wouldn't—deal with.

Maybe it was the time he'd been born into. She'd heard that men of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries had a tendency to become emotionally unavailable once they'd had sex with the object of their desires. Not that he'd been too obvious in his desire in the first place. He'd made her make the first move, though he'd certainly responded passionately enough once she'd started the ball rolling.



A week later the ship was back in open seas, sailing through the cold clear day ahead of a powerful storm that beat against its sails like a caged animal. Val stood on deck, eyes roaming the horizon as the day

drifted toward dusk. She was angry now. Angry at Raven, but equally angry at herself. She'd compromised everything she believed in for the vampire, and now she had little left but doubts and recriminations.

She just couldn't understand what had gotten into him. He'd been avoiding her with an amazing dexterity, considering they were stuck on a rather thin sliver of wood in a vast sea of blue. What the hell was *with* him, anyway?

More than once she caught Goban staring at her with a thoughtful expression on his face. She nearly broke down and read him, but stopped herself on the verge. She'd already compromised one set of principles; she wasn't about to do it again.

Raven had taken to sleeping in the hold again, about as far away from her as he could manage aboard ship. He hadn't exchanged a dozen words with her since they'd set sail and it was all she could do not to march right up to him and demand he explain himself.

But she suffered in silence instead. Why should she give him the satisfaction of knowing how much he was hurting her?

She watched as the setting sun cast ribbons of silver and gold across the darkening sky and sighed inwardly. She'd doomed herself. Her career was over, her personal life a muddled mess, and nothing she could do now would redeem her in her own eyes.



Raven woke and stared up at the top of his crate and resisted the urge to scream aloud. He'd been swimming in self-loathing for the past week, which he considered a bit like taking a bath in raw sewage. Only a complete idiot would be unable to recognize the pain he'd inflicted on Val, and he regretted it with every fiber of his being.

But he needed this distance between them. They both did, though she would never have understood the reason why, or agreed with it if he tried to explain it. By now she was starting to hate him and the thought was like a vial of hydrochloric acid poured into a sucking chest wound.

He felt things for her he shouldn't, he realized. Not only because they made him vulnerable, but because they made both of them vulnerable.

He didn't trust everyone aboard the ship. He needed desperately for those he doubted to believe that what had happened between him and Val had been for recreational purposes only—at least as far as his part went.

The irony of the situation was not lost on him. He protected her by causing her pain.

He shoved the top of the crate aside and climbed out into the hold, eyes scanning the darkness. Somewhere above him he could hear murmured conversation and smiled thinly. Morrigan was comforting Val, a scenario he would never have imagined ahead of time. She'd struck him as about as empathetic as a piece of driftwood, but, he realized, there were always hidden sides to people a person might not see.

What amazed him even more was that Morrigan was even defending him, in a way. Surprising, considering it had been she who'd warned Val about getting involved with him, saying that vampires were incapable of love. He only wished that were true.

He emerged onto the deck in a swirl of darkness, noting the position of the passengers and crew in the first few seconds. Morrigan and Val were at the bow, speaking in low tones, and he caught sight of Bryon and Goban in what almost looked to him to be a silent confrontation. The whippet-like son of the governor had his face scant inches from the ex-merc, and their contest of wills was going unnoticed by the few people on deck at the moment.

Frankly, Raven was surprised he hadn't heard anything of their exchange before he emerged onto the deck.

He strode toward them just as Bryon shoved at the watchman's broad chest. "Just stay the hell away from me!"

*Well, isn't this interesting?* Raven thought. "What's going on here?"

"Nothing," Goban rumbled, with barely a glance in his direction. "The young master is just overwrought."

"Overwrought?" Bryon's voice spiked high and shrill. "You know what this *kau-si-pe* said about—?"

The ex-merc's fist crashed into his jaw and sent him stumbling for the railing. Raven caught him an instant before he would've gone overboard and set him down on the deck. He checked the boy and wasn't

surprised by the fact that the blow had knocked him out cold. He whirled on Goban. “What the hell was that?”

“Did you hear what he called me?” Goban hissed, the scar on his face flashing crimson as the blood rushed to it.

Raven had, but he’d never heard the word before. He shrugged. “So what?”

“I don’t have to take that kind of crap from him.”

Something struck the vampire as odd about the ex-merc’s anger, and he wondered if it had been the curse or something else entirely that had provoked Goban into striking out at the slight young man. Goban had been acting strangely since they’d been on the alien ship, and Raven was seriously starting to wonder why.

He glanced up as Morrigan approached. The brunette immortal regarded him with calm assurance and took only a cursory glance at Bryon’s unconscious form behind him. “We need to talk,” she said.

“Aren’t we?” he asked, not sure whether to be irritated or amused.

She ignored the attempt at humor and grabbed him by the arm. “Come with me.”

Goban’s gaze, dark and shrouded in something Raven couldn’t identify, followed them as they made their way past the poop deck to the ship’s stern. The vampire could still feel his stare even after they’d moved from view.

“For the record,” Morrigan told him in a low tone. “I think you’re being an idiot.”

“Nice to know. In what way?”

“Valerie thinks you don’t care about her and that’s the reason you’ve been avoiding her. I know differently.”

“Do you?”

She cocked her head and aimed an icy glare at him. “Don’t fuck with me, vampire. I know that you came to the realization that being involved with you here and now puts her in a lot more danger than her own mission would. I’m not sure who, exactly, you think is going to use that against you, but I think you’re doing more harm than good with the way you’re acting.”

“Oh, what—now you’re an expert on human behavior?”

“I killed people for a living, Raven. That means I needed to know what made them tick, how they were vulnerable. Who do you think is going to betray you?”

“What makes you believe I think *anyone* is going to betray me?”

“Don’t act stupid—and don’t pretend you think I am, either. Something changed your attitude on the crashed starship and I’d like to know what it is.”

“What if I think it’s *you* who will betray me?”

“Hah. That’s bullshit and you know it. You know my reputation. I’ve *never* screwed over an ally. And that’s what we are. Both of us want this Church taken down. If you know anything about me you know I’ve never compromised my principles.”

“Such as they are.”

“Such as they are,” she agreed with a shrug. “My fellow immortals have always been suspicious of me—but not one of them will say I don’t follow my own code of honor.”

He shook his head. He already knew that. When he’d been working for the PAC, he’d been briefed on all the immortals living and operating on Earth Prime, and, while it was acknowledged that Morrigan acted outside the law, it was also noted that she was very particular about which contracts she did and did not accept. Athena, when she’d put out a contract on one rogue agent, had contacted Morrigan and had been turned down flat. There were certain lines Morrigan would not cross, and that, apparently, had been one of them.

“You need to talk with her. If you like I can provide a distraction for the others to give you a few minutes alone. But you owe her that much at least.”

He simply nodded. She was right, as much as he hated to admit it. He needed to talk to Val.

## Chapter Nineteen

“Sails ahead!” came the cry from the crow’s nest. Val’s head jerked up and she glanced over at the captain, who stood on the poop deck in full regalia for the first time since they’d broken free of the ice.

The sun came out from behind a cloud, bathing the ship in brilliant sunlight for a moment. She caught sight of Goban in the corner of her eye, staring in the direction of the sails with a speculative expression.

Her gaze flicked to Bryon, standing at the bow, then Morrigan, not ten feet away from the boy. She shook her head at herself. She didn’t really consider Bryon a boy, but Raven certainly did, and since their conversation, his perceptions were obviously affecting her own.

Like how she was seeing Goban now. Something was wrong with him, something she couldn’t put her finger on. It was almost as though he’d changed from the gruff, self-possessed man she’d met that evening so long ago; where once he’d been bold and cynical, there had grown a furtive air about him.

She didn’t like it.

“How many ships?” the captain yelled up to the ’nest.

“Six or seven,” the man called back.

“Can we run from them?” she asked him.

“Run where?” the captain growled. “I’m sure we could, but we’ll never get away.”

She glanced up at the sun and realized it was still several hours until dusk. Raven wouldn’t rise to save them unless they managed to stay ahead of the small fleet that long. “How long can we stay ahead of them?”

“Depends on what kind of ships they are,” he replied. “If they’re larger, we might have a chance. You’re trying to hold out until nightfall, right?”

She nodded. “With that many ships, we have no chance of dodging them in the dark, or, even of outrunning them, do we?”

He gave her a serious look in return. “We have almost no chance, milady. Of either. This ship is doubtlessly faster and more maneuverable than those larger merchantmen usually used by the Church. But as you said, we’re not going to be able to escape entirely unless we manage to dodge right across the leading edge of a big blow, and I don’t see that happening.” His glance led her gaze up to the crystalline blue sky.

She nodded. “Then do what you can, Captain, and we’ll all keep alive the hope we can outrun these bastards long enough.”

Neither mentioned the very likely possibility that Deacons aboard those ships—she had no doubt the ships themselves had been commandeered by the Church—would be using magic to catch up all the quicker.

“Morrigan, can you do something to help?”

“Was wondering when you were going to ask,” the immortal replied with a dry chuckle from her habitual spot on the bow. Her two crows had taken to perching there on the rails at her back, black feathers rustling in the wind arching over the sides of the bow.

Val found the crows unsettling. Their stares were so intelligent, so piercing, that she couldn’t bear being around them for long. It might have helped if she could have read them, but they weren’t sending anything out she could pick up. As closed up as Raven himself.

“I can think of a few things I can do,” Morrigan said. “The ships are warded, so I can’t attack them directly, but there are other ways to skin the cat.”

Val winced. She recognized the saying, but had spent enough time on Starhaven to find it more than a little gauche. “Do what you need to. Accelerating us would be a good start. Or maybe—”

“Bringing in a little fog *and* kicking up a little speed should be possible,” Morrigan interjected. “I’d rather do that than attack their ships.”

“Best get to work, then. We don’t have a lot of time.”



They raced ahead of the fog under a full moon. Looking back, it almost looked as though the sea itself was on fire, the fog rising from the water like thick black smoke. Raven hung halfway up the mainmast, his radar-like gaze sweeping the darkness boiling from the ocean. “You said there were seven?” he called out to the captain, who stood on the forecastle with his spyglass to his eye.

Pointless, really, but Raven had to admire his dedication to his job. He could no more peer through that fog than he could to the bottom of the ocean.

“Seven!” the captain agreed.

Raven nodded. Through his web of far-sight strands, he could only make out four ships behind them. He didn’t think the others had simply dropped off. They’d probably come up with some way to get ahead of them. As far as he knew, they didn’t use transit tubes, but he thought it unlikely that they’d never figure them out.

“Morrigan!”

“No need to yell,” she called down from her perch on the foremast somewhere over his head. She swung down and dropped to the deck beside him. “What do you think?”

“I think there’s at least three or four ships ahead of us somewhere that we can’t see right now. Probably rushing to cut us off.”

She nodded. “We can’t very well race back up north, now can we? We’ve got to figure out a way to get past them.”

Raven glanced to port and realized they were only a couple of miles from what would have been, on his Earth, the Japanese isles. “Head for those islands,” he told the captain.

The man winced and shook his head. “We can’t. My crew will revolt!”

The vampire whirled on him, fast as thought. “We don’t have a choice.” Of course he’d heard the superstitious nonsense that the Japanese islands on this Earth were inhabited by cannibals, but cannibals were the last thing *he* was worried about. Between him, Val, and Morrigan, any cannibals who appeared would be taking one hell of a risk. “We’ll have to chance it.”

The captain must have noticed a hint of mockery in his voice, for his response was as dry as a Saharan wind. “Yes, sir.”

His irritation couldn’t have been more obvious. Irritation mixed with a note of fear. Raven gave him a single curt nod and turned back to scan the ships behind them. Where had the others gone?



“Now what?” the captain asked some minutes later, as the ship’s sails were reefed and the anchor dropped. “It’s not as though they can’t find us, fog or no. It will lift eventually and—”

“I plan to have us well-hidden before that happens,” Raven told him. “But first things first. Morrigan, Val, and I are going to do a little recon to set your sailors’ minds at ease. I would assume they’d trust my judgment by this point?”

The captain thought about it, then nodded, scratching at the unruly beard crawling across his face. “I think so.”

“Good. You know the drill, Captain. I’m going to hide the ship, so don’t let any of your men go ashore no matter *what* happens. If you do, they’ll not be able to find the ship again.”

He looked anything but pleased by this, but nodded again. It wasn’t as though he really had any choice in the matter. “You two ready?” Raven asked the women.

“Always,” Morrigan answered with a grin. “Let’s take a walk on the wild side.”



Val crouched in the crawling shadows, eyes wide as dinner plates as she took in what was happening in the clearing before her. The silver

archway of light could only be a worldgate, and the creatures manning it as familiar to her as they would be to any denizen of Starhaven. Hybrids—primarily feline, she noted, but she thought she recognized a few more obscure breeds.

The placement of this little encampment made no sense to her. What was the purpose of smuggling in a handful of hybrids at a time in such an unpopulated area? They could be using this particular island to gather an army before launching an attack anywhere on the mainland, but, unless she was sorely mistaken, that wasn't what they were doing at all.

If not for the evidence in front of her face, she would never have imagined they'd find hybrids here. The cult of the Three-Fold God, for all of its other failings, had never manipulated the people by fear of monsters or other outsiders. This precluded them using the hybrids as a tactic for spreading superstitious terror.

But it did explain the reputation these islands had as home to cannibals. They weren't cannibals at all...or, at least, not quite what anyone meant when they used the term. *If a human/animal hybrid eats a person, does it make him a half-cannibal?*

She spotted Morrigan squatting a few yards away and slowly inched her way to her side. The immortal noticed her approach and raised a finger to her lips. Unnecessarily, as it turned out. Val already knew how sensitive hybrid hearing could be. They all had enough skill in woodcraft to sneak around without being noticed, but a single spoken word could reveal their presence faster than a burning flare.

*Where has Raven gone?* she wondered. The man could appear and disappear with more alacrity than anyone she'd ever seen. He had a talent for being unnoticed. For all she knew he was standing in their midst, ready to carve a bloody swath through the dozen or so of them around the 'gate.

Of course, it made her wonder what the hybrids were all waiting for. If they were patient enough, they might find out, but, unfortunately, they might end up beneath an unfolding dawn, which certainly wouldn't be healthy for Raven.

She could guess what his plan would be—kill the hybrids, destroy the 'gate, and get the hell back to the ship before daybreak. But more than anything she wanted a hybrid to question. Since they were officially listed as enemies, her psychic ethics wouldn't be conflicted if she decided she needed to read them.

If only her telepathic gifts were more dependable, she thought. At this distance she couldn't sense anything and she was afraid to push it. The few times she'd strained to use her telepathic talents over greater distances, she'd quickly discovered that her efforts might well leap to her telekinetic functions and instead have the unintended effect of pummeling the person she'd meant to read.

Definitely not a good idea in these circumstances. She made a quick head count of the hybrids and stifled a groan. They must have still been emerging from the 'gate, since where she'd first seen half a dozen or so, now stood at least ten.

Maybe not a challenge for Raven or Morrigan, but Val knew her skills weren't up to handling more than a couple of them, and then only if they weren't particularly well-trained. She wasn't about to place a bet on the likelihood of that being the case.

*Where is Raven?*

Just as the thought reformed in her head, the shadows surrounding the 'gate rippled and Raven materialized in the midst of the hybrids, who reacted with superhuman speed, though not nearly quick enough. He tore through them as if they were standing still, sending humanoid cats, weasels, and other creatures flying through the air.

Morrigan leaped into the open and caught one of the flailing figures as it tumbled past, reaching around and snapping its neck with a sort of casual grace that made Val's blood run a little chill. Two more of the creatures, evading Raven's swath of destruction, came at her at a full-out sprint.

Morrigan side-stepped, arm extending like a steel girder to sweep one of the creatures—a taut-muscled jungle cat of some kind—off its feet. Black claws glittered in the radiant light spewing from the open 'gate as the second cat lashed out at her.

Val sent a burst of telekinetic power at it, blasting it down like a bolt from the heavens. She drew her blade and leaped from the bushes, spearing another creature—this one had obviously come from weasel stock—through the chest with her rapier. She kicked it off the end of the blade and spun to meet the charge of another creature straight out of the mouth of the 'gate.

This one was armed with a sword of its own, a heavy, slightly curved blade she was hard-pressed to deflect. She turned the blade and drove it toward the ground, punching the creature in the side of the neck with her free hand. The beast lurched away and raked its claws down her left arm. She gasped in pain and focused a powerful telekinetic bolt into the center of its chest, sending it tumbling away.

She glanced up to see what the others were doing just in time to see Raven disabling the 'gate device. The silver archway dissolved into nothingness and plunged the clearing into darkness.

When she felt a hand on her shoulder she turned to fight, but found herself caught in a vice-like grip. "It's me, Val," Raven murmured in her ear. "You're hurt."

"A scratch," she replied, allowing herself to sag against him. The two strong telekinetic blasts so close together had drained her and she felt a dull throbbing in her head that beat in time with the throbbing in her wounded arm.

"My ass," he answered back, pulling her arm up to look at it more closely. "He got you good. Let's see if we can find any medical equipment around here." He led her across a few splayed corpses and searched around the 'gate module, finally unearthing a small blue box. "Ah-hah."

He smiled as he pulled off her jacket, his gaze both soft and concerned as he set the coat aside and tore her shirt away from her forearm. She heaved a sigh and smiled back. "You and Morrigan make a good team," she said.

He gave her a mild frown. "She's a killer," he said. "No surprise there. So am I. When you need killers, we're a good choice. Doesn't mean anything more than that."

He sounded a bit defensive and she smiled again to ease his discomfort. “And I’m glad you two handled it so well. If I had stumbled upon this by myself, I would’ve been seriously screwed.”

“You’re right.” He flipped open the small blue box. “What the hell?” He reached in and extracted a small, one-liter plastic bottle filled with what appeared to be a clear liquid or gel. He popped the cap and sniffed.

There was nothing else in the box.

Val pressed her eyes most of the way shut and opened them again, summoning her courage to study the four deep furrows in her flesh. It stung, but the real pain hadn’t set in yet. It would, in time. Had she not been parahuman, she would’ve worried about infection.

Raven squeezed a little of the gel inside the bottle into his cupped palm and raised it to his lips. He tasted it and frowned deeply. “Weird. It numbed the end of my tongue.”

Shrugging, he reached over and dabbed a little on her wounds. Before their startled eyes, the wounds began to close as the pain receded. He smeared it on a little thicker and, as they watched, the wounds vanished completely. “Well, I’ll be damned,” Raven muttered. “We’ve got to get this stuff back to Starhaven.”

Val nodded. He was right. If the Cen were producing and sending out this stuff with *their* operatives, the medicos at base needed to backwards-engineer it and hand it out to their agents.

“Can we finish up with the screwing around and canoodling?” Morrigan asked waspishly. “We need to disable this thing completely and get the hell out of here.”

“What the matter, Morrigan? Getting nervous?” Raven grinned back at her.

She didn’t reply, instead settling her hands on her hips and glaring down at them, tapping her foot impatiently.

## Chapter Twenty

At dawn, Morrigan sent her crows up to do an aerial recon of the nearest islands. They returned around noon with information regarding several hybrid installations spread across the four they'd surveyed.

She found this puzzling. Why weren't they all gathering in one place? Certainly it would be easier to supply them from one worldgate rather than a dozen or more. There was something about this whole situation that stank to high heaven, and she was determined to get to the bottom of it. This bore no real resemblance to any Cen operation she'd ever heard about.

Had there been some sort of break in the Cen leadership? Was there now more than one faction operating out here? It *would* explain such things as this strange placement of troops, and the fact that Raven thought they were sponsoring the Church and its attempted monopoly on using magic.

The best thing was that they could capitalize on it if that was what was happening. The Cen had been a monolithic, indivisible threat for so long. Maybe their defeat on Earth Prime had led to fractures within their ranks. Which, in her mind, wasn't a bad thing.

She noticed Val watching her talk to the crows once they'd returned, so she waved her over. The blonde woman, who'd spent a good part of the morning supervising the digging of a mass grave for the dead hybrids, made her way across the clearing and stopped about ten feet away.

Morrigan suppressed a smile. She made Val nervous, which was not her intention at all. She rather liked the young woman, though she was

far too earnest and uptight for her tastes. She could use a few energetic tumbles with someone with a pulse.

She suppressed that thought, deciding it was a bit too catty. She liked the vampire, too, and had to admit he was nowhere near as cold-blooded as she'd originally assumed. He remained, however, far more barricaded within himself than she thought was healthy.

She nearly laughed at herself then. Psycho-analyzing the undead wasn't a particularly healthy pastime. The immortal part she got—the rest of it confused her. She knew something about the breed they never discussed with outsiders, what few mortals knew or understood about them in the first place. Vampires were a colony organism, ruled by the once-human brain that still resided within their skulls, but made up a colony of cooperative cells that bore very little resemblance to those of a true human being. They were as much alien as they were human, when you got right down to it.

“Can you really talk to them?” Val asked her with a pointed glance at her crows.

“I can. It's one of my few immortal talents, and a pretty weird one at that. I've been able to talk to crows since we first arrived on Earth, though it took me a while to realize I wasn't simply going nuts.”

“I can imagine,” Val said with a little laugh. “So what do they say?”

“Now they're telling me that there are a bunch of different encampments like this one across the nearest islands. What I can't figure out is *why*.”

“How about war games?” Val asked after a moment's thought.

Morrigan blinked at her. It seemed obvious in retrospect. It was really the most plausible explanation. Her estimation of the woman, which hadn't been lacking in the first place, went up another notch. “That makes sense. Kinda a weird way to go about it though.”

Val shrugged. “We were taught not to expect the Cen to make any sense from our perspective. They're alien, and their servants, however much human DNA they have, are just as alien. The hybrids who've defected to our side tend to think more like us, but this bunch? Not for a minute.”

“Explains the whole cannibal theory though, doesn’t it? If they’ve been using these islands as a training area for very long, it only makes sense that the sailors would have some hair-raising stories about them.”

Val nodded thoughtfully. “That’s a good point. So what now? Do we go from encampment to encampment slaughtering them, or do you have something else in mind?”

Morrigan closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She knew Val hadn’t meant to be insulting, and probably wouldn’t realize how offensive the question actually was, but she really hated to be painted as some kind of bloodthirsty mass murderer. She wasn’t, and neither was Raven. The hybrids weren’t human beings, but, even so, deserved a chance to escape their bonds and live as free people. Killing them surely wouldn’t go very far toward accomplishing *that* objective.

Their best bet, actually, was coming up with a way to disable the gate modules without leaving a trail of dead bodies behind them. If marooned here, the hybrids would likely be more open to negotiation. She knew that they weren’t mad beasts—she’d met several hybrids on Starhaven and had grown to consider them almost friends.

She certainly didn’t want to kill them all. When the vampire rose, she had a feeling he’d be as interested as she was in getting them to abandon their masters. It wouldn’t be easy, but leaving them stranded here would be a good first step. If she could turn them, and bring them home, she’d make her partner *very* happy.

Not that Val would easily believe most of this. Morrigan’s reputation had definitely preceded her, and the fact that most of the other immortals still distrusted her didn’t do much for her case.

She shook her head. “Uh-uh. We’re going to destroy the gate modules and leave them high and dry.”

Val considered this, then broke into a wide grin. “You’re going to try to free them, aren’t you?”

“It’s an option. They’re used to getting almost constant direction from their handlers. We cut them out of that loop and they’re going to lose any semblance of cohesion. Within a week on the outside, at least some of them will be approachable.”

“Those that aren’t completely pissed off,” Val added with a chuckle.

“There is that,” Morrigan grunted. “It’s not out the of the question that they’ll start fighting amongst themselves for real in order to secure whatever rations and other supplies they can find.”

“It’s going to get pretty damn hot around here, isn’t it?”

Morrigan responded with a quick nod. “Probably so.” She glanced over at the three sailors Val had conscripted to dig the grave. They’d finished excavating the hole and were eyeing the bodies nervously.

“Don’t worry,” Morrigan called out. “They’re not going to get up again.”

Three baleful glares converged on her and they spat in the trench as one. She knew they didn’t like taking orders from her—bad enough to have to share the ship with two women, but having to take orders from one? Humiliating.

The three men argued amongst themselves for a few minutes, then two of them broke off and went over to where the bodies were stacked. They grabbed the arms and legs, slowly slogged their way back to the edge of the pit, and tumbled it over the edge.

The two women watched as they disposed of the bodies one by one, then began to fill the trench using the primitive shovel they’d found in the gear surrounding the now defunct gate. One of the men, obviously of higher rank, watched as the other two men did the deed.

“When Raven wakes up we’ll start putting together a plan,” Morrigan said. “I’m assuming he plans on short-circuiting the other ‘gates in turn.”

Val regarded her with what Morrigan thought was a suspicious look. The young woman was too smart by half, she decided. She knew Morrigan had motives she hadn’t mentioned, and was, even now, nearly bursting at the seams with the urge to ask about them. But she was also smart enough to realize Morrigan wouldn’t give up her secrets that easily.

Morrigan suspected that Val would talk it over with the vampire later and he’d confront her about it sooner or later, forcing her to come clean.

She sighed inwardly. She hated all this political crap. Pretending to do one thing, or to pursue a certain agenda, while, in fact, chasing some

other objective altogether. Her life had grown a lot more complex than she liked, especially now that she was answering to someone else as well as her own conscience.

Not that her partner was that hard to work with, when you came right down to it. They shared similar motivations, and their ultimate goals were close enough that they made a better team than anyone would have expected. The woman was a little strange, of course, even for Morrigan, but what could one really expect from the Queen of the Goblins?



Val settled in, her back braced against one of the six foot tall side-arms of the worldgate module, her eyes following the dark-haired figure of Morrigan as she paced a thirty foot path on the other side of the encampment, apparently murmuring to herself. The woman was up to something, and Val wanted to know what it was.

Raven seemed to trust her, a fact that Val found more or less inexplicable. It wasn't as though Morrigan had done anything to *win* trust, after all. When it came down to it, Raven and Morrigan shared something she could never hope to with either of them—a memory of Earth before the Cen. Sure, the immortal woman had centuries upon centuries of memory before that to draw upon, but the fact still remained that Morrigan knew the time in which Raven had come of age. Val had only read about it, and, according to the vampire, nearly half of what she'd read was revisionist bullshit.

She knew it was stupid, but the chumminess between Raven and Morrigan made her a little nervous. Morrigan had all the morals of a cat in heat, which she'd made abundantly clear by making obvious advances on both Raven *and* Val herself at various times.

Though, Val had to admit, she hadn't sunk so low as to make similar advances toward Bryon, Goban, or any of the ship's crew. Now she thought about it, that was rather weird and out of character from what she'd observed of her so far.

Despite her doubts, Val also had to admit that she'd grown to enjoy Morrigan's company quite a bit. Her almost continual wry commentary on the personal habits and other foibles of their shipmates could skirt the edge of cruelty at times, but it was always funny.

No, the question wasn't whether she *liked* the woman, but whether she trusted her. And Val honestly couldn't say she did, no matter how much her lover apparently did.

Trusting someone with Morrigan's reputation was an iffy proposition, she decided, watching as the woman spun on a heel and paced back the other direction. What the hell was she doing?

She stopped dead in her tracks and threw up one arm as a blue-black bird dove from the sky and alighted there. She seemed to listen to the crow for a moment, smiling, then tossed it back up to wing its way southward.

*That* in itself freaked Val out. She wasn't a big fan of the breed in the first place. During one of her training missions she'd found herself alone on a battlefield, slightly wounded and knocked unconscious, and had awakened to find one of the beastly birds standing only a few feet away, its eyes like tiny pools of darkness staring at her. When she tried to shoo it off, it had hopped a couple feet away, cocked its head at her, and cawed something that sounded rather insulting.

No, she didn't care for crows.

One thing that made this particular detail bearable despite her suspicion of Morrigan and her damn birds was the fact that they'd left Bryon and the ex-merc aboard the ship, cloaked in a field of invisibility. Not that she really objected to Bryon anymore—ever since Raven had set him straight he'd been the very model of decorum and respect. No, the issue now was Goban, who'd actually started to make her skin crawl every time he came near her.

Cerberus had accompanied Raven into the wild just before dawn, most likely to guard him while he slept. He was certainly no ordinary dog, even though he seemed to be able to make people *think* he was. She had the eerie feeling the animal was a better telepath or empath than she

was herself, though the damned creature was so well shielded she couldn't know for certain.

She always had the impression the dog was laughing at her. Or, at the very least, a joke to which none of the humans in his company were privy. Yes, the dog was a complete wiseass. What was worse was that his only real loyalty seemed tied to Raven. If instructed to guard Val or the others, he would, but otherwise he looked after his master.

She glanced up at the sun, saw it making its leisurely way toward the horizon, and figured it would be another hour or so before Raven rose. Enough time, she decided, to close her eyes and catch a few minutes of rest herself.



Morrigan paused, throwing a glance over at the snoozing blonde woman, and smiled. It was probably better Val got some rest now, since there wouldn't be a lot of time for sleeping once all of this kicked into high gear. The vampire would have to be allowed to rest during the day, of course. There was no way around that. But Val, and Morrigan herself, would have to remain vigilant to make sure nothing went awry when the vampire was away.

Morrigan rarely slept, but she needed to be able to depend on someone for backup. She could conscript one of the crew, or perhaps Bryon, but she didn't want to give Goban any excuse to spend too much time snooping around. He'd given her the creeps since the alien ship and she didn't want to spend any more time in his company than she had to.

She spent the next couple hours prowling the perimeter of the encampment, pausing to receive updates from her crows every so often as they descended from the heavens with a bit of information. The hybrids inhabiting one of the nearby camps seemed to be making preparations to move out, most likely to assume the first phase of their war games.

They'd probably embark at dusk. Once they did, Raven could sneak in behind them and disable the 'gate, then follow them to where they were heading to take out the next in line.

She really hoped he went along with her plan. If he didn't, there'd be a lot of dead hybrids over the next couple of days. She was hoping he was still human enough to want to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. He seemed like he would, but she wasn't about to bet on anything where a vampire was concerned.

## Chapter Twenty-one

*Shit!* Raven launched himself from the dusty trail into the higher branches of the nearest tree, wrapping his hands around a convenient limb and waiting with perfect stillness as the cavalcade passed below his position.

So far the night's work had gone well. The hybrids had yet to figure out anything was wrong, though he'd managed to disable all the worldgates on this particular island. They were too busy with their mock war to realize someone had been sabotaging their equipment while they were on the prowl.

This changed things, however, and he wasn't quite sure how to handle it. He'd thought he'd caught a whiff of something earlier, when he'd snuck into one of the camps, but he'd passed it off to nerves. So far he hadn't seen anything that had pointed to the presence of anything but hybrids, so he'd figured his imagination was just screwing with him.

He should've known better. He'd never been *that* gifted, imagination-wise.

The valkyrie strode in the midst of a company of humanoid panthers, its pale blond hair shimmering in the fractured moonlight shining through the canopy of trees as it moved from one dappled spot to another.

He had to remain as still as possible, since the valkyrie had an immortal's senses, nearly as refined as his own. Even the slightest movement could alert the creature to his presence, and that was the last thing he wanted. He'd fought a valkyrie once, and more or less won, but it had been a close thing. Going up against one in addition to a squad of hybrid panthers would probably result in him getting his ass kicked.

He could always shoot the damned thing, but, even if that took it down, the whole area would be crawling with hybrids within minutes. There was no way they'd be able to ignore a gunshot echoing through the forest.

He figured there were at least a hundred or more within hearing range and he was pretty certain even *he* would have his hands full with that many of the bastards. Not to mention that Morrigan had told him she wanted them all alive.

He hadn't asked why, though he had his suspicions. She hadn't come clean about why she was even here, but he'd pieced together a few thoughts that made sense. She'd been smuggling weapons to the would-be revolution, and hinted at an alliance with other immortals, so he had a feeling she was involved in setting up another agency of some kind. That was, after all, what most of the immortals he knew were doing these days—trying to figure out how to justify their innate need to meddle, and impressing mere mortals into their service to do their dirty work.

Didn't explain why Morrigan was here, precisely, since she was doing her own dirty work, but he was sure there'd be a good explanation for that somewhere down the road. Maybe she wasn't the one in charge, though he had to admit he found it difficult to imagine her taking orders from anyone else.

Maybe she was working for herself *and* this mysterious other. He figured she wanted to try and recruit these hybrids, which actually wasn't a bad idea. TAU and Sash already had a few hybrid agents and, from what he knew, they were working out rather well, even though they couldn't work on worlds like this one. They were mostly assigned to worlds that had been liberated from the Cen, or as spies on worlds that were still under Cen rule.

When the troupe had disappeared around a bend in the trail some distance away, he dropped to the ground and made his way back to their camp. Val took one look at his face when he arrived and went ashen. "What's wrong?"

"Valkyrie," he told her, glancing around. "Where's Morrigan?"

Quite unbidden, the sound of her heartbeat skipping to a faster rhythm reached his ears and he paused for a moment to catch her gaze. “It’s okay,” he said. “We’ll deal with it.”

She nodded quickly, as if trying to convince herself, and moved closer. “I don’t know where she is. She’s taken to prowling the darkness, too,” she told him. “What if she runs into—”

“They’re not coming this way,” he said, cutting her off. “And Morrigan can take care of herself at least as well as either of us can.” He turned as Cerberus trotted up and exchanged a quick empathic dialogue with the dog.

The creature gave a low rumble of assent and dashed off, vanishing into the forest like a four-footed ghost. “He’ll find her.”



Val nodded, a little taken aback. He had a telepathic link with the dog—it was the only possible explanation. How, she didn’t know. Especially considering he was completely closed off to her, and, presumably, any other psychic. She seemed to remember reading that not even the first vampire, Renee Fontaine, had been able to read Raven.

This was a remarkable talent, and, in its way, similar to Morrigan’s communication with the crows—which she also could not overhear. She wondered if it had to do with it being broadcast on a different wavelength, and that telepathy wasn’t her best talent anyway.

She would’ve liked to listen in on these conversations, to be honest. *Just out of curiosity, of course.* To be able to communicate with animals directly—even if only enhanced ones—would be an amazing achievement.

And she had no doubt the two crows were somehow enhanced. The dog was, obviously.

She found herself wishing she had a companion like that. Someone she could rely on absolutely. Not that she didn’t trust Raven, but she knew that when this whole operation was over, she’d most likely be assigned somewhere else and might possibly not see him again for years, if ever.

That thought depressed her and she tried to shove it in a dark corner of her mind. She had more important things to worry about at the moment.



Morrigan froze as a spasm went through her body. *What the hell was that?* she wondered. She rubbed at her arms vigorously as a chill stole over her. She ducked into a hollow between two trees and a sprawling mass of thorny bushes she could only assume in the dark to be blackberries. *Are there blackberries in Japan?* she found herself wondering. She stilled her mind and waited, then heard the nearly silent tread of footsteps on the path some distance to her left.

She slid closer to the trunk of the tree on that side and held her breath, not wanting anything to betray her presence. She knew instantly that it wasn't any of her allies—there were too many feet stirring the earth. Maybe as many as twenty, she realized, and, with them, a much larger creature most accustomed to moving silently.

She lowered herself slowly, squatting on her heels, and watching in perfect silence as they passed her hiding spot. She kept her head turned slightly toward the tree to prevent any chance of her eyes reflecting anything out at them. She watched them using her peripheral vision.

They weren't carrying any light sources she could see, but the huge figure in the center of the column seemed to glow with its own unearthly light.

She wanted to spit. A valkyrie. It figured. She chewed her lower lip, considering her options. Even if she *could* take on the valkyrie—which was debatable—she'd never be able to handle the dozen or so hybrids accompanying it at the same time.

She clenched her jaw and waited.

As the creature drew opposite her, it slowed a bit, dragging its huge bare feet. It was naked except for a loincloth, a capitulation to modesty which she actually found amusing, since the damned things weren't in any respect anatomically correct. They simply had no primary or secondary sexual characteristics. From what she understood, they didn't

produce any kind of waste so didn't need any method of expelling it, liquid or solid.

The damn things were asexual, and no more human than the average machine.

It sensed her presence, but wasn't sure what it was sensing. It stopped for a long moment and she felt her legs tremble just slightly, threatening to pitch her forward right onto the trail at its feet. Then, as if shaking itself out of reverie, it continued on, a few smaller rat hybrids bringing up the rear.

Once they'd vanished from sight, she slowly stood and stretched. She'd better get back to camp and let the others know about the valkyrie. It wouldn't do to have one of them stumble upon the creature unexpectedly. *That*, she decided, *would be bad*.



Raven climbed out of his makeshift grave the next evening to find the ground covered in a feathery layer of snow, with more of the stuff swirling through the air. He looked around and sighed irritably. This wasn't good. The snow would make it easier to track their enemies, but it would make their own tracks that much more obvious.

So far they'd lucked out in the fact that there weren't any canine hybrids among them. Probably figured it would make the war games a little too easy, he thought. But it meant they weren't given any major advantages in the tracking department.

The way he figured it, there were only a handful of operational worldgates left, and, if he got busy, he could eliminate them by dawn. But first he had to check on the women.

He turned at the sound of something moving through the brush and saw Cerberus approaching, treading through the snow with a disgusted look on his doggy face. Raven grinned at him and ruffled the fur around his neck.

At his silent suggestion, the beast seemed to shrink and, as they walked across the thin sheet of snow covering the earth, his tracks were

those of a much smaller animal, while the vampire left no discernable tracks at all.

They seemed to glide through the falling snow, emerging from the woods into the clearing where the women had set up camp. To his surprise, Raven found the clearing empty except for a small white tent erected between the posts of the worldgate, and the distinct hum of a thermal heater from inside.

Cerberus poked his nose through the door flap, made a chuffing noise, and turned back to gaze at Raven.

The vampire frowned, looking around at the ground. It seemed unlikely that both Val and Morrigan would be off attending to the call of nature at the same time. Neither were ignorant of security threats, and leaving the encampment unattended was most definitely a bad move.

He didn't see any tracks that appeared to belong to either of them, though he *did* see an assortment of what might have been animal tracks, but were more than likely hybrid. They looked recent, but the fact that he saw no signs of a struggle gave him a reason to hope, though he didn't like the fact that he saw no obvious signs of the women.

It wasn't as though either of them would go down easily. There'd be torn up earth and, presumably, more than a few hybrid corpses. Even the presence of a valkyrie wouldn't have changed that.

"Track," he told Cerberus. The dog whoofed an assent and began snooping around the site, black nose twitching as he trudged in every expanding circles. Then, reaching the very edge of the encampment, a nearly invisible game trail, he paused, glancing back at Raven. As soon as he saw the vampire had noticed where he was, he ducked into the underbrush.

Sighing, Raven followed. Now that he no longer had his coat, the bushes had the irritating tendency to shred his clothing. He'd already gone through the five changes he'd brought from the ship, and only had a few more available on board.

This whole expedition was turning into one big headache. Not to mention destroying his wardrobe. Over the course of his existence, he'd grown to dislike the wilderness, but never more than he did right now.



“Where are we going?” Val asked Morrigan, irritated and tired. Her feet hurt and she felt as though she’d been walking for miles.

“Shhh,” said the other woman in very low tones. “They’re just on the other side of that ridge right there.”

Val gave her a disgusted look and stopped in her tracks. “We are *not* following the hybrids and that damned valkyrie, are we?” The immortal had more or less dragged her into the woods just before their camp had been invaded by the creatures, and then taken her on this cross-country trek without explanation. Now she knew why and wasn’t exactly happy about it.

To make things worse, she was cold, probably in a way that the immortal woman couldn’t feel. She was dressed warmly enough, she supposed, but the gathering snow had started to seep through her boots and her toes had gone numb.

This was insane. What did the woman actually hope to accomplish? She opened her mouth to say something else but a razor gaze from Morrigan silenced her before she could utter a sound.

She leaned close and whispered to Val, “The valkyrie is starting to realize something is wrong. Apparently they’re figuring out that the ’gates weren’t shut down from the other side.”

Val nodded. That wasn’t unexpected. Keeping worldgates open for a long time could be a massive energy drain and it wasn’t unusual for them to be cut off for long periods of time for recharge and as an energy-saving measure. They’d hoped the hybrids would assume this to be the case, but hadn’t really counted on the valkyrie’s presence and greater knowledge of operations.

“Run!” Morrigan yelled suddenly, giving Val an abrupt shove that shot her out from the trees and across the narrow path, her feet skidding out from beneath her. The explosive sound of a pair of wings catching air caused her to spin, stones beneath the snow digging into her knees.

The valkyrie hit the ground with a solid thud, so hard that it was almost as though she could feel it through her whole body. It turned a

burning gaze her direction, then seemed to dismiss her as it turned towards the copse of trees behind it.

One might expect something that large to be ponderous, but the valkyrie was anything but. Its movements were quick and sure, and it met Morrigan's charge with an outstretched arm, the blade of her rapier skittering across its thick-skinned forearm as its anvil-sized fist smashed her from her feet.

Extending her arm, Val projected a lance of telekinetic force, focused as tightly as she could, directly into the back of the valkyrie's head. She poured everything she had into that single blast, and felt the world spin around her as she struggled to remain conscious. Tiny sparkles danced before her eyes against a sea of black but she managed to claw her way back to awareness, though her head pounded as though a thousand dwarven hammers were beating against her brain.

Raven arrived just in time to see the valkyrie fall, its head a ruin of scarlet, white, and gray. He rushed to Val, who swayed on her knees, eyes clenched tightly closed. He caught her as she started to topple and she opened her eyes just far enough to gaze up at him. "I tried," she murmured. "I didn't have anything more—"

"You did great," he replied, still not sure what had happened. The valkyrie, however, was undeniably dead.

## Chapter Twenty-two

“She came very close to killing herself,” Morrigan told Raven on the third night after the death of the valkyrie. “And it probably wasn’t from lack of trying.”

They stood outside the tent where Val had spent the last three days nearly comatose, surfacing only on occasion to stagger outside and heed the call of nature or, all too infrequently, to eat a few bites.

He gave a deep sigh. “Is she going to be okay?”

Morrigan started to nod, then shrugged instead. “How the hell do I know? I’m not a healer. I *think* so, but I’m not sure what the long term repercussions of this sort of energy drain *are*.”

Raven nodded, feeling a bit sick despite the fact that he shouldn’t even be able to. He was terribly worried about Val and this half-life within which she was currently trapped. He hoped she came out of it soon. He was starting to feel frantic, and didn’t like it.

Thankfully the hybrids had taken the valkyrie’s death as some sort of sign, and had seemingly retired to another nearby island to regroup. It wouldn’t last for long, more than likely, but if it lasted a few days it would be a good thing. If they came back and wanted blood, he would have preferred Val be on her feet. As things stood, if she wasn’t up by a couple of hours before dawn, he’d be taking her back to the *Rakehell*. She’d be a hell of a lot safer there than she was here.

He mentioned this notion to Morrigan, who glanced back at the tent and nodded. “Probably a good idea. You’ll be happy to know the hybrids seem to be digging in—they sure as hell don’t look like they’re going to come screaming up on us out of the blue.”

He nodded again. Her crows had proved to be very handy in that regard. Aerial surveillance was a beautiful thing, particularly here on a world where they'd never heard of it. If his plan went forward the way he intended, the crows would be invaluable, assuming that he could trust Morrigan to go along with it. Then again, he'd been left with the impression she loathed the Church as much as he did, and would be happy to help out.

He needed to talk to her about it but, oddly enough, felt a little hesitant about broaching the subject. Maybe he was just conflicted at the moment, filled with the urge to make sure Val remained safe. If they ended up in an overt war against the Church, maybe none of them would be safe.

Except Morrigan, perhaps. Immortals were even harder to kill than vampires, most particularly since they didn't explode when sunlight hit them.

He jerked his gaze toward the tent as a tiny moan escaped it and he rushed to the flap to peer inside. Val was struggling to sit up, looking dazed and confused. "Raven?"

He crawled into the tent and took her hand as she blinked blearily at him. "Everything's good," he told her. He wanted to yell at her for taking the risk she had, but figured that could wait. Right now he just wanted to make sure she was all right.

Her gaze was cloudy, her grasp a little feeble, but he could see her eyes regaining focus as she looked at him. "How long was I out?"

"Three days."

"And the valkyrie?"

"You exploded its head." He paused a second, then, "Morrigan says you could have killed yourself doing it."

She nodded slowly, then winced. "I have *such* a headache."

"Somehow I'm not surprised. You hungry? I think Morrigan has a stew going out there."

"More thirsty than hungry."

He flashed back out of the tent, snagged a canteen out of Morrigan's hand just as she was taking a drink, and shimmered back into existence

in front of Val an instant later. He passed her the canteen and watched with a small smile as she drained, then handed it back. “I suppose you need to visit the bushes now...?”

She nodded, then winced again. “You would not *believe* how badly I need to pee.”



Raven and Morrigan strode out of the darkness into the hybrid camp, neither showing the slightest hint of trepidation as the gazes of the assembled beast-men fell upon them. When they entered, there were only about twenty gathered around the large fire set in the midst of a ring of tents. One, a tiger hybrid of truly massive proportions, stepped forward, teeth bared in a silent snarl. “You destroyed the worldgates,” he said, not so much angrily as in a straight-forward, matter-of-fact manner.

Raven shrugged, and nodded. “I thought it was the best strategy to take.”

One of the others, shorter, but twice again as wide in the shoulders, stepped forward, its wolverine’s face twisted into an expression of pure rage. “We ought to kill you both,” he growled.

“You could try,” Morrigan replied with a deceptively sweet smile. “It would be a painful lesson, that’s for sure.”

The wolverine hybrid started to surge forward, but ran into the tiger’s extended arm. “No,” he said. “They’re here to talk, not fight. I want to hear what they have to say.”

“That’s a wise move,” Morrigan said.

Raven shot her a glower. The last thing they needed was to needle these guys past the point of tolerance. He knew she could be a sarcastic bitch, but this was one time it wasn’t going to fly. “That’s what we’re here for,” he told the tiger. “My name is Raven. This is Morrigan. We want to talk.”

“They call me Tuck. This is Claw.”

“Claw the wolverine?” Morrigan chuckled. “And Tuck the Tiger? Too rich.”

“Would you shut up?” Raven hissed. “You keep running your mouth, you’re going to piss them off.” He turned back to the tiger and nodded. “We’re here to talk.”

“Which one of you killed the valkyrie?” Tuck asked out of the blue.

“Neither, actually, though either of us might have,” Morrigan answered quickly, before Raven could get a word in edgewise.

“They’re not easy to kill,” the wolverine admitted grudgingly. “It takes a real warrior.”

“Well, the one thing you can say about fang-boy here is that he’s tough as nails,” Morrigan said with a sly smile.

“Fang boy?” Raven shook his head at her choice of appellations, but he couldn’t quite suppress a smile. Morrigan was irrepressible. She’d probably laugh and spit in the face of death while whistling merrily. There was something to be said for it, even if it could be aggravating at times.

“My first impulse was to thank you,” Tuck told them. “You have no idea what it’s like to live under one’s thumb.”

“I’d have killed it a *long* time ago,” Morrigan responded.

Claw was staring at the tiger with an unreadable expression, but something told Raven he wasn’t happy with what he was hearing. *Tough*, Raven decided. He had the distinct impression that Tuck was going to be fairly easy to reason with—he harbored no love for his masters.

Pretty much the result he’d been hoping for, but actually more than he’d anticipated. He just hoped that the whole thing didn’t prompt a revolt in their ranks. Tuck seemed to be the leader, but that could change pretty quickly if enough of the others decided they didn’t like him treating with the enemy.

The rest of the crowd around the fire was watching with interest, but no one except Claw seemed inclined to offer up any dialogue. This suggested that Claw was probably second in command, or at least an equally strong leader in his own right. Raven wasn’t sure how their internal politics worked. If nothing else it would be something to learn about in the days to come.

If things didn't explode, that was. At the moment he was satisfied by the way things were going.

"Can I talk to you in private for a moment?" Claw asked Tuck.

The tiger shook his head in a distinctly human gesture. "I'm not interested in debating anything, Claw. To tell you the truth, this is an opportunity and I plan to make the most of it."

This admission provoked a startled murmur among those observing the exchange. Raven watched them carefully, certain that a couple of the discussions that erupted were likely to devolve into physical disputes.

But Tuck whirled on them, claw-tipped forefinger stabbing into their midst. "You cannot tell me that you enjoy being slaves!" he roared. "Make no mistake, that's what we are!"

Claw was visibly restraining himself from leaping at Tuck's unprotected back. Raven shook his head. "I wouldn't," he warned softly.

All this managed to accomplish was to turn the wolverine's malevolent intent upon them.

Morrigan shook her head. "Not on your best day," she drawled quietly, giving the wolverine hybrid the evil eye.

He blinked in momentary puzzlement, obviously thinking they couldn't really pose a threat to his fearsome claws and teeth, not to mention the large axe strapped to his back Raven hadn't noticed until that instant. The harness he wore was rather cleverly camouflaged to match his pelt and happened to be the only thing resembling clothing he wore.

"You're mighty bold," he said, shooting a glance over his shoulder at Tuck, who was still orating at his fellow hybrids.

Raven made a quick note of the fact that nearly all of them were feline in origin, obviously designed from various types of big cat, except for a few notable exceptions such as Claw. He saw no wolves or bears among them, a fact he found somewhat curious. If things didn't go to pieces in the next few minutes, he might ask Tuck about it.

Morrigan repeated her sweet smile, which was about as sincere as a used car salesman's back on Earth when Raven had been mortal. "Now I

think you're catching on, my furred friend," she said pleasantly. "We're bold because we have reason to be."

Raven didn't like what he was seeing in the eyes of those Tuck was addressing. He had the distinct feeling it had nothing to do with any loyalty to the Cen, but more a matter of not trusting non-hybrids to be particularly concerned with protecting their interests.

Had the situation been any less tense, Raven might have laughed aloud. The Cen had made their slaves *too* well—they needed sentient creatures able to adapt to changing circumstances, able to make judgment calls on their own initiative, but that came with an equal likelihood of them learning to consider themselves ultimately worthy of determining their own fates.

Arrogance was the Cen's primary weakness. They didn't seem to be able to grasp that their slaves might develop their own perspective on things and act according to principles that didn't mesh with their creators.

He hadn't met a Cen himself, nor did he know anyone who had. They were reclusive and rarely, if ever, left their home world or the crèche worlds on which they bred and raised their hybrid servants. He'd dearly love the opportunity to question one though. Had they no dissidents? Was every Cen a believer? Could they ever be reasoned with?

He'd probably never get the opportunity to ask, though he'd give half his amassed fortune for the chance. "Stop antagonizing him," he hissed at Morrigan. "We do *not* want to get into a fight here."

She actually looked a little abashed and nodded. "Sorry. Guess he's just rubbing me the wrong way."

He gave her a hard stare, then shrugged inwardly. She *was* who she was, after all. Did he expect her to become all sweetness and light just because they were working together? She was an abrasive bitch and liked it that way.

Claw was twitching in a way that put his nerves on edge. Raven watched as a tremor seemed to ride up his legs and his torso as his thick, dark-palmed hands clenched into white-knuckled fists. He winced.

He'd seen the creature's talons, and knew they were digging into his palms about now.

He wanted to attack so badly he was having trouble restraining himself. If the end result didn't have the potential to be so explosive, it might even have been intriguing to watch. As it was, Raven scrambled for something to say to defuse the wolverine.

His head snapped up as Tuck knocked another one of the cats—this one a black leopard—to the ground with a single blow. His voice rose in a threatening roar. “We will at least listen to what they have to say!”

The sudden violence pushed Claw over the edge. He uttered a low growl and charged them. Morrigan, looking almost bored, flexed her fingers and launched a spell that bound the wolverine and held him a few feet off the ground. “We'll have none of that,” she said, walking forward and patting the creature's furry cheek. Claw snapped at her fingers, his eyes flooded with rage.

Raven shook his head at her and glanced back toward the others. Silence had fallen and they were all looking at the three of them now. He wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing. Then one of the weasels snickered. “I'd give *anything* to know how you did that,” he said amidst a barking laugh. Or at least, Raven *thought* it was a he; it was hard to tell with some of them

And just like that the tension seemed to drain from everyone. Raven felt nearly giddy from the relief. “Are we ready to talk now?” he asked Tuck as he approached.

The tiger nodded. “We're ready. But you'd better make it good.”



Cerberus lifted his head and let out a low, rumbling growl, bringing Val to her feet. Shakily, she had to admit, but at least she could stand. She held her rapier in front of her, fingers wrapped around the hilt, her gaze stabbing into the darkness. “What's out there, boy?”

He'd been laying several feet away, deliberately facing away from the small fire she'd built to keep herself warm in the chill hours before dawn. A harsh wind had sprang up out of nowhere around midnight, making

the whole fire-lighting experience extremely frustrating, but she'd finally gotten it going well enough to heat up the rabbit stew Morrigan had left for her.

A shiver ran through her as Cerberus surged to his feet and backed around the fire, coming to stand next to her. She laid one hand on his back, feeling the tension in his muscles as he continued to scan the night. He lifted his nose and sniffed and she felt his hackles rise beneath her fingers.

This couldn't be good. Whatever it was.

Something cracked in the woods opposite her, across the fire. An icy numbness settled in the pit of her stomach and she could taste her heart beating in her throat.

## Chapter Twenty-three

Her first thought when they came out of the forest was that they were lycanthropes—werewolves—but they were too small, and too humanoid. They were taller than her, definitely, at about six and a half feet, and wore mottled green and black camouflage, like military BDUs. They carried bows and had swords strapped to their hips.

They fanned out around the camp, searching through everything while she and Cerberus watched, directed by a slightly larger representative of their kind. *Obviously the alpha*, she thought, as her eyes met its golden gaze. *Her golden gaze*, she realized with a start. The alpha was a female. Val wasn't sure how she knew this, but she did. Something about the way she moved?

Cerberus glanced up at her and she smiled hesitantly. She didn't expect him to try to defend her from eight wolf hybrids—especially since none of them had offered her any threat so far.

The alpha walked around the fire and straight up to her. "I assume you're what happened to the worldgates." she said. It wasn't a question. The other wolves lined up to the left of the fire, eyeing Val and Cerberus with distinct suspicion.

"Not precisely," Val said.

The alpha's gaze flicked down to the rapier in her hand. "That pig-sticker isn't going to do you any good."

"If that's a hint that you want me to drop it, it's not going to happen."

The wolf cocked her head and stared at her. "You can't possibly win a fight against us."

"You'd be surprised," Val said sadly. "I don't want to fight, but I'm not going to surrender either."

“Did I ask you to?”

She wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that. “No, but I suspect you were about to.”

“What are you, a mind-reader?”

“Actually, yes. Sometimes.”

The wolf looked nonplussed for a moment. “You don’t attack us, we won’t attack you. We’re just trying to find the weasel camp.”

“The weasel camp?”

“Yes. Our mission objective is to sneak into their camp, disable their gate—which is probably an unnecessary step at this point—and capture their leader.”

“Who’s their leader?”

“Some *barqua* named Claw,” the wolf replied. “A pretty tough customer, from all reports. But the weasels aren’t very good at teamwork.”

“There were something like eight camps on this island alone, and more on the adjoining islands,” Val told her. “Most were abandoned after we disabled the gates and killed the valkyrie.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” the alpha replied. “You killed the valkyrie?”

Val nodded, hoping it wasn’t the wrong thing to admit. “You have a name?”

The wolf’s lip curled into what might have been a smile. It could also have been a snarl. Val was hoping it was a smile. “Bridget.”

*How in the hell do these creatures get their names?* Val found herself wondering. Bridget, after all, was a human name, and as far as she knew they were given very little knowledge of their human ancestry. The Cen, for all of their vaunted intelligence, could be remarkably stupid at times. Maybe they were educating their slaves a little *too* much. “Nice to meet you, Bridget. I’m Val.” She extended her hand without thinking.

The alpha appeared a little baffled by this but, after a moment, enveloped Val’s hand in her grasp. The skin on her palm was calloused and rough, thicker than that of a human’s. “If you killed the valkyrie, I have to thank you for it.”

It was Val's turn to look puzzled. "I kinda figured you'd be pissed about it."

"Pissed?"

"Angry."

"Ah—well, the valkyrie was a bastard. Most of them are, but this one was worse than usual. We were bound to follow its orders, but some were outright idiotic. Had this been a real operation rather than an exercise, it might well have gotten us killed."

"I don't understand," Val said. "You're being trained to do what—invade this world?"

Bridget shrugged. "I don't know. It's possible. Things have been very mixed up lately—I've talked to older slaves and they said that it wasn't always this way. The orders they received from on high used to make sense, but now it's like there's no one steering the boat.

"Or too many people steering the boat," she added in a musing tone. "If I didn't know better, I'd say the empire was collapsing."

"Why do you know better?" Val asked, genuinely curious. It would be simply amazing if the Cen empire shattered, though it could well plunge a thousand worlds into chaos. She wasn't sure if it would be a good thing to hope for or not. It would free a lot of people, but it would also kill more people than she could easily calculate.

"Because they told me..." Bridget let her voice trail off. "Because they told me so," she repeated, clearly irritated with herself. She shook her head and grunted something Val couldn't quite make out.

She turned to her squad. "Secure the perimeter," she told them. "If even a field mouse crosses into the area, I want to know about it. Go!"

They exploded into motion, vanishing into the forest like so many furry ghosts. "You work for the immortals, don't you?"

Val blinked at her. She was remarkably knowledgeable when you got right down to it. She couldn't figure out why the Cen would educate their slaves any more than absolutely necessary—though it could be argued that they needed to know about the immortals to be informed as to what they'd be up against.

Still seemed odd. None of this followed the Cen Empire's standard operating procedure according to what she'd learned in agency school. None of this made any sense whatsoever.

"I work for the immortals, yes."

"Good. My team wants to defect."

*Well*, thought Val, *that was certainly easier than I thought it would be.* "Okay. Good." She wasn't quite sure what to say next. Where in the hell were Raven and Morrigan? She could really use some backup here, she decided. Somebody with more of a plan than she had. "You'll have to wait until my companions get back."

Bridget seemed to consider that and then nodded. She opened her mouth to say something else but the buzzing whine of the allegedly disabled worldgate re-activating cut her off. The silver doorway sprang into existence in an instant and the three of them whirled just in time to see a single giant figure stride out of it.

It was another valkyrie.



Morrigan didn't like how easily all of this had gone. Every instinct within her was screaming that something was off about this whole arrangement. The hybrids were way too eager to join up for her comfort, though their motivations seemed clear enough. They didn't feel like they were being protected by their absentee 'masters.'

But what did this say about the Cen indoctrination procedures? These creatures had been raised from infancy with loyalty conditioning efforts at maximum overdrive twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. They *had* to identify with their masters—how would they know how to think any other way? Hell, the Cen could probably program it into their genes.

So why did they seem so eager to escape, to join up with their masters' most hated enemies? It didn't ring right, like they were walking into some sort of a trap.

The only one of the hybrids whose reactions she actually trusted was the one who'd tried to attack them.

Maybe she was just being a suspicious bitch, but being a suspicious bitch was far better than being caught by surprise by whatever screwy game plan their masters had dreamed up. She'd already targeted a spell on the tiger for when things went south, simply the nastiest offensive spell she'd ever designed. He wouldn't even have a chance to scream before it tore him limb from limb.

They trooped through the forest towards the camp they'd taken over, Raven in the lead, Morrigan following not far behind, the captive Claw floating in the air between her and their hybrid escort. They'd be there in less than a minute.

Raven halted and lifted his hand. "Val and Cerberus are not alone," he murmured. She glanced over her shoulder as the column of hybrids ground to a halt.

She slipped forward and peered out of the underbrush alongside him. "I'd been wondering where the wolves were," she said quietly.

"Yeah, me too. But what really interests me is the valkyrie. There's something different about it..."

"The fact that it's not an *it*?" she said. The creature was obviously a valkyrie—the massive frame and angelic aspect was too familiar to mistake. But she'd never seen, or heard of, a valkyrie possessing a definable gender. This one was female, and wearing more clothes than was generally common with the valkyries, though its outfit revealed a wide expanse of alabaster flesh nonetheless. It seemed almost scary to contemplate how enticing the creature was—beauty and brawn all wrapped up in one deluxe-size package.

Val looked to be in deep conversation with the creature, looking as relaxed as Morrigan had ever seen her. Even the dog, ostensibly there to protect her, seemed quite comfortable lying in front of the fire, watching as one of the wolf hybrids stirred it with a long stick.

Raven jumped as the valkyrie raised her gaze to his. "You can come out now, Raven. I know you and Morrigan are there. Tell your companions that they may come out as well, though I strongly recommend they not offer us any violence."

Raven stepped out into the clearing, gaze locked upon the valkyrie's. "Tell the hybrids to behave," he told Morrigan without looking back. "I'm not sure what's going on, but I plan to find out."

She made no reply. Not that he'd been expecting one. She positively stank of suspicion, and, if anything, this development would make it worse. She expected the hybrids to turn at any minute and, if he was being honest with himself, he'd have to admit that he wasn't sure it wasn't going to happen himself.

Sometimes paranoia was what kept an agent healthy. So to speak. Health wasn't exactly one of Raven's primary concerns, though he wasn't thrilled about anything that might put holes in his body.

Or, he thought, with a covert glance at the sky, anything that stalled him long enough to risk him being caught in the open when dawn came.

This, he had the feeling, definitely had that potential.

He strode confidently across the clearing, stopping several feet away from the valkyrie, smiling slightly at Val as she stood and walked over to join him. Cerberus didn't stand, though his tail thumped the ground a couple of times.

"Traitor," Raven growled, not really meaning it. The dog's tail thumped against the ground with even more enthusiasm.

He pulled Val against him, throwing an arm around her shoulders as he brought his gaze in line with the valkyrie's once again. "Who are you?"

"My name is not important," the valkyrie said, in a voice as pure and sweet as a mountain stream. "What's important is warning you of the danger you're in."

Raven's eyes narrowed as he stared at her. "How am I in any more danger than I've ever been?"

She gave him a flat stare in response. "You were never targeted specifically," she told him. "That's about to change."

If he had been anyone else, this news might have startled, or even worried him. But not Raven. He gave her a curt nod. "And you're here to warn me of this?"

"Among other things," she said. "You are about to be betrayed by someone you trust."

“Lady, you have *no* idea who I do or do not trust,” Raven responded through clenched teeth. He loathed people who assumed they knew how he felt, or what he was thinking.

Despite the fact that she towered over him, somehow, for a moment, they seemed to be eye-to-eye. Val shook her head to banish the illusion, but it persisted for a several heartbeats before fading. She wrapped her arms around herself and glanced between them, not at all sure what she’d just seen. Magic? Or something inexplicable? Had they even noticed it?

“There are things going on behind the scenes you know nothing about, vampire.” The valkyrie stated this as a matter-of-fact and Val could feel Raven tensing next to her. She wanted to tell him that she trusted this creature, but wasn’t sure she wanted to do it right in front of her. They’d had some time to talk, and she understood more about the Cen and what was going on here than she ever expected to. The Cen were fracturing, with some wanting to retreat to their stronghold worlds, others wanting to take the fight to a new level, and a third faction who wanted to begin negotiations to halt the hostilities. This valkyrie said she represented the third group and Val had been able to pick up enough out of the creature’s mind that she knew she told the truth about that, at least, though she couldn’t shake the feeling the valkyrie hadn’t been completely up-front about everything.

No surprise there. “Can we have a moment?” she asked the valkyrie. She had refused to supply a name to her as well. Annoying, but hardly something she was willing to throw a fit about. If she wanted to be known as ‘hey you!’ it was no skin off *her* nose.

She received a nod and led Raven to a point several feet away, hoping that it was far enough to carry on a conversation without being overheard. “She’s on the level,” she told him. “We were right—the Cen are fighting amongst themselves.”

He nodded. “A great opportunity. We need to take advantage of it.” He didn’t bother expressing any doubts—if she said it, he obviously trusted her judgment. That realization gave her a warm feeling, but she did her

best to ignore it. This was not the time nor the place to be distracted by that sort of thing, regardless of how good it felt. They had a job to do.

Of course, that job now involved specifically defying TAU's standing orders, but she could live with that.

## Chapter Twenty-four

“Glad someone besides Raven can do that mumbo-jumbo,” Val drawled, glancing over her shoulder as Morrigan dismissed the invisibility shield around the ship and the vessel seemed to spring fully formed from the cold blue sea.

Val had been bitching about the vampire all the way to the ship. Not that it had done her any good; Morrigan didn’t act the least bit sympathetic. Val didn’t care. She felt as though Raven was trying to get her out of harm’s way—even though they did need to inform the ship’s captain and their allies aboard about their potential passengers—and that aggravated the hell out of her. She didn’t need protecting. And besides, she didn’t really anticipate the Captain taking this latest development any too well. “Are you coming with me?” she asked with a pointed glance over her shoulder.

Morrigan shook her head. “I’ll drop you aboard, but I need to get back to the hybrids and our friend, the valkyrie—Raven wants me to keep an eye on them.”

“Perfect,” Val muttered, though she shouldn’t have expected anything different. She was a full agent and if her job at this point involved telling uncomfortable truths to people who didn’t want to hear them, that was just part of the deal. “So can you transport me to the ship?”

“Not a problem,” Morrigan answered. She did something mystical and suddenly Val was standing on the gently swaying deck. She fought back a moment of disorientation and looked around. A few crewmen were glaring at her, not even having the grace to be startled by her sudden appearance. For folks who were almost comically superstitious when she and Raven had first come aboard, they’d grown pretty damned

accustomed to magic. They still didn't much care for having women aboard, though.

Bryon leaped off the foredeck, staggering a few steps as his feet struck the main deck and pulled up short a short distance away from her, realizing that hugging her wouldn't have been appropriate. "Val! I've missed you!"

She returned his infectious grin. "It's good to see you too, Bryon." She shifted her gaze and watched Goban slide down the ladder from the forecastle. He turned to face her, eyes filled with something she couldn't define, and definitely didn't like.

"Where's Morrigan?" he asked her gruffly, scanning the deck for any sign of the woman.

"She has other things to do," Val replied cryptically, not wanting to give him any more information than she had to. He'd learn what was going on soon enough, when she informed the captain. The ex-merc had changed while they were in the alien ship. She'd liked him before, but now she could barely stand to turn her back on him. It gave her chills every time she did.

What was worse is the fact she could no longer read him even a little. At first, he was nearly an open book—even considering her moderate telepathic skills, he'd worn his thoughts as if they were printed on his forehead.

Not now, though. Now it was like he lived behind a ten foot thick wall of ice that had sprang into being while they had walked the curving corridors of the crashed starship together. Something lurked behind those eyes that she wasn't even sure she wanted to see. If not for the fact that her life might depend on it, she wouldn't even bother to try. But try she did.

And fail. What was worst was that she was still uncertain whether it was her limited talents in that area or something more insidious that kept her from succeeding.

"I need to talk to the captain," she told them. Bryon nodded vigorously while Goban narrowed his eyes in response.

Ignoring the ex-merc's reaction, she glanced up at the forecastle, where she could see the captain lounging against the rail, scanning the horizon with a spyglass. He'd probably welcome the news in one respect at least. They'd soon be underway.

She walked over to the ladder, placed her hands on the top rung, and started to pull herself up, but stopped as she felt something hard and cold jab into her back even through the padding provided by her parka-like jacket.

"Don't make any sudden moves," Goban murmured in her ear, his breath washing over her as he leaned close. "We don't want to alarm anyone. And don't look at me!" he added tersely. "I know what you can do. Close your eyes and turn around. If I see even a hint of white I'm going to put a bullet in you."

She heard Bryon's quick intake of breath and knew the young man had seen what Goban was doing. Unfortunately, despite the fact she liked the younger man well enough, and trusted him, he'd be of no use to her in this. The best he could offer would be a momentary distraction, and that would most likely get him killed. She had to act decisively and quickly.

She heard steel rasp against leather. Bryon had drawn his sword. This was about to get very ugly. "Put the weapon down," she heard him say. "Do it or I'll run you through."

"Brave pup, isn't he?" Goban grunted at her. "Put the sword down, Bryon—in fact, I want you to throw it overboard. If you don't, I'll put a hole through her large enough to stick your arm through."

"Do I look stupid?" the man-child asked. "You shoot her and you're a dead man. If I don't get you, Raven or Morrigan will tear you limb from limb."

"Not if they're not here," Goban said. "Do it!" He jammed the muzzle into her back with enough force that she grunted involuntarily.

There was a moment of silence and then she heard the sound of boots scuffing against the deck. A distant splash reached her ears and she didn't know whether to sigh in relief or groan in dismay. It all depended on what Goban did now.

Light exploded in her head and, an instant later, she heard two thunderous shots ring out. She clawed herself away from the yawning edge of unconsciousness just in time to hear something large hit the water below. She struggled to rise and realized she'd gone to her knees from the blow to the back of her head.

"Captain! Prepare to set sail!" Goban yelled. "We're going home." Val gasped as thick fingers tangled in her hair and warm steel caressed her cheek. "I really hate to do this to someone as beautiful as you," he said, "but I can't have you causing problems on the way home. I don't have time to drug you right now, so..."

The impact of the next blow sent her crashing to the deck and spiraling down a long vortex into darkness.



Raven emerged from the forest the next evening to find the encampment suffused by a somber mood. Nearly a hundred pairs of eyes followed him as he strode toward Morrigan, who stood alone near the fire pit, her gaze flat and cold as she watched him approach. There was no sign of the valkyrie and he wasn't sure whether to take that as a good or bad sign.

"Before you say anything, Raven, I want you to listen. Val went back to the ship today. I came back here to keep tabs on the valkyrie. But by the time I arrived, she'd gone. Tuck couldn't tell me where. She said she'd be back."

He shrugged, fighting back a growing sense of unease. "Okay. But that doesn't—"

"Let me finish," she interrupted. "When Val was on the ship, Goban stuck a gun in her back. I still don't know why. Bryon tried to stop him. Goban gut-shot him and threw him overboard. He managed to make it to shore, amazingly enough, and came looking for me. He staggered around until one of the patrols found him and brought him to the camp."

"What? Where is he now?" Raven's mouth was suddenly filled with a coppery taste he recognized as fear. No, not fear. Pure, unadulterated terror. Goban had taken Val and shot Bryon? But why?

“He’s in the tent, Raven. It doesn’t look good for him. I’m not a healer. A bullet through the breadbasket tears shit up, and he’s in a lot of pain. I’m hoping you have some medical skills to go with your magic, because, if you don’t, the kid’s going to die. And it’s not going to be a pleasant death to watch. Or listen to, for that matter.”

“We have that much in common, Morrigan. I’m not a healer, either. Whether by accident or design, Goban managed to take the only one of us who might have a chance to save him, even if it meant opening up a ‘gate to Starhaven and taking him there—rules or no rules.” Raven said. “So he tried to protect Val?”

“That’s what he managed to tell me before he passed out. I believe him. He’s pretty torn up about it. Thinks he should’ve done more.” She stank of suppressed rage. She took betrayal about as well as he did, he thought.

Raven took a deep breath. “I can’t heal him, Morrigan, but I can save him.”

It took her a moment to realize what he was saying. “Are you sure you want to do that?”

“I don’t see I have much of a choice. I owe him at least that much. I’m not going to stand here and listen to him scream through his last hours of life. He doesn’t deserve that. *Goban* may, but Bryon doesn’t.”

She nodded. “You’d better do it quickly, then. He’s a lot tougher than I would’ve imagined. He’s unconscious, but I’m not sure how much longer that’ll last. The next time he wakes up will probably be the last.”

Both of them had seen stomach wounds, he thought, and both of them had some idea of what kind of agony Bryon had to be going through. He’d probably lapsed into unconsciousness as a defense mechanism, but it wasn’t one they could depend on sustaining him for any length of time.

He brushed past her and ducked into the tent. Bryon lay there amidst a pile of bloody bedding, his breath coming in short, ragged gasps. His eyes flicked open as Raven entered. “I’m sorry,” he said, panting the words.

“Don’t apologize,” Raven told him, settling down next to him. “You have nothing to apologize for. I want to know—are you going to just give up?”

“I’m dying,” Bryon groaned. “I know it. I’m not giving up. If I could fight it, I would.”

“What if I offered you a choice?”

Raven waited a long moment for the boy to gather enough strength to speak. “What choice?” he said finally.

“I can save you. More or less. I’m offering you the chance to become like me. To avenge what was done to you, if you want it.”

Bryon spasmed and blood flowed from between his lips as he tried to speak. “I want it. What do I need to do?”

Raven reached down and gashed open his wrist with his forefinger. “Drink this.” He held his wrist to the boy’s mouth and gritted his teeth as Bryon latched onto the wound, drinking the blood hungrily.

It had been a long time since he’d done this. The weird thing was that he’d never done it like this before. Usually he transmitted the infection through his bite, draining the victim far enough that the virus could overcome the victim’s immune system.

There was only one other time he could recall when he’d done this to save someone who was dying anyway, and that hadn’t even been his choice at the time. Someone else had made the choice for him.

The image of his friend Ben’s son, shaking with fury, pulling a gun and shooting him, came unbidden to his mind. The kid had showered his dying sister with Raven’s blood and just that had been enough to infect her. It had been a desperate move on his part, and Raven had long since forgiven him for it.

After a few minutes Bryon went limp, falling back onto the bedding with a long moan. “I can’t take anymore.”

“You’ve taken enough,” Raven told him. “I want you to listen very carefully now. In three nights you’ll wake up and you’ll be ravenous. You’ll need to feed almost immediately. I’ll try to bring an animal of some kind to you.” He thought about it. The only predator he knew for sure was native to Japan was a fox, though he seemed to remember

something about a miniature wolf of some kind—the ancestor of the Shiba Inu he'd owned as a kid.

Either way he'd find something, and he'd be damned if he'd short change Bryon by bringing him a deer or something lame like that. "If you drink from the animal I bring, you'll absorb some of its nature and, possibly, forge a bond between yourself and its kind."

Bryon didn't say anything. He was moments away from death now and didn't really have the energy to respond. As Raven watched he closed his eyes and took his last few breaths. They came quick and shallow, sounding more like an animal than a human.

When his breath came no more, Raven clambered back out of the tent and walked back over to Morrigan, who was deep in conversation with Tuck and Claw. The wolverine had apparently accepted these new arrangements and had turned out to be a pretty decent fellow underneath all the bluster. He looked around for the hybrid wolves, but they were nowhere in sight.

"He's gone," he told Morrigan. "It's done. Three nights from now, he'll rise. I'll take care of feeding him the first time. In the meantime, we need to figure out how we're going to get the hell off these islands and back to so-called civilization."

"We've been talking about that," she said. "Tuck tells me that they have some rudimentary ship-building skills. Between what they know and our magic, we should be able to construct a serviceable craft in a matter of a week or so."

Raven nodded. "Good. Where are the wolves?"

"When they heard about Val, they took off. Apparently they'd forged some kind of bond with her—don't ask me what or how. I don't know. All I know is that they were pissed when they heard what happened. I'm sure they'll be back."

"Yeah. Me, too." He shifted his gaze to Tuck. "I hope you guys are ready for a war," he told him. "A real one this time. I don't know why Goban took Val, but he isn't going to be able to keep her."

"Count me and my people in," Tuck answered. "Lady Morrigan and our valkyrie worked out a deal. We work for her now."

Raven would've loved to been a fly on the wall for *that* conversation. He was curious to know what she'd been able to offer the valkyrie. Not that any of that mattered at the moment. All that mattered from this point out was putting together some sort of seaworthy vessel and going after Val. His first instinct, which was to say the hell with it and *swim* to the mainland, had been suborned by a growing sense that they'd need the hybrids when they finally reached the end of this little venture.

Assuming Val kept her mouth shut—and he had no reason to believe she wouldn't—Goban was in for a few very nasty surprises when they caught up to him. Next time he ran into Bryon, the kid wouldn't be so easily dispatched. And if he read the wolves right, he and Byron would be racing them to get their hands on the ex-merc first.

If taking Val wasn't the stupidest thing he could have done, it wasn't far from it. If Raven had his way, he'd be finding out how bad he fucked up before the end of the next two weeks. And Raven didn't care if he had to wade through a thousand Church soldiers and Deacons to drive the point home.

Morrigan reached out and grasped his shoulder. "I'm with you until the end," she told him. "Come hell or high water, as they say."

"Oh, there'll be high water," he answered with a grim smile. "And there's going to be some serious hell coming down, too. Bank on it."

## Chapter Twenty-five

Rumors swarmed the city, thick as the small black flies with the painful bites that filled the air during the summer months. Citizens stayed indoors as much as possible after nightfall, frightened by the reports of the animalistic creatures roaming the streets and rooftops night after night.

The tavern was crowded, and filled with noxious smoke, but the windows remained shut. No one wanted to risk opening up to whatever prowled the midnight streets. A solitary figure sat in one corner of the room, alone at the table despite the crowded conditions. It was as though everyone avoided him, though none of the other customers could have said why.

He wore a commoner's cloak, the hood thrown back to reveal a chiseled, frightfully handsome face the color of polished alabaster. Dark hair fell in waves across his shoulders and he scanned the crowd with strange violet eyes—a color no man or woman had ever seen.

The stranger had a mug of something in front of him, but, had anyone been paying attention, they wouldn't have seen him drink from it. He had an air of patience about him, as if waiting for something or someone in particular.

The door opened suddenly, letting in a cloud of black flies. No one noticed as the man in the corner lifted his hand and all the flies dropped to the floor dead. The newcomer threw back his hood, revealing a youthful face and the mustache and goatee of a nobleman. His skin was so white, it almost looked blue. Despite the heat, not a single bead of sweat marred the perfect flesh of his face.

He nodded to the man in the corner and threaded his way through the crowd.

As he sat down, the one who'd been waiting leaned across the table and murmured, "So, what's the news?"

"If she's in the city, they're hiding her very well and Goban hasn't returned to his old job."

"Shit. And the Church?"

The newcomer smiled. It wasn't a friendly sort of smile. "They're busy trying to figure out why there's a gaping hole in their stronghold wall."

"That was good work, by the way. Did you have to kill any guards?"

"No. Their security is as bad as you said it was. They all rushed to the hole and milled around while I went up the outer wall and slipped in around them."

"Idiots." Raven shook his head, leaned back, and grinned, even though he didn't feel much like smiling. It was good the operation had gone off as planned, but the longer he was in the city without finding a single sign of Val, the more frightened he became. For all he knew, she was dead. She'd be difficult to keep prisoner, considering her psychic gifts, though he did consider the possibility that she'd burned out her teek ability when she'd taken out the valkyrie.

He couldn't help but wonder. Part of him thought he'd know if she was dead, but that was wishful thinking and he couldn't lie to himself about it. Just because he'd fallen in love with her, and they'd had sex, didn't mean they had some sort of preternatural connection.

His life wasn't some sort of supernatural romance tale, after all. Hell, the stench in this goddam bar was enough to tell him that, if nothing else did.

He levered himself to his feet. "Take my place at the meeting," he told Bryon. "I've got something I need to do—something I should have done when we first got back."

The younger vampire nodded slowly, clearly puzzled. "All right. Is there anything you want covered specifically?"

Raven shook his head. "Just tell them to keep doing what they're doing. They're scaring the locals into staying in at night, and that's half

the battle right now. As long as their existence is merely rumored and not confirmed, it works to our advantage. The longer we can move around at night without being observed, the better.”

“Hey, Raven? Where are you going?”

“To see a man about a dick,” Raven answered with a wry smile.



Tomas had been mayor for less than a year, since his governor-appointed predecessor had died unexpectedly. In accordance to the agreements signed between the Church and the governor, the Church had put him raised him from Commissioner of the Watch to the allegedly esteemed position of city mayor. Of course, now he owed the Church and the proctors were all too happy to remind him of the fact anytime something came up they didn't like.

He'd signed their goddam Warlock Act, hadn't he? It put the power of the government behind their battle against magic done outside of Church auspices. Not like they hadn't always acted as though the secular authorities were already on board.

But he knew the rumors as well—that the Governors were starting to question the Church, and working to limit its power. Though he hadn't wanted to look very deeply at the time, he was now certain that the former mayor had died because he'd, at least covertly, supported this trend.

There were a lot of advantages to his new office. A nice house, beautiful clothes, and a bank account balance that bordered on the obscene, not to mention hot and cold running mistresses.

At the moment he was relaxing in between visits from two of said mistresses, lounging in a bathtub large enough for three grown men, liberally scented with lilac and jasmine. He reached out and picked up his goblet, realizing it was empty. “Tholin!” he bellowed

Typically a single shout was enough to bring his manservant at a dead run. When he didn't arrive, Tomas threw the goblet across the room in a fit of pique and dragged his body out of the tub. “Tholin, you lazy bastard!”

“He’s not lazy, Sir Laubaw,” came a voice from the shadows of the doorway leading toward the kitchen. “He’s a bit...constrained right now.” The voice was deep and steady, dark like a swatch of velvet, and somehow carried a hint of casual threat.

A black clad figure strode out of the hallway, seeming to glide across the marble tiles of the bath chamber. Laubaw struggled to climb into his robe, cursing as the thing wrapped itself against his ample belly and refused to budge. He ended up standing there, only half covered, as the stranger drew near, pausing on the other side of the bath.

It was a man, and a strikingly handsome one at that, with clear eyes the color of a poignant sunset, skin like burnished ivory, a snub nose, and a wide, expressive mouth. Black hair hung loosely around the collar of his swirling, ankle-length black jacket. His face might’ve been carved with an axe, all sharp angles from the cheekbones down.

Women would have found him beautiful, Laubaw was certain. The bastard. He wouldn’t need riches to attract a mistress. “Who are you and what do you want?”

The man leaned against a column bordering the bath and folded his arms over his chest. He wore a strange kind of pointed-toed boot, the mayor noted, and the cut of his long jacket was also unfamiliar. An outlander of some sort? Perhaps, but he had no discernible accent. “I have a few questions to ask you. If you answer them honestly, I’ll be gone and none the harm. If you do not...” He let his voice trail off and Laubaw felt icy fingers clutch at his chest.

“Guards!” he screamed.

The man simply sighed and began walking around the bath. Despite wearing boots, his footsteps were utterly, eerily, silent as he skirted the sunken tub. “Your guards are incapacitated, I’m afraid. I wouldn’t look at it so much as a failure on their part, but as a success on mine. I can be...” He smiled, a cold, merciless expression as if a hunting cat had suddenly sprouted a human grin. “...most persuasive.”

The mayor suppressed an involuntary shudder. Something about this man made him want to scurry into a hole and pull the hole in over

himself. He fought his robe into some semblance of order and stood there blinking at the stranger as he approached. “Wh...what do you want?”

“Information,” he said, in a voice barely above a whisper. His gaze caught Laubaw like a bug in amber. “I want to know where Goban is.”

“G...Goban? I haven’t seen him since he left town with that thief-catcher and the Governor’s son last autumn.”

“I didn’t ask if you’d seen him. I asked where he was. There is a difference, if you care to notice.” The man’s voice was smooth and calm, but something of a threat lingered behind it as well. Laubaw shrank back from his advance, his foot sliding off the edge of the tub and costing him his balance. He fell into the water and came up sputtering.

His visitor stared down at him with a mocking eye. “You are truly pathetic, fat man. I believe you know where Goban is—he worked for you.”

“He *worked* for me. I don’t know anything about him now.”

The stranger gave a quick nod. “So you say.” He reached down and buried his fingers in Laubaw’s robe, lifting him effortlessly out of the tub. The mayor heard a strange sound—a sort of squealing—and realized it was coming unbidden from somewhere deep in his throat.

His visitor set him gently on the tiles next to the tub and bent close. “I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt, Mr. Mayor, but I’m giving you two days to find out where Goban is. Two nights from now I’ll be back and you’d better have the answer I’m looking for.” He released him, stepped back, and strode toward the other door leading to Laubaw’s bedchambers without another word.

He stopped on the verge of stepping through and turned back to scrape him with his gaze once again. “I wouldn’t recommend going to the Church for help,” he said. “They won’t be able to, and it’ll make me angry. Bad things will happen. Very bad things.”

“Who are you?” Laubaw yelled out, regretting it the moment the words had left his mouth. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“Some call me ‘The Redeemer,’” the stranger replied as he vanished from sight. Laubaw scurried across the tiles as fast as his pudgy little legs would carry him, but of his visitor he saw no sign. He rushed to the

only window in the room, throwing it open to the night and leaning out. It was a good three story drop to the flagstone courtyard below, but there was no other egress from the room.

He'd said that others called him The Redeemer. The mayor felt the icy fingers of supernatural dread crawl up his spine. He'd never really believed in any of that Church stuff, but now he found himself considering it seriously.

If it came down, which side of things would he want to be on? Now *that* was a dangerous question to be asking, even in the silence of his own head. If it was a war brewing, no matter what side he chose, he'd do more than his share of suffering.



The Church Stronghold was a massive keep-like structure tucked into the corner where the west and north walls of the city came together, its towers stretching skyward many leagues above the intersecting walls. The city Watch patrolled the wall proper, but their jurisdiction ended where the Stronghold and the wall met. Inconvenient for the Watch, since they had to post two different sets of guards on each side of the Stronghold rather than one set that could traverse that whole section of wall, but no one was foolish enough to complain.

Some hundred yards or so from the Stronghold's main gates stood a row of old warehouses once used to house goods that came in from the old caravan routes to the west, before most of the city's trade goods started coming in by sea.

Despite the fact that someone had blown a hole in one of the Stronghold's walls, they still weren't particularly security conscious. They must have perceived someone putting a gaping wound in their defenses and having a walk around inside without being sighted once as being a fluke. Or the people running the place were simply insane.

*That's a distinct possibility,* thought Morrigan, from her position atop one of the warehouses along with three members of the hybrid wolf-pack. They were clad in camouflage fatigues, and carried assault rifles like the soldiers of old Earth, but no one could mistake them for human soldiers.

The lead bitch, the alpha, Bridget, caught her in her golden gaze. “She is not in there,” she repeated for the fourth time. “Why do we guard this place if the human woman isn’t there?”

For some inexplicable reason, the wolves had bonded to Val, and none more than their alpha. Morrigan didn’t understand it, but, then again, she didn’t need to. It had nothing to do with her business here. The cats were coming along well enough—she didn’t need the wolves. She had the feeling they’d be wearing the TAU ankh before all of this was over.

She’d have to talk with her partner about devising an agency symbol of their own once they came out into the open. “We’re watching the Stronghold because they’re sneaky bastards, and Raven wants to make sure they don’t decide to take her inside since we already searched it.”

Tuck and a few of the feline hybrids were prowling the city’s sewers, monitoring any sign of the Church’s agents using it as an alternate entrance and exit into the keep. It wouldn’t be the first time people had waded through shit to hide their movements from prying eyes.

The wolf thought about this, then nodded. “We will watch, then.” She went back to the edge of the building and returned her stare to the Stronghold’s gate.

The only one whose whereabouts of which Morrigan remained uncertain was Bryon. The young vampire’s actions had grown increasingly erratic from her point of view, though she had a suspicion that Raven knew exactly what the boy was up to at any given moment. He’d grown wilier, somehow, as if the infusion of fox’s blood upon his awakening had changed him in some deep, fundamental way. Where once he’d worn his heart and intentions boldly upon his chest, now he’d become furtive and cunning. *Not that this is necessarily a bad thing*, she thought with a wry smile. Ordinarily she very much approved of such behavior. But when it was *she* who was left in the dark, she didn’t tend to like it quite so much.

One of the wolves gave a low growl and she moved to the edge to check it out. A small contingent of what could have been city watchmen were approaching the Stronghold gate. Four of them paused, still in

formation, as one of them walked forward and pulled a cord that rang a bell deep inside the keep's bowels.

Interesting, on one level, at least, but it didn't look like it had anything to do with them. She left the edge in disgust and made her way back to the makeshift chair she'd constructed toward the center of the roof. As an assassin, she'd grown accustomed to lying in wait for long periods, but since she'd given it up, she discovered she really didn't have the patience for it anymore. It just went to show how quickly important skills atrophied once they were no longer being used.

*Face it, Morrigan, she thought. You're just getting lazy.*



Bryon had to put down a feeling of unease as he walked into the dockside tavern. It was well known as a thieves' den, and most likely the thieves' guild base of operations. It was said that no honest man, or woman for that matter, would dare step foot across the threshold of *The Burgher's Bane*. *Silly ass name for a thieves' den*, he thought cynically, but it was in keeping with the whole corrupt power structure in this city. If it didn't affect those in charge, they pretty much ignored it. They probably got a chuckle out of such an obvious slap in the face of the middle class—such as it was these days.

He was dressed in a commoner's outfit, though his mustache and goatee made it pretty obvious he was not. Commoners wore full beards or mustaches only as a general rule. Most didn't have the free time it took to groom a goatee to make it look as good as his.

The barroom swam with smoke and noise and he winced against the stench assailing his nostrils from entirely too many unwashed bodies. Not the burglars, of course—they, at least, knew that they could as easily be betrayed by their scent as by making too much noise—but those who performed other, perhaps less savory tasks had better things to do than make themselves 'smell pretty.'

A *shakkir* game at a corner table threw out a wall of sound, laughter, flashing jibes, and growls of frustration, but Bryon knew that no violence would be forthcoming. Those who managed such places as this rarely

tolerated bloodletting in their establishments unless, of course, the bloodletting was done on their orders.

The tavern fell into an uneasy silence as the patrons turned their gazes upon him. He cleared his throat. "I seek an audience with The Spider," he said, referring to the unknown entity who ruled the thieves guild and its membership.

"Good for you," said one of the patrons, rising to his feet. He stood nearly two feet taller and nearly twice as wide as Bryon, and glared down at the governor's son out of tiny, dark, pig-like eyes from within a jungle of facial hair that made his features nearly indiscernible. "You ain't getting one."

Bryon felt his spine stiffen a little and smiled up at the towering man-mountain. "The question here is not whether I get to talk to The Spider, but how many people I have to injure or kill to gain that audience."

The sound of several dozen chairs scraping against the wooden floor filled the tavern and Bryon let out an inaudible groan. That had been a remarkably stupid thing to say, he realized. He was letting the rush of power go to his head. He might be a vampire now, but it didn't make him indestructible. He was no Raven, that was for sure.

He did, however, have his own methods of persuasion. He reached inside his jacket in a movement so quick he felt certain no one could track it, and pulled out one of the pistols Raven had passed out to their crew. He pointed it at the man and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. The trigger didn't even move. Frowning, he brought it close and looked it over. He'd forgotten to take the safety off. He remedied the oversight, but by the time he managed that, the giant of a man had roared in fury and charged him. He was snatched off the floor and slammed into one of the support columns holding up the roof.

He smiled down at the man-mountain and clipped him behind the ear with the butt of the pistol. The man's eyes rolled to the back of his head and he folded like a beach umbrella, dropping Bryon back to the floor. He nudged the unconscious body with a foot and spread his gaze across the room. "Well, that was fun," he said slowly, pretending to

brush imaginary dust off his long jacket with a free hand. “Anybody else want to play?”

Out of the crowd two men rushed him. He calmly lifted the pistol and shot one in the leg. The second he met with an outstretched arm, effortlessly slamming him to the floor. He placed one boot on the man’s face and grinned out at the crowd. “I’m really finding it hard to believe that you people are this stupid. I could kill damn near every one of you without breaking a sweat. Take me to see The Spider and we can be done with all this. I’d hate to have to hurt anyone else.”

He flicked his gaze to the guy squirming around on the floor, blood pumping from a hole in his leg. “Better get that guy a healer before he bleeds to death.” He smiled, revealing his extended canines. “I mean *now!*” This last came out as a roar, easily as loud as the pistol report had been.

Raven should have done this himself, he thought. Somehow he just didn’t have the whole menacing thing down very well. He stifled a sigh. Maybe he could take lessons on how to frighten mortals.

## Chapter Twenty-six

Val opened her eyes to the sound of conversation, but, as had been the case for several months now, could see nothing of her surroundings. They kept her in darkness so absolute, she could see nothing but the pulse of her heartbeat against her eyes. It was strange, but remarkably effective as a way to negate her primary power. She would never have considered it herself, but, in the darkness, she had no way to focus her telekinetic gift.

Her other psychic gifts, never quite as powerful, had risen to take the place of the one she could no longer exercise. The minds of her captors occasionally opened to her, their thoughts, fears, and ambitions flowing unbidden into her own consciousness.

She even knew where she was, though the information did her no good. The estate was about a day's ride on horseback from the city—on land deeded to Goban by the Church itself. She was locked into the estate's cellar, in a dungeon constructed specifically to house her.

One of the voices was Goban's, and he sounded anything but happy. He'd apparently been instructed to bring her to the Church Preceptor in the city, and thought it would be too dangerous. He'd heard rumors—that strange creatures stalked the city, and he was certain that Raven and his crew was somehow behind it. They were looking for Val, and wouldn't give up until they found her.

She tried not to allow hope too much of a foothold in her heart, but she needed something to keep going. Trapped in this ever-present darkness, with nothing but the thoughts in her head and the thoughts of her captors to keep her occupied.

She had a small hole in one corner—a hole she identified originally by smell alone, and food and water was shoved through a thin slot in the bottom of the door twice a day. She slept on a narrow cot on the opposite wall, under a thin, itchy blanket that smelled as if it hadn't been washed in a few years. But it had kept her warm enough in this cold prison.

How she wasn't mad already she couldn't guess. Sheer stubbornness, perhaps. All she knew was that she was holding onto hope of rescue, and, if they made one misstep, she'd bloody this bunch like a ferret let loose in a henhouse and rescue herself.



“You can't use a gun to scare people who don't know what one is,” Raven growled with a shake of his head.

Bryon looked pained. “The damned thing sure scared *me* at first.”

“Yeah, but you already had an idea of what it was. Tomorrow we'll both go down to the ‘Bane’ and I'll show you how it's done.”

He couldn't really be too hard on the kid. It wasn't as though he'd had any real training in intimidation. It was an acquired skill. Most people who tried to intimidate without any practice flopped badly. And Raven was certain that the people he'd tried to spook were themselves pretty damn good at it.

Dawn was coming fast now. Raven could feel it in his bones. They stood in an alley next to a an abandoned building they'd appropriated, one with a very deep sub-cellar. He gave a low whistle and Cerberus seemed to materialize out of the darkness, trotting up and sitting down in front of them with an expectant look on his doggy face.

“You know the drill,” Raven said. “Keep an eye on this door until dusk, all right?”

Cerberus nodded, which always looked a little weird when a dog did it. Raven opened the door leading to the sub-basement and walked across the low-ceiling room in a crouch until he came to the two crates they'd snuck in one night soon after they'd arrived back in the city. The two vamps crawled into their respective ‘beds’ and pulled the lids over themselves.

“Hey, Raven?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry for screwing that up.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’ll learn.”

Then the first rays of the sun sliced across the horizon and both vamps fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.



Morrigan sprinted to the end of the alley and cut a hard right around the corner. She glanced around, shooting her gaze up toward the top of the building and smiled to herself as she threw out a transit tube and made the jump.

The four members of the city watch skidded around the corner, their epithets clearly audible as they foraged for some sign of her passage. She ducked back as one looked upward, a rather unusual act in itself. Humans didn’t tend to look up. Smart of this one to think of it. On that note, she decided to keep an eye on him, if she could.

She quickly crafted a three-strand spell and dropped it off the roof. It fell the fifty or so feet and lodged in his clothing, just as she’d intended. Now she’d be able to track him wherever he went.

Maybe overkill, but maybe not. She didn’t like leaving things to chance. If he proved to be a problem, it would be easy enough to activate the contingency built into the spell and toss him a half mile out to sea.

The notion of bloodlessly killing someone like that didn’t bother her in the least. In fact, she found it rather amusing.

She wasn’t sure if they’d identified her, but that wasn’t really much of a concern. Like most of her kind, she could consciously alter her appearance just enough to foil any visual search. It didn’t work all that well in a technological setting, but, then again, that wasn’t likely to apply here.

She chuckled to herself. Napoleon had once been quoted as saying something about not interrupting an enemy when he was making a mistake. She took it one step further. Don’t interrupt an enemy when

he's making a mistake, and, if he strikes you as the kind who's going to make fewer mistakes, take him out of the game entirely.

Raven wouldn't necessarily agree, but he was a do-gooder. Silly thing for a vampire to be, if you asked her, but, then again, no one was. Morrigan wasn't morally opposed to doing the right thing, if it was too inconvenient, but she sure as hell didn't understand those types who centered their whole world around it.

Doing the right thing, in her lexicon, was doing whatever made her life easier.

Once they'd continued on, she took a deep breath and trotted across the rooftop in the direction of the abandoned warehouses where they'd set up shop. She felt amazingly cheery, considering how close a call she'd had.

Not that she was ever in any physical danger, really, but the danger of being discovered, being outed as what they'd assume was an enemy agent—or worse, a traitor—was real enough. If they'd faced her and she'd been forced to do her worst, she would have had no choice but to slay them all, lest they return to base and start a city-wide manhunt for her. And the manhunt—or *womanhunt*, more accurately—would doubtlessly unearth the hybrids, something that they simply couldn't risk.

And though she would never have admitted it to anyone else, she really didn't like the idea of slaughtering people willy-nilly like that. One or two, in the interests of security, would be one thing. Any more than that would be a bit over the top, even for her.

She was a professional assassin, not a mass murderer.

She stopped at the edge as she drew down a mana thread and allowed herself an evil little chuckle. She'd once prided herself in never killing for personal reasons—for killing people who deserved death for money. Now she'd gone far beyond that and become tied up in a freakin' cause. She thought causes were stupid.

Who knew being a revolutionary and a weapon smuggler could be so damned ethically challenging?



A dark fog rose from the bay at nightfall, sending black tendrils creeping through the city streets. Upon arising, Raven and Bryon were led to a spot along the wall overlooking the bay and shown a huge, black-sailed ship sliding silently into the bay, nearly invisible against the dark water and shrouded by the dark boiling haze.

Even Morrigan looked concerned, Raven noted, as he passed his gaze over her face. “What do you think it is?” he asked her.

She shrugged and shook her head. “Whatever it is, I doubt it’s good.”

“You never ran across a ship like that while you were playing pirate, did you?”

“No. I’d remember if I had. I would’ve probably also tried to scuttle the damned thing.” She looked uneasy, an expression Raven never expected to see pass across her face.

“So what do we want to do?” Bryon asked him.

“For now—nothing. Or at least nothing we hadn’t already planned to do. I’ve got to make a stop at the Mayor’s house, then we need to drop by the Bane and see if we can’t convince them to give up the location and identify of the Spider.”

“I’ll check out the ship coming in,” Morrigan told them. “You tend to your business and I’ll let you know if there’s a problem.”

There was a time, not too long ago, that Raven would’ve looked at her with nothing but distrust, but the last several months had made it pretty clear that they were on the same side in all of this. The Morrigan he’d heard about when he was working for the PAC wasn’t quite the same woman he knew today.

Whatever the reason, he was thankful for it. He nudged Bryon with his elbow. “We’ve gotta go.”

They nodded farewell to Morrigan and jogged into the night.



The black-haired immortal crouched on the edge of one of the piers, gaze stabbing through the night as she tried to make out more of the details of the ship’s design. The swirling black mist didn’t help matters any.

She considered using a transit tube to get to the ship but rejected it instantly. She didn't know what she'd be facing and the notion of jumping in blind left her cold. She wasn't prepared to dive into something deadly without backup. She had the feeling that something truly frightening awaited her aboard that ship.

She wasn't even sure why she had that impression. She seemed to be pulling it out of the ether. Her intuition wasn't usually so specific. She didn't usually rely on it all that much, but in this case she considered it wise to pay attention to it. Obviously her subconscious had noticed something her conscious mind had not.

Her other option, of course, was to go back to base and scare up some of the cats to accompany her. She allowed herself a feral grin. That sounded like a plan.

Before she could summon a mana thread to jump back, however, the ship suddenly banked, revealing a double row of gun ports and the gaping black maws of dozens of cannons pointing directly at the city.

*Holy shit!* She didn't have time to go back and get help. She needed to intercede *now*. She dialed up her magesight and groaned aloud. The ship was warded from the top of the mast all the way into and below the waterline.

Who could be aboard that ship? The spells were far more complex than she would've expected from any of the locals, but what other outworlders could be mucking around here? The Cen? Regardless of Raven's suspicions in that direction, she found it nearly impossible to believe the aliens had set aside their prejudice against magic. She felt certain that some unknown power was involved here—someone maybe they'd never encountered before. In an infinite metaverse, it was certainly possible.

Would they fire? Or was this some kind of bluff? She had no way of knowing until the first cannon spoke.



Bryon lifted his head and stared into empty air. "Do you hear that?"

“Hear what?” Raven asked, then realized he did. A far-away whistle, coming closer. He’d noticed it a moment earlier, but it hadn’t impacted his consciousness until Bryon said something.

They stood in the darkness outside the mayor’s house as Raven scouted for any unexpected security. There was no telling whether the mayor had decided to be difficult and try to prevent Raven’s return. Not that he could, but he probably wouldn’t be willing to accept the inevitable.

Too bad for him.

Raven had run out of patience. If the man wouldn’t cooperate willingly to take down the Church’s bastion, the vampire knew all too well how to force the issue.

The whistle grew louder and, in an instant of sudden clarity, Raven swept up the younger vampire and dodged away from the building just as a large sphere descended from the sky and struck the front of the mayor’s manor like a huge iron fist.

And exploded into a raging storm of flames and fury.

Raven threw up a shield as a burning slab of debris struck near them, showering the alley with flaming bits of wood and melted glass. “What was that?” Bryon cried out, raising his voice against the roar of the conflagration scant yards away.

Raven wasn’t sure how to answer. It looked like a cannon ball, but the explosion that ripped the house apart came from no ordinary cannon. “I’m not sure!” he yelled back. “Come on.” He led the other vamp through the alleyways of the city, threading past panicked civilians and the booted feet of both the city watch and the Church soldiers.

“Stay here,” he murmured to Bryon, who watched uncomprehendingly as Raven vanished before his eyes.



The Church officer didn’t see anything out of the ordinary even an instant before the vampire snatched him from the midst of his squad. He saw nothing until he was hurled against a brick wall with enough force

to steal the breath from his lungs, far distant from his fellow soldiers. He fell to his knees, gasping for breath.

Then a man was mere inches from his face as he was swept up and his back planted back against the wall. Fingers like steel rods tangled themselves in the front of his jacket. The voice was cool, detached, and somehow frightfully intense at the same time.

The face from which it issued seemed disembodied, startlingly white, and hewn from ice itself. It could not be the face of a mortal man. "Let's make this simple. I need information. You give me what I need, you live. You refuse to answer, or lie to me, you die."

He kicked out and struck something hard. He seemed to float for a moment, then his back struck the cobblestones with an impact that rattled his teeth. He slashed wildly with his fist at the shadow that appeared above him and found himself jerked to his feet. He was spun around and slammed face-first back into the now familiar wall, his arm bent painfully behind his back. The voice murmured in his ear. "You've proven your manhood. By continuing to fight, you waste your energy and my time, and I have no patience left for it. Do you want to live, or are you tired of breathing? It would be easy enough for me to snatch another of you off the street."

"What do you want?" the soldier hissed, sagging in defeat. The rough brick façade scraped at his cheek and he whimpered.

"I want to know where Goban is."

"His estate. He's at his estate."

"See? Was that so hard? Where's his estate?"

The man told him in a series of gasping breaths, tears streaming down his cheeks as the alley behind him filled with human figures with the faces of beasts.

One of them, a human in the midst of all those monsters, spoke a single word. "Raven!"

The vampire turned without releasing his captive and saw Morrigan approaching. "What's going on?" he asked her.

She shook her head. “Damned if I know. That ship is firing on the city.”

Raven nodded. “I’d figured that out for myself. Why didn’t you stop it?”

“It’s warded too tightly for me to get aboard,” she answered tersely. “Raven, this doesn’t make sense. At first I thought it was a Church ship, coming with reinforcements, but the Church wouldn’t fire on their own keep, would they?”

“Not likely,” he said. “I think we’ve got another player in the game. I found out where Goban is. I’m willing to bet Val’s there too. Unless you all want to fight for the city, it’s time you got the hell out of here.”

“What about him?” She nodded past him to the sobbing man still pinned to the wall.

Raven shrugged. “He’ll have to take his chances with the rest of them. Bryon!”

“Right here.” The younger vamp materialized from the shadows.

Raven quickly gave him directions to Goban’s estate. “I’m trusting you to do what it takes. Take the cats and wolves out of the city—find Goban’s estate and sit tight. We’ll be along shortly.”

“What are you going to do?” Bryon asked, glancing between them. His reluctance to leave them behind was obvious.

“We’re going to find out who’s on that ship,” Raven answered. “I doubt their plan is to level the city from there. They’re just softening it up before landfall. When they disembark and head for shore, they’re going to find us waiting for them.”

“Sounds dangerous,” Bryon observed.

“Probably is,” Morrigan growled, glaring at Raven. “Not to mention unnecessary.”

“Aren’t you curious?” Raven returned her glare blandly.

“I can live with not knowing,” she told him. “Don’t you want to rescue Val? It seems silly to waste time with this when you could be heading for Goban’s place right now.”

He shook his head. “She’d do the same thing if she were in my place. We have to know what we’re up against here. It’s obviously not just the

Church, and I don't think it's the Cen. This may be our best chance to find out who's behind it."

She grimaced, but didn't argue.

"Go!" Raven snapped at Bryon. "Get out of here before things get too hot to make it through the gates. Now!"

Bryon nodded, motioned to the hybrids, and they all vanished into the night. "I think you're being all noble and stupid again," Morrigan told Raven, once they'd left.

"Maybe. But I *do* have a job to do. I can't forget that a major part of that job is keeping an eye open for potential threats to *our* Earth and Starhaven."

"And you think *this* is one of those threats?"

"It could be. We won't know until we check it out."

Their discussion was interrupted by a shout, and the sound of rapidly approaching boots. A squad of about six Church soldiers came charging down the alley toward them. Raven, remembering he still had the man pinned to the wall, released him and stepped away. The guard slid down the bricks, sobbing like a broken child.

"Step away from the soldier," the leader commanded. At least Raven assumed he was the leader, since he was the one with the plumed hat and the big voice.

"Go away," Raven told him. "Your man is fine. None of you will survive the night if you don't find someplace else to be...right now."

*I've really got to work on my threats*, he thought, as they drew their weapons and attacked. *They just don't work well against these guys. They're too goddam stupid.*

A few seconds later, amidst a pile of bruised and broken bodies, he and Morrigan exchanged glances once again. "Impressive," he said.

Someone groaned.

"I was about to say the same to you," she replied. "Where'd you learn to fight like that?"

"My friend Ben," he told her. "Well, he got me started. I picked up the rest of it along the way. You weren't half bad yourself."

"Thanks. Shall we head for the pier?"

He answered her with a nod and took off at a jog. She followed on his heels.



Near as he could tell, the ship had only fired three or four shots into the city. One had been aimed at the Mayor's house, another at the Church's keep, and the others seemed to be placed at random, just to cause widespread panic.

When they arrived at the waterfront, they saw a boat being lowered over the side of the ship. "I knew it," Raven muttered.

"Okay. So you were right," Morrigan admitted. "What's it get us?"

"We'll have to wait and see."

Once the boat was lowered to the water, they could see a handful of men swarm over the side and descend by way of a rope ladder. Then, once everyone had apparently disembarked the larger vessel, the boat turned and headed their direction.

The smaller craft was warded as well, Raven noted sourly after switching to magesight. Whoever these people were, they weren't taking any chances.

It seemed unlikely, considering that most of the piers were currently empty, but the boat was heading straight for them. Raven glanced over and saw a feral smile flick across Morrigan's face. Once things were moving along, her initial reluctance completely disappeared. The woman was so transparent. She enjoyed a good fight *far* too much to take a pass on the opportunity to kick some ass.

He wrapped them in shadows and they waited.

The landing party came ashore in a smaller, oar driven vessel the crew might have normally used to ferry goods or passenger from the larger ship. As the boat kissed the dock piling, one of its passengers leaped off to tie it off.

Eight men climbed up from the boat to the pier, and stood in a small group while a ninth barked orders. He spoke English, which was weird, but fortunate.

He was short, squat, and powerfully built—probably only a few inches above five feet, but most likely weighing in at nearly two hundred pounds. Raven had only met one man as squat as this one, and his first thought was that the resemblance was uncanny.

“Leave the civilians alone,” he was saying. “Take out every soldier you can find. I want this city in our hands by daybreak.”

“Does he look like anyone you know?” Morrigan asked in a whisper.

Raven nodded. “Except for the face, he looks a lot like Deryk Shea,” he said, referring to one of Morrigan’s fellow immortals, and one of the most powerful figures on Earth Prime.

“That’s what I was thinking. He might be a doppelganger. Just because Deryk won’t bother to change his ugly mug doesn’t mean that all his variants feel the same way.”

“This is bad, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely. I’m not sure either of us can go up against him and not get our asses handed to us.”

“I’ve got the crystal sword,” he reminded her. “That’s gotta be worth something.”

“Only if you hit him with it,” she told him. “Deryk’s probably the best hand-to-hand fighter who’s ever lived. And if this doppelganger’s the one I *think* it is, he’s also the most ruthless bastard in the metaverse.”

“So then what?” Raven asked her. “We just slink away and let them do whatever they’re going to do?”

“I’m not sure we have a choice,” she answered. “Shhh.”

The leader lifted his head and peered into the shadows where they crouched, brow furrowing as if he’d somehow been alerted to their presence.

The original Deryk Shea was more or less immune to magic, the powers of other immortals, and vampiric talents as well. Raven wasn’t sure if his immunity would extend to something passive like his own power. It didn’t actively engage the man at all, so his immunity might not come into play. Or so Raven hoped.

This seemed to be the case. Deryk's doppelganger shrugged and turned his attention back to his minions. "What are you waiting for?" he barked. "Get moving!"

"We might not be able to do anything about *him*," Raven mused aloud. "But his lackeys are something else entirely."

She nodded. "They're splitting up. How about you take one group and I'll take the other. Meet back at the old base in about an hour?"

"Sounds like a plan. See you then." He waited for her to leave and faded himself. Since he didn't know if any of the doppelganger's thugs were mages—it was a pretty good bet, considering the wards on the ship and long boat—he didn't summon a thread and leave via transit tube. He just jogged silently into the darkness, dragging a cloak of shadows around himself as he did so. Things had just gotten *very* interesting, and despite himself, he was intrigued as he'd ever been. All they had to do was catch one of these buggers and find out what the hell was going on and he'd be able to get out there to rescue Val.

He was *not* going to feel guilty about not heading out there immediately. Just not going to.

*At least you'll keep telling yourself that until you believe it, right?*

## Chapter Twenty-seven

Val lifted her head as she felt someone approach the door to her cell. Goban's voice boomed outside, echoing through the small room. "I'm going to shove a blindfold through the slot," he told her. "I want you to put it over your eyes. Don't try to get clever. If we think you can see, my comrade has orders to shoot you down on the spot."

She heard the rattle of the narrow slot through which they shoved her food and crawled over, grabbing a length of fabric and obediently tying it around her eyes. "Okay," she called out. At least she was finally getting out of this cell. She had one hell of a lot better chance to escape once out there than she did in here, blindfolded or not.

She felt three men in the hall as the door was opened and rough hands hauled her to her feet. She was ushered down the hall none too gingerly and, at one point, felt the edge of something cold and cylindrical pressed against the side of her neck.

Her hands were bound in front of her with a length of rope, and she heard Goban murmur orders to the other two men with them. "Take her to the carriage. Whatever you do, don't let her take the blindfold off. If she tries, shoot her."

"Yes, sir," one said.

"You—come with me."

Their boots receded down the hall as her solitary captor shoved her again. "I don't think he cares whether you're alive or dead," he murmured in her ear, his breath a foul mixture of wine and rotting teeth. She nearly gagged. "Move."

She let him guide her with a series of hard shoves, all the way extending her mental senses to the edges of her awareness. His hand left

her arm for a brief moment and she heard the sharp click of a bolt sliding. She reached out, felt him turning the knob even as his hand descended on her shoulder as if to keep her in place.

She blasted him with a mindscream, all of her pent up pain and rage focused straight into his naked, unprotected brain. She heard him grunt, felt him sag against her for an instant. She gave him a push, felt him bounce off the door, and reached up and tore the blindfold free.

Thankfully the light wasn't too bright here in this hallway. A few torches guttered fitfully, disturbed by the air flowing from the partially opened door.

She knew if she'd pulled it off under the direct glare of the sun, she might well have been struck blind for real...at least temporarily. As her eyes swam into focus, she saw the soldier clutching at his head, the gun in his hand momentarily forgotten. She leaned back and fired a weak kick into the center of his chest, slamming him against the door. Realizing she wasn't physically strong enough to do him any damage, she reached out with her mind once again, this time narrowing her thoughts to a thin, hard lance and firing them straight between his eyes. He uttered a single choking cough and sank to the floor, blood running from ears and nose.

She crouched down beside him, fumbled at his belt for his dagger, which she used to cut herself free.

She felt along his neck for a pulse and wasn't surprised to discover he was dead. She'd never been able to do anything like that before. She glanced down at the pistol beside him and, after a moment's consideration, picked it up. If she ran into Goban again, she was going to put a hole in him.



Raven landed lightly in the street behind the advancing soldiers, moving swiftly up to flank them without attracting their notice. He strode like a ghost and yanked the last in the column from his feet before vanishing into the shadows.

He quickly snatched the man's weapons away, smashing them into useless bits between his hands, then stabbed him in the throat with stiff fingers to forestall any attempt to call for help. The soldier gagged and coughed and Raven waited for the discomfort to subside before tossing him against a nearby wall.

"I'm giving you a minute to catch your breath," the vampire told him, "and then you're going to tell me what the hell you're doing here and what your boss's goals are."

The man's eyes shot daggers as he struggled to breathe.

Raven smiled thinly. "Your friends *are* going to notice you're missing soon enough. But I have no qualms about killing you and grabbing another until one of you spits out the answers I'm looking for."

He was already moving as the soldier kicked out with a foot, obviously feeling perky enough to try to fight back. Raven slapped the foot away, slightly stunned by the power in the man's kick. He was no ordinary human, of that he was certain.

He struck him again, this time hammering him in the sternum with enough of a jolt to toss him back into the wall and send him back into the world of trying to suck air into a suddenly uncooperative body. "Are you *shitting* me?" He reached into his duster and pulled out one of his pistols, shoving the muzzle against the man's jaw. "You people are seriously starting to piss me off."

The gun did the trick. The man froze, eyes suddenly pinned to Raven's forearm—the closet point on his body to the weapon in his hand. He couldn't see it, but he could feel its cold bite well enough. "What is with you people?" Raven asked him. "Everybody *has* to make this difficult. What is your leader after?" He snarled this last question, baring his fangs in a rare expression of anger and frustration.

"You! He's after you!"

"Me? You've gotta be kidding." Raven pulled the weapon away and stepped back, considering. Why in the hell would Shea's doppelganger be after him? How did he even know about him? He grunted his disgust that he'd even bothered to ask himself that last question. Of course he knew

about Raven—they had evidence enough that the doppelganger and his crew of miscreants had been monitoring Earth Prime for centuries.

It was the doppelganger Shea's philosophy that any method used to defeat the Cen were acceptable, even if most civilized folks would find it unpalatable. Neither moderation nor humanity were words that held any value in his personal ideology.

The first question still lingered, though. Why would he target Raven? Quite unexpectedly he found himself growing increasingly concerned by this revelation. What was the doppelganger's connection to what was going on here? Had he made contact with a rebel faction among the Cen? The valkyrie had hinted there were things going on behind the scenes they'd be shocked to discover, but, like most of her kind, she hadn't been particularly forthcoming with the particulars.

The soldier opened his mouth and Raven heard a deep, swift intake of breath. His fist snapped out, connecting with the side of the man's neck. He dropped to the ground, unconscious. This changed everything. He couldn't afford to stay here and risk a face to face with the doppelganger, just on the off chance he'd figured out a way to capture him.

Leaving the unconscious soldier where he lay, he turned to exit the alley and found himself standing face to face with Shea and half a dozen soldiers. "Raven, I presume," the squat immortal said dryly. "It's so nice to finally meet you."



Morrigan dragged her captive onto a convenient rooftop and turned him over, pulling out the impromptu gag she'd made with the sleeve of the man's own shirt, torn from his arm when she'd first subdued him. "Don't yell," she warned him. "You don't want to know what'll happen if you make *any* sound without my permission."

He didn't look nearly as frightened as she would have liked. There was a certain mocking glint in his eyes she found very troubling, especially since she'd bound him tightly before carrying him off. "What's so funny, asshole?"

“You’re wasting your time,” he said. “My boss has already captured your friend.”

“What?”

“The vampire. That’s why we’re here. Lord Shea has a use for him and knew an attack here and now would draw him out.”

Morrigan cocked an eyebrow. “Oh, really? Why does he want him?”

“They say he can slip in and out of places even a stray dust mote can’t go—the boss has someone he wants killed and thinks the vamp is just the man for the job.”

“Huh. Not if I have anything to say about it.” She stuffed the gag back into the man’s mouth and peered down at him for a long moment. The casual arrogance of these people was nothing short of astounding. He hadn’t been afraid of her and, in her book, that was as bad a sign as any she could imagine.

She reached down, grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, and dragged him along the rooftop. Once she’d reached the other side, she casually heaved him over the edge to fall the three stories to the cobblestones below. She listened carefully and, when she heard the wet smack like a bag of watermelons hitting pavement, she turned and cast a transit tube back toward where she’d last seen Raven.



Val burst into the welcoming night and breathed a sigh of relief that she didn’t have to face the sun. She was pretty certain at this point that she would’ve run screaming back into the manor house if she had.

She crept along the outer wall, toward the front, the naked blade of the sword she’d taken from the guard cradled between her hands. She was so weak. It shamed her to admit it even to herself, but they’d fed her the bare necessity to keep her alive. She was spare flesh and bone now, her strong, healthy physique melted away after months of forced inactivity and a starvation diet.

Her mind, on the other hand, felt as strong as it ever had. Maybe stronger. She’d make Goban pay for this—but not before finding out what he thought he was doing. And, just perhaps, what had gotten into

him. The man whom she'd sensed outside her cell upon occasion hadn't been the one she'd first met. She couldn't put her finger on the difference, especially considering her empathic talents hadn't been particularly strong at that point.

She crouched on all fours and peered around the corner of the house, through the leaves of an unidentified shrub. A carriage stood in the drive, a team of horses fidgeting in harness in front of it. There was no sign of anyone but what she assumed was the driver, who was busy loading a chest on top of the carriage.

She slowly rose to her feet and edged forward, peering toward where she thought the front door would be. A second man stood there, watching the driver with a distracted air. Beyond him several yards away she saw a couple of saddled horses tied to a post and straining against their reins in a vain attempt to graze on the grass beneath their feet.

She took the corner at a run, hoping her legs wouldn't give way as she sprinted toward the guard at the door. He turned and saw her at the last second, but she'd already raised the sword and run him through before he could cry out. She yanked the blade from his ribcage and spun away from the falling body, eyes leaping to the driver. He hadn't noticed her yet, she realized; he was too busy securing the chest to the carriage roof.

She flicked the blood off the sword and raced for the horses. She slowed as she reached them, clucking softly to keep from panicking the beasts. She slid to a halt, quickly untied the reins and vaulted onto one horse's back, hissing in frustration when she realized the stirrups were too long for her.

She didn't have time to adjust them, so she leaned down, pulled them up, and, tearing a strip of cloth from her ragged shift, tied them together across the top of the saddle. She wrapped the reins around her left hand, retrieved the rapier from the post, and kicked the beast into motion.

A shout rose up behind her and she heard the unmistakable sound of a shot ringing out, but she didn't dare look behind her. She sent the horse galloping up the drive, racing through the chilly night with her heart thudding in her throat.



Morrigan reached the alley mouth and found the shattered remains of seven soldiers, broken and cast about like neglected toys. There was no sign of Raven. She cursed under her breath. She didn't know *how* they'd managed to capture the vampire, but it appeared as though they had.

A boot scraped against cobblestone and she spun, sword leaping into her hand. A waif stood there at the alley mouth, staring at her with wide eyes. Grubby and disheveled, she couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl.

"I saw them take him," the urchin said. "They went back to their ship."

"They did, did they?"

The waif nodded. "I followed them. I know Raven. He's given me food before. I was worried about him."

Morrigan caught herself smiling slightly at that. Raven *would* give food to a street rat, wouldn't he? She glanced down at the kid's feet and frowned. Most of the street kids here didn't wear any shoes at all, but this boy had a rather nice pair of boots on. Another gift from Raven? Perhaps. She seemed to remember him saying something about the kids being practically invisible, and occasionally using them as his eyes and ears. It would be just like Raven to reward them well for their service.

The sound of more boots coming their direction jerked her head up. Too late. A squad of city watchmen sprinted around the corner, pinning them in the glare of a lantern. "Stay where you are!" a voice boomed.

*The hell I will*, she thought. She reached out and pulled the child behind her, lifting her sword warningly. "I'm *really* not in the mood for this," she said.

"Take them," said the leader, and the squad fanned out to block the alley mouth. They advanced slowly, cautiously, but with obvious determination.

"You're making a mistake!" Morrigan snapped. "These are the invaders—and it wasn't me who killed them."

“Tell it to the magistrate,” the watch-sergeant growled. “I’m sure he’ll be very interested to hear your story.”

She noticed that he’d hung back. She made a quick headcount. Five of them, plus the sergeant. She might actually be in danger of breaking a sweat. “Stay behind me,” she murmured over her shoulder at the waif.

She lunged forward, blindingly fast, and speared the lead watchman through the thigh. He went down screaming, his blade ringing against the stones underfoot. A second executed a high strike, which she didn’t even bother to parry. She slipped under it and straight-armed him in the face with the palm of her hand. The impact lifted him off his feet and threw him into another’s arms. As they struggled to separate themselves, she skipped forward, parried an awkward blow from the fourth, and swiftly riposted. He gave a cry and staggered backward, blood pouring from the rent in his forehead and effectively blind.

By this time the other two had disengaged and joined the last remaining watchman besides the sergeant in an attempt to circle her. She couldn’t let them do it—once they did, they’d have the kid, and use him as leverage against her.

She snapped out her hand, activating the rune on the ring on her left hand. A bolt of lightning stabbed from her extended fingers, blasting the one she’d already struck into the wall behind him. He sank slowly, oblivious, as she met the last two’s coordinated attack.

They were good. But she was better. She slapped one’s sword aside, fouling his companion’s strike, and fired a swift front snap kick into his crotch. She followed it up with a quick round-house to the jaw as he folded.

This had the intended result of throwing him to the ground in front of his companion. As he jumped back to avoid tripping over him, she lunged forward, using the supine watchman’s back as a springboard. She vaulted up and over, performing a mid-air somersault and landing directly between him and the sergeant.

Her rapier flicked out, neatly hamstringing the guard, even as her foot rose and caught the sergeant in the chest. He was blasted from his

feet by the impact and he lay several feet away, gasping like a fish thrown ashore.

She finished off the ham-strung watchman with a sharp rap to the side of his head with the pommel of her sword. “C’mon, kid,” she said to the urchin. “This is a very unhealthy place to be right now.”

She took his hand and cast a transit tube to nowhere in particular. She just wanted to get out of this alley. Something told her things were finally coming to a head and the city itself might well be a very unhealthy place to be for at least the next few days. If not longer.

But she owed Raven at least an attempt at rescue. Damn him. If he had’ve had the sense to go after Val rather than trying to find out what was going on, they’d all be out of harm’s way right now. But no, he had to be the goddamn hero.

*Sometimes even heroes fall.* She knew that for a fact. More than a few had fallen to her. She wasn’t proud of it. It was just a fact. *Hero* was often just another word for *fool*.



As if sensing Val’s need, the horse ran harder, its breaths coming in huge gusts as it drove itself forward. She could hear shouts and the sounds of pursuit in the distance, drawing closer as the beast began to tire. She leaned close to its ear and whispered, as if it could understand. “You must run,” she told it. “I’m sorry, but you’re my only hope.”

A shriek jerked her head around and she saw a dark shape leap from the bluff lining the road and a rider go down in a heap on the road. Another flew through the air and a second rider fell. The third and fourth pursuer reined in their mounts, drawing swords and approaching the figures warily.

Then, like a pale streak amidst a flow of black garments, another figure launched itself from the bluff and carried the third rider to the ground. An arm rose and fell once and the rider did not move again. *Raven?*

But somehow she knew it wasn’t him. The movements weren’t as smooth as she remembered—there was a certain grace that was missing.

Despite this, it only took another couple of seconds before the last rider lay on the dusty road.

Out of the shadows lining the road, a couple figures coalesced, grabbing the horse's reins before it could rear in panic. She looked down and felt a surge of relief as she recognized Bridget and another of her pack.

"It is good to see you, Valerie," the pack mistress said, giving her a doggy grin. "We were afraid you were dead."

"If they'd have caught me, I most likely would have been," Val replied. "Is there a stream around? I'm sure this horse could use a drink."

"I will tend to him," said the other hybrid, taking the reins from Bridget.

Once she'd actually dismounted, it was pretty obvious that the horse was a gelding by the way he was wetting the earth beneath him. She patted his hindquarters as he was led away. "That's okay, buddy. The whole thing damn near scared the piss out of me, too."

She turned to Bridget. "Where's Raven?"

"He sent us ahead," the wolf replied. "The city was receiving cannon fire from an unknown ship and he stayed to deal with that, but he sent the rest of us to rescue you. It seems you were in little need, though."

"The only way I was able to escape was because Goban decided to move me for some reason. His lackeys weren't nearly as careful with me as he'd probably intended. All the better for me."

She felt slightly piqued that Raven hadn't come to the rescue himself, and then chided herself for being a fool. He'd done exactly what she would have in the same circumstances. She was actually somewhat surprised by it—maybe he had more of a sense of duty than she'd realized. It was the right choice for an agent to make.

She frowned. "He didn't stay alone, did he?"

"Morrigan stayed with him."

*That* didn't please Val much. She didn't trust Morrigan in general, but she wondered if something was going on between them after all. Despite Raven's original denials, she couldn't help feeling a little suspicious. Had Morrigan had some influence on his choice not to come?

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” came Bryon’s voice—or what sounded a bit like Bryon’s voice—from behind her. She jumped and turned on him, giving him her best glare.

He stood there, pale eyes regarding her calmly, seemingly unaffected by her pointed gaze. It only took a second to realize that he was undead. When Goban had thrown him overboard she’d given him up for dead, and, in truth, he probably would have died. But Raven hadn’t abandoned him to that fate. Even though he’d failed to protect her, just making the attempt had been enough for him.

“You’re psychic,” she said, through narrowed eyes. “More than Raven, anyway.”

“Your average tree stump is more psychic than Raven,” Bryon returned. “You look terrible.”

“Just what a lady likes to hear.”

There was a time when Bryon would’ve blushed at that statement, but now it seemed he was beyond such responses. Or maybe vampires didn’t blush. He did possess a self-assuredness she didn’t remember from the last time she’d seen him. Where once she’d seen a boy in a young man’s body, now she just saw a man.

He chuckled wryly. “It’s good we thought to bring you extra clothes. We figured you might need them.”

Smart too. “How are things in the city—other than the ship blowing holes in it, that is?”

“Rough. Raven’s been scouring the place searching for you, and finally got a break just tonight. The ship came in with the evening tide and opened fire just as we were heading for a meeting with the mayor in a last-ditch effort to get him to sign on with the revolt.

“Everything happened at once,” he said. “Raven made a spur of the moment decision, and it seems to me it was the right one.”

“Me, too,” she answered thoughtfully. “And you say there’s nothing between him and Morrigan?”

Bryon shrugged. “They’ve learned a lot of respect for one another, but if you’re suggesting she’s managed to entice him into her bed, you’re wrong. He’s never seemed interested to me.”

“How about you?” Val asked, and was rewarded with a sudden shift of his gaze.

“That’s not fair,” he said. “I’m still pretty new at shielding. No fair reading my mind.”

“I’m not. It’s not one of my strong suits,” she said. “We’d better get moving before Goban shows up. He’s not going to be as easily surprised as his lackeys were.”

Bryon nodded and gave a low whistle. As if by magic, this patch of road was suddenly overrun with cat and wolf hybrids. He gave the panthers instructions to cover the back trail, watch for any more pursuers, and suggested the wolves scout ahead in case there was any chance of ambush. He wasn’t taking any chances.

The kid *had* learned a few things while she’d been gone.

Good for him.

The idea of him being infatuated with Morrigan gave her a momentary chuckle, however. She kept it silent, but his sidelong glare made it clear that he sensed not only her amusement, but the reason for it.

“Let’s get moving,” he said aloud as the pack member returned with her horse. “I’ll bet Raven can’t *wait* to see you again.”

## Chapter Twenty-eight

It actually didn't take long for Morrigan to find where the urchin called home—namely, an abandoned section of the city sewers that had been routed out and forgotten for the past several years. The orphans who lived down there supported themselves by begging and petty theft, and had created quite the little enterprise, in her estimation.

She didn't stick around to chat. She told him to make sure he and his friends stayed out of sight and jumped back to the docks so she could keep an eye on the ship. She'd harbored a fear that they'd have set sail again, but was glad to find the thing still sitting there in the bay, spewing its black fog in enough volume to obscure everything but the top of its masts.

At least she knew Raven was safe, for the moment. If the doppelganger wanted something in particular from him, he wouldn't try to kill him. But she had to wonder how in the hell they'd managed to capture a vamp, and *that* vamp in particular. She'd have guessed it would have been a lot like trying to bottle a ghost.

He'd be particularly vulnerable once dawn came. By her reckoning it was about two in the morning. A little more than four hours to go. Had she been the type, she'd have prayed that Bryon and the hybrids returned with Val before things grew any worse.

Unfortunately, they'd be slowed by the fact that there wasn't a mage among them. Bryon had the capability, but he'd just begun to explore the limits of his vampiric powers—adding magic on top of that would've been grossly unfair.

She wasn't yet sure of the hybrids, though it was rumored that the Cen deliberately excised mage talent from their breeding lines. Suffice to

say it would take a while for them to get back, and in the meantime the best she could do was keep a watch on the ship and hope nothing changed in the next couple of hours.

Just as this thought struck, she found herself switching to magesight without consciously making the decision. The ship was caught in the center of a slowly rotating web of silver light and what looked like a shimmering curtain had fallen around it.

Her fists clenched at her sides and she cursed aloud as she took a unintentional step forward, nearly striding off the end of the pier before catching herself.

The sight of it turned her belly to ice. They were 'gating the whole damned ship. Impressive magic indeed.

She clawed a spell out of her web, blood humming with the sensation of building power as it crawled across her fingers and extended tendrils halfway up her arm. It was one of her most powerful, a fifteen-strand sigil she'd built for just this sort of situation.

She didn't know if it would work the way she'd intended when she'd put it together, but she sure as hell hoped it did. Otherwise Raven could be lost forever. And she wouldn't wish that fate on an enemy, much less someone she'd come to think of as a friend. She didn't have enough to be able to afford to squander one.

As the ship began to fade like some immense Cheshire Cat, she sent the spell flashing across the bay into the contracting wheel of light formed as it collapsed. The spell expanded in short bursts, thrusting its own rotating arms up into the collapsing disk of silver fire, which flared and flickered as spell met spell and reached an impasse.

It worked! Morrigan's spell held the portal open. But the question remained—for how long?

She hoped it would be long enough.



Val nearly fell off the horse as they broke through the tree-line and approached the city. She was exhausted, and the scraps of food proffered by the wolves had done little to assuage her deep hunger. They'd been

reluctant to give her more, figuring it would most likely make her sick if she ate too much.

They were right, but it wasn't easy to convince her stomach of that fact. It wanted more. Bryon appeared by her side, grasping her mount's reins. "We'll wait here. The cats will reconnoiter."

She nodded, and sagged in the saddle. They'd paused long enough before setting out to adjust the stirrups to fit her, but it had been long enough since she'd ridden that, in her weakened state, her muscles were already tensing up, promising even greater soreness and stiffness to come.

"They'll scout out the city and find out if it's safe enough to return, then they'll split, sending half of the squad out to lead us in and the other half in search of Morrigan and Raven. Bridget and the wolves will remain with us."

She didn't have the energy to speak. She simply nodded once more.

He smiled up at her and turned to scan the city walls.



"I can't believe you're such a sentimental fool," Deryk Shea's doppelganger said to Raven, as they stood together on the deck. The 'gate energy had dissipated from the ship but, amazingly enough, he could still see the glowing doorway standing several yards off the stern as the ship sailed through dark waters toward a chillingly familiar looking port. "It's only a dog, for Christ's sake."

He motioned toward Cerberus, who sat several feet away, ears back and head hanging low, seemingly unconcerned about the weapons trained on him by several of Shea's soldiers. "This is why your kind will *always* fail, and will never have the strength to truly defeat the Cen."

Raven didn't reply, instead forcing a rapport between himself and the reluctant dog. *When I give you the signal, I want you to run*, he told the animal silently. *Dive overboard and swim for shore. As long as they're still threatening you, I can't risk trying to free myself.*

“It’s only a fucking dog,” the doppelganger snarled, obviously irritated because the vampire seemed to be ignoring him. “Kill it,” he told his soldiers.

*Now!*

As if it been rehearsed ahead of time, Raven and the dog moved in unison. Cerberus pivoted on his haunches, snatching one of the soldiers’ wrists with his teeth and pushing sideways and upward. A row of bullets stitched their way up the torso of a second soldier, who fell back, his own weapon clattering to the deck. Cerberus dashed for the railing, the weight of his massive body sending a third soldier stumbling in a completely different direction.

Raven slammed his fist into the side of Shea’s neck, temporarily stunning the immortal. He followed up with a kick to the back of his knee and a leaping snap-kick to the bridge of his nose. Shea’s head snapped back and blood flew.

Had he been a mortal, the blow would have killed him. It would’ve stunned any ordinary immortal. But it did little more than annoy the impervious Shea. He grunted, reaching out and grabbing Raven’s outstretched foot while the vampire was still airborne. Rather than trying to release it and retaliating with a blow of his own, the doppelganger simply spun and twisted, swinging Raven into the forward mast.

He followed that with three smashing blows of his fists and Raven toppled to the deck, not unconscious, but certainly dazed. He’d not expected the immortal’s speed, strength, and ferocity. A couple more blows were enough to send him into the vampiric equivalent of unconsciousness, and a wave of blackness overtook him even as he struggled to defend himself from Shea’s fists.

The last thing he heard was the roar of the doppelganger, cursing his men for allowing the dog to escape.



“We’re running out of time,” Morrigan told Tuck, when the tiger and his squad found her on the pier.

He shrugged. “Not so much,” he told her, then explained that Val had freed herself before they’d arrived. “They’re waiting just inside the forest to the west of the city.”

She nodded. “I’ll take care of them. I want you to collect Claw and the rest of the weasels from the hideout,” she told him. “We’re going to need everyone for this expedition. Hurry. We don’t have a lot of time before daylight.”

He didn’t question her orders. He simply motioned for his squad to follow and vanished into the darkness of the battered city.

Once they’d gone, she wove a quick transit tube from a couple of mana threads and made the jump to where Bryon and Val waited. The vampire gazed at her suspiciously as she stepped out of the empty air, but, then again, he was positively radiating tension. Unusual in a vampire, but he *was* a young one, after all. “It’s good to see you,” she told Val, who smiled wearily. “But I’ve got some bad news.”

“What? Is Raven all right?”

“As far as I know. But he’s been captured by a doppelganger of Deryk Shea. That’s who was on that ship,” she added for Bryon’s benefit. “Apparently they want someone killed and figure he’s their best possible assassin.”

“Well, then, let’s go get him,” Val said.

Morrigan shook her head. “I *wish* it were that easy. They took him through a worldgate. I’ve managed to hold it open so we can follow, but it’s not going to be a walk in the park. You’ve only got a couple of hours before you’re going to be useless...” She jabbed a finger at the vampire. “...and you look like you’re about to fall off that horse, Val. Dammit. I really needed you two at your best for this.”

“We’ll manage,” Bryon told her. “I doubt we’ll be able to jump in and rescue Raven immediately. We might have to dig in and stay undercover like we’ve been here. That’ll give her a little time to rest up.”

Morrigan wanted to argue, but he was right. They didn’t have time to debate about it anyway. “Tuck’s getting Claw and the weasel-folk. Where are the other cats and wolves?”

“Right here,” said Bridget, stepping out of the shadows. “We’ve been doing a quick recon around the area to make sure there weren’t any unfriendlies in range.”

“Good idea in general. Now it doesn’t matter. We’re leaving.” She wove another two-thread transit tube and took them all to the docks.

Bryon ogled at the shimmering ‘gate hovering in the midst of the bay. “Is that—“

“That’s the worldgate,” she answered before he could finish. “And, yes, we’re going to go through it. If we do, I can’t say how long it’ll be before I can bring you home—“

“As if that matters,” he muttered. “We need to save Raven. That’s more important than anything else right now. I owe him.”

“Okay. Just wanted to make sure we were on the same page. Once Tuck and the rest of them get here, we’re going to steal a couple of boats and head for that ‘gate. I’m warning you though, Bryon, this world is very unlikely to be anything like yours. Don’t freak out if things are strange.”

“I’m not going to ‘freak out,” he replied, a little irritably.

With an instant leap into a high tech world ahead of him, Morrigan wasn’t sure he’d handle it as well as *he* thought he would. But they’d all do what they had to.

She frowned at Val, who was currently being supported by Bridget. The wolf looked concerned, and Morrigan couldn’t blame her. Val was clearly on her last legs. She needed rest, and food, and both in abundance.

Another forty or so figures melted out of the darkness and she breathed a silent sigh of relief. The others had arrived. “C’mon,” she said. “Let’s get some boats.”



The passage through the worldgate was fairly unremarkable, and Morrigan was surprised to find no one waiting on the other side. She’d expected they’d have to fight their way to shore, and the lack of any sort of blockade didn’t sit right with her at all. Not that she *wanted* a fight

with Val nearly unconscious and less than an hour to get Bryon to some sort of shelter.

She left the spell to dissipate on its own, which it should in a matter of hours. If she collapsed it now, it would just signal to Shea and his cronies that something had changed. She wanted them kept in the dark as long as possible.

They docked the boats at a convenient marina and disembarked. Once everyone was on the pier, she scuttled both boats. No one said anything about it. That was good. It meant that everyone understood without her telling them that they didn't want *anyone* to realize they were here.

She knew this city. Or, at least, one very much like it. It looked a lot like Tacoma in the early twenty-second century back on *her* Earth—the one the immortals referred to as Earth Prime. This world was a little behind technology-wise, which wasn't too much of a shock. This Deryk Shea wasn't as likely to encourage innovation except when it came to weapons and the like. And, from what she'd heard, he pretty much ran the place, the self-proclaimed Emperor of Earth.

She didn't want to consider the things he would've had to do to pull *that* off. It was already pretty obvious that the population here was considerably smaller than that of Earth Prime, even before the Cen War.

She spent a moment idly wondering why, but cut off the thought before it fully formed in her head. Interesting as it might be, it was a waste of time to contemplate. Their first mission had to be to find someplace to hole up for the day.

Thankfully, it didn't take long. There was a row of abandoned warehouses less than a mile from the marina, and they found a nice office space with all the comforts of home. A little dusty from disuse, perhaps, but that would be easy enough to fix.

As dawn arrived, Bryon was safely tucked away in a windowless office. Morrigan quickly inspected Val and, satisfied that she wasn't in any immediate danger, put her to bed on a musty sofa in a lounge area. The hybrids, except for the wolves, who insisted on remaining behind to guard Val personally, claimed the warehouse itself. Within moments she

was alone except for Tuck and Bridget. Until Val and Bryon awoke, they'd act as her lieutenants. Or so they'd decided. Fact was, she had nothing planned until nightfall, and she was certain they'd need some rest too. Once she'd gotten this through their thick heads, she sent them off—Tuck into the warehouse with the rest of his people and Bridget into yet another small office—and had collapsed into a mouse-eaten leather chair and threw her feet up on a expansive maple desk in the largest of the available offices.

The place still had power, which was surprising, if convenient. Then again, if Shea had nationalized the power system, he probably didn't bother to turn anything off unless it became a noticeable problem.

The whole situation had now become a bit ironic to her, since she'd pretty much fallen into the leadership role. She'd led small squads here and there, like her pirates, but she'd never taken on something this important. Something told her that the fate of several worlds could hang in the balance of how they handled this, and the prospect of screwing it up made her more than a little uneasy. Raven, a mere stripling compared to her, had a hell of a lot more leadership experience than she did.

She hoped he was all right, that Shea hadn't done anything too terrible to him.

She gave a start when a hulking shape skulked into the room, tail between his legs. "Cerberus?"

The dog chuffed at her and she gave a small sigh. The dog's presence here, and the guilt plainly written across his doggy face, told the tale in a glance. They'd taken the dog hostage and the vampire's sense of loyalty hadn't allowed him to abandon the beast to his fate.

The sentimental fool.

And what really riled her at this point was the fact that she couldn't say she wouldn't have done the same thing in his place. The dog was more than just a dog, and somehow the past several months had engendered a sense of personal loyalty in her she'd never known. She wouldn't have been able to simply abandon another member of the team any more than Raven could.

The damned vampire had become quite the bad influence on her, she decided. “You thirsty?” she asked the dog.

He signaled assent and, with another loud sigh, she found a bowl and filled it from the sink in the office’s adjoining washroom. “Sorry I can’t do anything about food right now, but we’ll try to get that taken care of tonight.”

Cerberus eagerly drank about half of what she gave him and curled up on the floor by the door. She’d never seen a dog sulk before, and she ardently hoped she’d never have to see it again.

The clock on the wall ticked through the day as she sat there, contemplating their next move.



Raven awoke in darkness. Deep, abiding darkness so thick he could taste it on his tongue. Even in magesight there was nothing to see. Wherever he was, mana did not touch it. A perfect prison for someone like him.

Up to a point. It seemed that Shea was immune to his powers—he could see right through whatever cloud of obfuscation Raven managed to cast. But that wasn’t true of his minions, and, unless Shea’s doppelganger planned on personally supervising his whole incarceration, it could prove to be a problem for them.

How arrogant *was* this version of Shea, anyway? Arrogant enough to think he had total control of the situation? Word had it he was a control freak. He’d most likely want to be hands on, but the real question was—how many irons did he have on the fire right now? Could he afford to be hands-on with everything?

Somehow Raven didn’t think so. He’d *want* to be everywhere at once, running the show, but even an immortal as capable as Deryk Shea, or his doppelganger, couldn’t manage *that* trick.

So he waited.

Patience was probably the primary vampiric virtue. Raven could wait better than just about anyone. He’d turned a virtue into a talent.

He sat on the floor with his legs folded in the lotus position, and stared forward. An observer could easily have assumed he'd died for real, since he didn't blink and didn't move even a muscle. As one of the undead, he wasn't required to breathe except to speak, so there wasn't even the rise and fall of his chest to indicate that he wasn't the cadaver he appeared to be.

What he did, however, was listen. Beyond the deep, dark silence of this room, he could hear the distant hum of machinery, and if he stretched his awareness even further, he could hear murmured voices and snatches of conversation.

Then came a sound he couldn't quite make out or identify. A strange mix of biological and mechanical, a heartbeat and a subtle hum of articulated micro-mechanisms. The door opened, yet the darkness remained untouched. The oddly mechanical sound grew louder.

He rose silently from the floor, sliding toward one of the side walls, ears tuned toward the door. Air moved rapidly and Raven found himself in the grasp of someone—something—nearly as strong as he was

Fingers like small steel rods tangled in his jacket. Still suspended in darkness, Raven snapped his arms upward, trying to break the grip. His jacket tore away and he spun free, firing a kick into his unseen opponent's legs.

It was like kicking a girder. His nerves fired a message to his brain that would've been pain had he been a mortal man, but instead it was a warning that repeating that particular move would be a bad idea and pointless to boot.

This was no human being he faced, he realized. Not even an immortal could fight so effectively in pitch darkness—in a blackness so deep that even a vampire's eyes could find nothing upon which to focus. This semi-mechanical creature was like nothing he'd ever seen before.

He let reflex and instinct take over, relying on his sense of touch and the Wing Chun sticky fingers technique he'd picked up back on Earth to defend himself. Touch, parry, divert, trap, release, repeat. The blows stung, but he was able to divert the vast majority without taking any damage at all.

He wanted to strike out, but wasn't sure it would do any good. So he spoke. "So who—or what—are you?"

He thought he already knew the answer, but had to ask. Cybernetic humanoids had never been created on his home Earth, but he knew the theory well enough. His world's research took a different path, especially after Loki's intervention.

He hadn't really expected a spoken answer, and wasn't disappointed when he didn't receive one. *Think, damn you! What weakness could an android have?*

A skeletal structure of titanium, or similar alloy, a gas-driven musculature, no need to breathe, eat, sleep, or pass waste. *A closed system, assuming...* His thoughts zeroed in a glimmer of an insight. Assuming an internal power source of some kind. Of course! The energy requirement for something like this had to be tremendous.

It could have its power beamed in from outside itself, but that seemed unlikely. Broadcast power was notoriously inefficient.

He parried and redirected the next round of blows, mind racing furiously. The most logical place to put a power plant would be in the same protected location as the heart was located within the human body, protected by the ribcage and the sternum. Of course, in all reality, they could have put it anywhere, but he had the impression that the closer it was to human the better Shea's doppelganger would like it.

He executed an outside block and snapped his hips into his first counterpunch of the battle, driving with every single muscle in his body to the exact center of where he thought his opponent's breastbone must be.



"I'm not going to sit around here waiting!" Val snapped, turning and heading for the door.

Morrigan grabbed her by the sleeve and spun her around. "You don't have a choice!"

"The hell I don't! Let go of me."

As her eyes narrowed, the immortal released her and stepped back. “Use your head. We can’t afford to attract attention. I spent a couple hours this afternoon snooping around. This isn’t really a city, though it looks like one. It’s an armed camp. Damn near everyone out there is wearing a uniform. And once night falls, there’s a curfew in place.”

The muscles in Val’s jaw jumped, but she seemed to deflate a little. “What else were you able to find out?”

“That this Deryk Shea is a fucking lunatic,” Morrigan growled. “He’s so obsessed with the Cen and the possibility of an invasion that he started a world war just to gain dominance over the planet.”

“Not a nuclear war?”

“No. Even he’s not *that* crazy. Of course, that’s debatable. Just like on our Earth, Shea was one of the world’s richest men. He deliberately destabilized the U.S. currency and sent the whole world into a depression that made the nineteen-thirties look like the nineteen nineties. Then he hired a boatload of mercs and set about starting a second civil war in the United States. A race war.”

“What?”

“It gets better. He used the whole thing to leverage his way into the White House.”

“He became President?”

“Yeah. He bullied Congress into passing a confidence resolution and calling for a recall election of the lawful President, then made damn sure anyone that opposed him found a safer line of work. Like wrestling wolverines.”

“You sure learned a lot in such a short time,” Val said, unable to keep the suspicion out of her voice.

Morrigan aimed a twisted grin at her. “Still don’t trust me, do you?” She shrugged. “There’s a very small, very frightened underground here. I caught one of their operatives sneaking into the hospital to steal medical supplies—the only people who have access to regular healthcare are Shea’s people. For everyone else it’s catch as catch can.”

Val blinked at her, absolutely horrified by what she was hearing. “Is he still President?”

Morrigan shook her head. “The United States no longer exists. The end result of the war was that the world ended up united under Shea’s rule. In more primitive areas, he’s damn near considered a deity. He managed to hitch his wagon to various messianic beliefs and rode them to ascendancy.”

She sighed. “No, Deryk Shea is the undisputed Lord of Earth. He has a veritable army of religious fanatics all over the world that consider him the second coming of Christ, Vishnu, or Mohammed and punish heretics instantly. He’s made Tacoma his base camp, and probably the most dangerous place on Earth for us to be right now.”

“I’m not afraid,” Val said, though, technically speaking, nothing could be farther from the truth. She was terrified by what she was hearing. She would have never have imagined what he’d done to even be possible. He’d destroyed the world to save it. Or so he probably told himself.

“I never took you for an idiot,” Morrigan snarled back at her. “You *should* be afraid. I’m fucking terrified.”

This confession shocked Val. She’d seen Morrigan as coolly confident, one of the most self-assured beings she’d ever met, and not afraid of anything. “What are we going to do?”

“I’m not sure yet,” the immortal replied. “But it’s pretty obvious we can’t hang around here any longer than necessary. I think we’re just going to have to hit them hard and go for broke. We don’t have a choice.”

“Will the underground help?”

Morrigan chuckled ruefully. “Not likely. They’re lucky to exist at all. My guess is that Shea doesn’t consider them any kind of a threat and pretty much ignores them. Some of his followers would love to get their hands on them, but Shea himself couldn’t give a rat’s ass.”

“That’s good for them.”

“Yeah. Unless something changes. Which, I’m afraid, is pretty likely to happen if we’re successful. Shea’s not going to believe they didn’t help us.”

“Are we going to warn them?”

Morrigan considered it, then nodded. “But not until after we get Raven out.”

## Chapter Twenty-nine

Upon awakening, Val wasn't surprised to discover that Morrigan had called a war council. She emerged into the warehouse to find the cats, mustalids, and lupines already assembled, most crouched near the floor inspecting their weapons.

She climbed up on a large concrete slab next to Morrigan, who gave her a nod of greeting and continued her scan of the crowd. "They seem ready enough, wouldn't you say?"

"Maybe too ready," Val answered back. "Do you think they have any idea what they're up against?"

"Considering *we're* not sure what we're up against," Morrigan replied smartly, "I'm not sure there's any way for *them* to know." She stuck her fingers in her mouth and gave a shrill whistle. "Okay, listen up. I've got assignments. Bridget—you and your squad have bodyguard detail. Make sure Val's covered at all times. Tuck—your cat-folk need to stay back as ready reserve. Anything goes wrong, I want you folks to come in, guns blazing, and rescue our stupid asses.

"Claw—you and your kin are coming with me. We're going to try a full frontal assault to start. Once we're inside, we're going to scatter. You're going to use your talent for getting through small spaces to spread yourselves through the duct system."

The mustalids exchanged glances, looking to Val, who wasn't really up on her weasel and wolverine facial expressions—such as they were—as if they were both pleased and impressed that Morrigan had come up with a use for their specialized talents.

"Any questions?"

The assembled hybrids shook their heads.

The immortal assassin grinned big. “This is the big leagues, folks. Deryk Shea ain’t prey. Not mine, not yours. But we ain’t no one’s meat either, and that’s no joke. There’s a bunch of human soldiers and wannabes guarding the place. They’ve never seen anything like us. They have one of ours in the basement and we’re going in to get him out.

“This is war. But we’re different than they are. We don’t make war on the helpless. But those who can fight back—they better watch the fuck out.”

Bridget threw back her head and howled, the sound sending chills down Val’s spine as it echoed through the warehouse. The other wolves joined in, a symphony of something beyond human speech, beyond words. Something that reached into Val’s very soul and cast her back a million years to an ancestor squatting in a cave, staring past the fire at the eyes shining out of the darkness.

“Let’s go!” Morrigan screamed, a sound nearly as primal as the cry of the wolves.



They exploded from the warehouse, a teeming mass of fur and fury, led by an immortal woman as lithe and deadly as any cat, a pale streak of fledgling vampire, and a human woman flanked by six wolf-human hybrids. They moved through the thin mist falling from a gray-clad sky, amidst the oddly welcoming scent of wet asphalt.

They encountered a troop of Shea’s soldiers around the next corner. They didn’t have a chance, shredded in a hail of bullets before they could even raise their weapons. Morrigan strode past their shattered bodies without a downward glance and the weasels, badgers, and their ilk flowed around her like a river of fang and claw and rage.

Bryon, to Val’s surprise, launched himself up an adjacent building, running along windowsills and frames as if they were a pathway to the rooftop, so smoothly it was as if he’d simply jogged up a flight of stairs. The flowing motion was so natural, she wasn’t even sure she’d seen it until she caught sight of him on the roof, waving down at them. Being a vampire certainly agreed with the young man, she realized. He’d

embraced his new existence whole-heartedly and seemed almost desperate to make the most of it.



The Shea Building was less than two miles from where they started out and within twenty minutes they were approaching the barricades separating the immortal's base from the city surrounding it. What had once been an office building now looked entirely too much like a fortress.

"Are you up to this?" Morrigan asked Val, who'd been so caught up in the fervor that she hadn't even noticed the immortal's approach.

She nodded. They'd talked about it earlier, and she believed she had it within her to do what Morrigan had asked. "I can do this."

"Good. There are troops behind those barricades, just waiting for us to get close enough. Waiting to see the 'whites of our eyes,' so to speak. Do what you can."

"Too bad for them," Val said tersely, and raised her arm, pointing at one of the concrete barriers between them and where she assumed the front door would be. Energy flowed through her, power drawn not only from herself, but also the mass of warriors holding her in its midst. Rage, strength, will, and a kind of mental frenzy. *Telekinesis is all about emotion*, she heard her instructor's distant voice say deep in her mind. And she continued to pour her emotions and every ounce of will into the assault. She brought an image of Raven's face into her mind's eye and felt a scream of anger rise within her breast.

The screech of tearing metal filled the air and one end of the huge concrete barricade rose into the air, pulling free of its rebar anchors and whirled like a dancer performing a pirouette before hurling itself into the side of the building with all the grace of an orca returning to the sea.

She raked her hands apart, clawing at the empty air, and glass shot from the shattered windows, a storm of splinters rising in a great glittering cloud as she willed it to coalesce. She conjured thoughts of the darkness, of the months spent inside her head, of longing to see Raven again, and she stoked the rage it produced as if pouring gasoline on a bonfire.

Men screamed, their cries caught and shredded by the cyclone of whirling shards. She made circling motions with her right hand and the storm grew into a shrieking thing of unbridled ferocity. Then, suddenly, she thrust outward with her left hand and the storm threw itself against the face of the building.

The rest of the front façade along first three floors disintegrated.

Val sagged, only to be caught mid-fall by the wolves. “Impressive,” Bridget murmured in her ear. The only sound that broke the silence was the steady clinking of glass pouring from the shattered structure to the ground below.

She steeled herself and rose from the hybrid’s grasp, turning a weary smile upon her. “Let’s go find Raven.”



Light flooded the room and Raven stared down at the humanoid figure laying at his feet, twitching and buzzing like a nest of hornets disturbed by the foot of a passer-by. He reached for mana that wasn’t there and swore aloud.

The door hissed open and Deryk Shea’s doppelganger stepped into the room, sparing the figure on the floor a casual glance before turning his dark eyes on the vampire. “You’re far more dangerous than I realized,” he said, smiling grimly. “No matter. You are no threat to me.”

“Don’t make any bets on that,” Raven spat. “I don’t give a damn how tough you think you are.”

Shea’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Don’t get cocky, bloodsucker. If I wanted, you’d be a corpse for real. Your friends may be knocking, but they’ll never make it past my guards.”

*My friends?* He started to reply but a great roar overtook them both, drowning out his words. The whole building shuddered around them.

Shea’s gazed jerked toward the ceiling and he flushed white with shock. “What the hell?”

The momentary distraction was all Raven needed. He was on the immortal before the man could blink, catching him with a rapid tattoo of

flesh against flesh, the speed of his blows matched only by the power he put into each and every one of them.

The doppelganger rebounded off the doorframe and into a perfectly executed side kick that swept him off his feet as if he'd run into a steel bar. As he scrambled to rise, Raven dashed past him, slamming the door closed and turned to the two guards who stood in the hall, mouths hanging open in shock as their fingers scrabbled for the pistols strapped to their hips.

Raven snatched the closest up by the face, his fingers digging into the flesh like talons as he swung the man around to smash the other into the nearest wall.

The door behind him shuddered from a massive blow and he knew Shea had already recovered. Whatever else he could say about the man, the bastard was certainly tough. Raven didn't stand there waiting to see how many blows it would take to break through the door. He scanned both directions of the hallway and, picking one at random, fled the scene.

He didn't get far before encountering his first opposition. A squad of armed soldiers were rushing down an adjacent corridor and came upon him suddenly. The only thing that saved him from a spray of bullets was the fact that they reached the 'T' at the same time. He was in their midst before any of them realized their intersecting trajectories.

Vampires were faster than humans. It had something to do with the nature of the cells that made up their bodies—complex, cooperative cells that can *all* act as neuro-transmitters. He was reacting to their presence before they could do much more than gasp in shock.

With the speed of a striking cobra, he snatched the automatic rifle from the hands of one of the soldiers, using not as it was intended, but spinning it his hand like a baton as he struck to the center of their mass. The rattling roar of machine gun fire filled the enclosed space and he spun low as fragmented drywall rained down on them, sweeping out with a leg and mowing them down en masse.

He surged to a standing position and dispatched them all in turn with a series of well-placed kicks. He went to magesight and, discovering

that this area was suffused with mana, snatched up a thread and transported himself to the street above.

He turned to survey the building and his jaw dropped. It looked as though someone had fired a shoulder-launched missile at the structure. The whole face had fallen and the parking lot in front was buried in glass so deep it looked like snow drifts.

*What the hell happened here?*

He caught the scent of the cats before they appeared, boiling out the shadows as if given flesh from the darkness itself. Tuck approached swiftly, cradling an M-16 in his hands and looking rather pleased to see him. “Raven!”

“Tuck. What’s going on?”

“We followed you here. Morrigan, Valerie, and the weasels and wolves are inside looking for you right now.”

“Damn. Our timing sucks lately, doesn’t it?”

The tiger chuckled. “It seems that way. We keep rushing hither and yon to rescue you folks and find that you manage to rescue yourselves without our assistance.”

Raven shot him a puzzled look. “You didn’t rescue Val?”

“She was free when we got there. Ah, here comes Bryon.”

The younger vamp trotted up from out of an adjacent alley and stopped a few feet away. “It’s good to see you, Raven.” He looked good. Strong, confident, and poised. Being a vampire seemed to agree with him.

“Likewise. What did they do—use a pocket nuke on that thing?”

Bryon shook his head. “Val did it. She’s scary powerful now, Raven. You should’ve seen it.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m glad I didn’t,” Raven muttered. He took a second look at the destruction and sighed. “How many soldiers do you think she killed?”

Bryon blinked at him. “Enough.”

That went without saying. Raven simply nodded in response and ghosted toward the broken barricade, crunching across the strewn glass and walking through the shattered windows into the building lobby.

The interior lights flickered as a backup generator went on-line. Raven could smell the residual traces of gunpowder lingering in the air. At least a hundred rounds had been fired off in here. Trailers of smoke drifted lazily through the air.

He sifted through the scents, picking out Val's remembered fragrance from the heady mix filling the lobby. He followed the invisible trail down a side corridor toward a bank of elevators and a door marked 'stairs.'

He leaped back as the door slammed open, spilling out two struggling figures. The long blonde hair of the tallest combatant made him gasp, but it was the identity of the shorter that sent his heart leaping into his throat.

Deryk Shea caught Val by the throat. He squeezed just hard enough to end her struggles and shot a glance at Raven. "Well, well. It looks like your hand is played out, vampire. Guess you don't have any choice but to go along with what I've got planned. You wouldn't want me to rip this young lady's throat out right in front of you, would you?"

Raven's lip curled at the tone of casual arrogance that infested the immortal's tone. "You weren't so sure of yourself when I punched you out and left you in your own cell, Shea."

"Temporary setback," the doppelganger replied. "Oh. It looks like she's having problems breathing. Maybe I should relax my grip a little."

Raven caught sight of Val's panicked gaze and took a step forward, halting only when Shea lifted her completely off the ground. All he could see was the whites of her eyes, and her face looked like a lobster's carapace. She was slowly strangling and there was nothing he could do about it. All Shea had to do was snap his wrist and she'd be damn near irrevocably dead. With the immortal there, Raven knew he had no chance to reach her in time to infect her before too much time had passed.

His gaze flicked to the stairs behind them and spotted the wolf, Bridget, raising her rifle and taking aim at the immortal's skull. He shook his head just slightly, meeting the wolf's golden eyes. "What do you want, Shea?"

"I want you to kill someone. Someone who's not even alive. That shouldn't be hard for a cold-blooded bastard like you."

Raven didn't flinch. "Let her breathe and we'll talk about it."

Shea appeared to consider it, taking far longer than Raven liked, then simply dropped Val. She collapsed to the floor, gulping for air and almost sobbing in between gasps.

Three shots rang out from the stairwell behind him. Shea's body jerked as the bullets struck but he showed no reaction other than to reach over and slam the door closed, effectively cutting off any more fire from that direction.

He jabbed a finger down at Val. "Don't even *think* of trying to squirm away, blondie. You're my insurance. If this bloodsucker doesn't do what I tell him, I'm just going to kill you. Slowly, too. And I'll make you hurt in ways you've never imagined in even your worst nightmares."

"You kill her and you won't have any insurance left," Raven pointed out. The man was a psychopath. An indestructible immortal psychopath. *Is there anything more frightening in the metaverse?* he wondered. He couldn't think of anything. The Cen were bad enough, but this version of Deryk Shea *looked* like a human being.

Shea's lip twitched into a thin smile. "Doesn't matter. You're a sap. I can grab some infant and threaten to pop its head and you'd be just as likely to go along with whatever I want. You're damn near a god and you're willing to sacrifice yourself for *these* worms?" He nudged Val's leg with his foot. "It's enough to make me sick."

"Or dead," Val said suddenly, her voice emerging as little more than a rasp. She reached upward with one hand and Raven saw a vein pulse in the side of her head. It was the only outward sign she was doing anything at all.

Every version of Deryk Shea of which Raven had ever heard had the same power—nearly complete immunity to both physical damage and any super- or preter-natural powers. Magic slid past him in much the same way it did many vampires in most instances, and his mind was shielded from any of the mental psychic disciplines. As far as Raven knew, Val's powers, no matter how strong they'd grown, wouldn't touch him, either.



Val too had read the dossier on Deryk Shea. He was one of the most important figures on Earth Prime, even today. Considered indestructible, even with respect to weapons that would kill other immortals, Deryk Shea was closer to a force of nature than to a human being.

But from her reading, Val knew it wasn't that Shea was absolutely impervious to damage, just that he healed so quickly there were few things that could do enough catastrophic damage from which he didn't have time to recover. A point-blank nuclear bomb might well be one of those things.

She didn't have a miniature nuke, but she had something she thought might work nearly as well. Something he could neither evade nor resist. No one could. His vaunted immunity to the powers of others wouldn't even come into play because what she was doing wouldn't be focused on him. He'd just be in the way.

She conjured six planes of force, one on each side of him, one above his head, and one under his feet. It took every ounce of concentration she possessed to do it—this was not anything she'd ever even attempted. As far as she knew, no telekinetic had *ever* done anything like it. There were those who could manipulate a myriad of small objects at the same time, even down to a molecular level, but the creation of something as solid and stable as these force planes was a feat so far virtually unknown in the annals of psionic accomplishments.

Shea stumbled and glanced down at her, frowning, as the plane under his feet disturbed his balance. Comprehension beginning to dawn on his face, he started to reach for her, only to find himself impeded by something he couldn't see, an invisible wall between himself and the rest of the world.

She uttered three painful words. "Say goodbye, asshole."

She brought the planes together, coordinating the movement and size of each plane with the others. Shea's doppelganger had the chance to utter one chilling scream that sounded as though it was coming from a long distance away, before he became nothing more than a bloody smear in the air. She dissolved the planes. The bloody mass that hit the floor wasn't even remotely recognizable as the remnants of a living creature.

She turned to look at Raven and felt the world contract around her. Inky blackness swallowed her whole and she knew nothing more.



“Fuck me,” Raven breathed, as he skirted the expanding pool of blood and the *thing* laying between them. Now he knew what Bryon meant by ‘scary powerful.’ He’d never seen anything like what he’d just witnessed and fervently hoped he never saw anything like it again.

He scooped her up and threw open the door to the stairwell.

The wolves emerged, took one look at the unidentifiable mess on the floor, and gulped in unison. Bridget, who seemed to be limping, a rough gouge torn across her thigh, shot Raven a quizzical glance. “What happened?”

“She killed him,” Raven answered, still a little shocked by what he’d seen. “Not even Deryk Shea could survive what she did to him.”

Apparently far more pragmatic than he was, the alpha wolf simply nodded. “I could sense greatness in her when we met.”

“Greatness?” Raven sighed. “Being able to turn someone into a mass of—whatever the hell you’d call *that*—isn’t greatness. What you *do* with such a power will dictate how great you are.”

“I know that,” Bridget replied in a low growl. “She did what she had to do. Sometimes knowing when to do the unthinkable is a sign of greatness as well.”

Raven had to concede her point there. He nodded. “Where are the others?”

“I think Morrigan and the mustalids went upstairs,” Bridget said. “Val was certain you were down there.” She jerked her muzzle toward the stairwell door.

“She was right. Just a few minutes too late.” He didn’t explain further. “We need to secure the building. His people probably aren’t going to accept he’s dead. No telling what they’ll do without orders from him.”

“Understood,” Bridget said with a nod. “Max, Daphne—guard the front. Shelby, haul your tail upstairs and let Morrigan know that the target is in hand and the enemy is down.”



“How long?” Raven leaned over the back of the chair, staring at the computer screen and the single text box on the monitor screen.

The bushy-tailed ermine gave him the evil eye and shrugged her thin shoulders. “It could take ten seconds or ten hours,” she replied irritably. “Depends on how security conscious he was. It looks as though it might be a fifteen digit code—based upon the size of the text box—but I can’t say for sure. If he was lazy, it shouldn’t take long at all. Now will you go away so I can do my job?”

“C’mon, Raven,” Morrigan said from across the room. “Leave her alone. She’s doing the best she can.”

“I know,” he said with a sigh. “And I guess I should be glad this world’s technology is barely up to early twenty-first century stuff back on Earth Prime. But I really want to know what he was up to. The few surviving soldiers we’ve captured aren’t talking, the stupid bastards. Maybe they think he’ll rise from the dead and kill them for actually pretending to be decent human beings after all. Breaking into the computers are our only way to find out what he wanted from me, and what else he was working on.”

“That’s assuming he even put anything down in there,” she replied with a wry grin. “How’s Val?”

“Still passed out. She seems fine, otherwise. My guess is that that little trick she pulled took a lot out of her. She’s obviously malnourished, and no matter how powerful she gets, she still needs to fuel up.” He couldn’t quite wrap his mind around what she’d done, and found it comforting to think of it as a ‘little trick’ when it was anything but.

“I know a little healing magic,” Morrigan told him. “You want me to try to give her a little boost?”

Raven shook his head. “Let her sleep. I can’t imagine what it took out of her.”

Morrigan shrugged. “Your call.”

A loud shout from somewhere down the hall alerted them to something happening outside. They rushed to the window and spotted a

large flying craft of some sort—not a helicopter or a plane, as far as they could tell—descending swiftly and landing on the street in front of the building.

Roughly a dozen heavily armed and armored individuals emerged from the craft's belly, fanning out into a semi-circle around the nose, facing forward with their weapons at the ready. A moment later a single figure came down the ramp and paused at the base, gazing up through the window as if returning their gaze.

He shouted something they couldn't make out, sending the soldiers into a forward march, moving into a spearhead formation. "Huh. This could be bad," Raven murmured. "They look like pros."

Morrigan was nodding. "Yeah. They're not wearing the uniform the doppelganger's guards—I'm guessing mercenaries."

"Possibly," Raven answered dubiously. Raven had had some experience with mercenaries in the past. If this bunch were mercenaries, they were certainly well-equipped. It was a rare merc who knew how to reinvest his money wisely, and very few would spend it on any better equipment than they needed at the moment. Whoever ran this particular show was a rare bird indeed. "We'd better go down and find out what the hell they want before they decide to march in here and let their guns do the talking."

## Chapter Thirty

The commander shucked his helmet as they strode toward him, telling his troops to stand down. Their faces, hidden behind the opaque shields of their black helmets, were unreadable, but Raven thought he could detect a certain disgruntled tension in their stance as their leader watched their approach in perfect silence.

He was a black man of about forty, Raven thought, not particularly tall, but broad of shoulder and thick of wrist. He looked vaguely familiar but he couldn't place the reason why.

Raven took care to move like a mortal man, though he knew a discerning eye would be able to recognize that his nature wasn't as mundane as he was pretending. They crunched across the glass and came to a halt some ten feet away from the honor guard.

He looked Raven up and down and uttered a non-committal grunt, then turned his dark eyes, glittering like chips of obsidian, on Morrigan. "Who are you? Where's Deryk Shea?"

"Shea's looking like a slab of raw bacon about now," replied Morrigan with a snort.

Raven winced. *Oh, that was tactful.* Then again, tact wasn't exactly in the immortal's lexicon. "He's dead," he said simply.

A dark brow shot upward as the man's gaze shifted to Raven. "You do it?"

The vampire shook his head slowly. He wasn't about to give anything away, or place the blame on Val, until he knew where this man stood. "Someone else."

"What d'ya know? I'd have said the bastard *couldn't* be killed. Ain't life just full of surprises?" He stepped forward, striding between two of

his soldiers, and stuck out a hand. “Name’s Scorpio. I run this crew. Shea had contracted with me to kick some alien ass, but I guess that contract ain’t worth shit paper anymore.”

Reluctantly, Raven took his hand. The black man gave it a couple pumps and let go, brow furrowing. “Mighty cold hand you got there, brother.”

“So I’ve been told.”

Scorpio seemed to shrug it off and turned to Morrigan. “You’re a sight for sore eyes, if you don’t mind me saying...”

Morrigan grinned in reply and took his hand. “Name’s Morrigan. Nice to meet you, Scorpio. So, what can you tell me about these *aliens* Shea wanted you to fight?”

His eyes twinkled with amusement. “You don’t mince words, do you. Not a damned thing. I gotta say—if you don’t have the answers, we could all be screwed.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. We’ve got someone trying to hack her way into his systems. What we’re looking for might be in there. Nice craft, by the way. Where’d you get it?”

“Had it built,” Scorpio answered with a grin. His gaze flicked past them and he reached for his sidearm. “Holy shit! What is *that*?”

Raven took a look over his shoulder and sighed. Of course Cerberus would pick this exact moment to make an appearance. The dog had a talent for that. “That’s my dog.”

“That’s no dog,” Scorpio growled. “That’s a—hell, I don’t know *what* it is. I’ve had my share of dogs, and none of ’em looked like *that*.”

“Cerberus comes from a very rare breed,” Raven told him. *Yeah...a breed composed of exactly two animals. Cerberus and his brother.*

*That’s what you get for letting Loki dog-sit,* he told himself. Or at least he *thought* it was internal dialogue. He hadn’t heard that argumentative inner voice in months, something for which he was quite thankful. The voice had made him start questioning his sanity. *Well, it’s not as though my stress levels haven’t been off the charts.*

Cerberus nudged his hip with his massive bulk and Raven reached down and dug his fingers into the animal’s ruff.

Scorpio frowned, looking from him to the dog. “You three ain’t from around here, are you? You’re out-worlders.” It was an observation, not a criticism, delivered in a tone surprisingly devoid of emotional context. It left Raven wondering what he thought of out-worlders. Wondering what the doppelganger Shea had told him.

He was sharp, but that didn’t come as much of a surprise. This wasn’t some would-be third world dictator. This guy was professional-grade mercenary—cream of the crop. Raven had met a few in his time, and only the best bothered with decent equipment, much less than cutting edge stuff Scorpio seemed to favor.

“We’re out-worlders,” Morrigan agreed. “You have a problem with that?”

“Not at all,” Scorpio shot back. “Just wanted to know the score. You look human enough to me. That’s all I give a damn about.”

“Appearances can be deceiving,” Morrigan said, with a twisted grin and a sidelong glance at Raven.

“Knock it off,” he told her, not at all amused.

She snickered and shot him a wink that was anything but discreet. Sometimes her sense of humor wasn’t in the least bit funny.

Scorpio followed the exchange with a curious look, but didn’t comment. He had more important things on his mind. “You find out where these aliens are Shea wanted us to fight, and we’ll work out a deal. I don’t want my world overrun by giant bugs any more than the next guy.”

Raven nodded. “Is there any reason to believe that you might not be fighting the aliens here?” he asked.

“Funny you should say that.” Scorpio scratched at the stubble covering his head and frowned deeply. “He had some of his technicians install some kind of device into all my ships...said it could jump them between worlds if we needed to confront the aliens somewhere else.”

“I think that’s exactly what he had in mind. I don’t think *this* world’s in danger. I think he was going to use your troops to help repel invaders on another world, then to take control of it as well as this one.

“Deryk Shea was, if nothing else, an ambitious man.” At least, *this* Deryk Shea had been. The original, back on Earth Prime, was ambitious as well, but in a totally different way.

He turned to look back at the building. “Morrigan? Would you mind escorting Scorpio and his troops around for a while? I think Val is awake.”

She nodded, not bothering to ask how he knew. He couldn’t have answered her if she did. He didn’t know himself. She seemed inordinately pleased with the idea of spending time with Scorpio, though he couldn’t complain about it. Maybe the possibility of some skin time with someone else would stop her from propositioning him and Val every time the impulse struck her.



Val was standing in front of a full length mirror dressed in nothing but her underwear when he ghosted into the room. She didn’t notice him at first and he stood there, watching her, his gaze tracing her spare frame. He could count her ribs, and her shoulder blades, once well-padded with muscle, were like dinner plates shoved under her skin.

He’d done everything he could to push thoughts of her into the background—to worry about his job and finding out where she’d been taken—but it was at this moment that he came to realize exactly how much he’d missed her. Somehow this mortal woman had taken up residence in a place he’d thought abandoned forever.

She looked terrible and yet, as he watched her inspect herself, he also thought she was the most beautiful thing in the world. *What did they do to you?*

She spun, hands leaping up to a defensive posture as she reflexively fell into a fighting stance. Then, just as quickly, she relaxed. “Raven.” Her voice was soft, and a little huskier than he remembered. Her face was somber as she stared at him unblinkingly.

He tried on a tender smile. “God, I’ve missed you.”

She cocked her head. “Have you? Why did you send everyone else to rescue me?”

This caused a thin spike of guilt he pushed aside. “I wanted to. Hell, I thought that if anyone could understand why I stayed behind, it would be you.”

She sighed heavily. “I *do* understand, Raven. How are we ever going to make a go out of this if both of us are too married to our jobs to manage a relationship? In the scope of things my life is going to be little more than a brief spark against your eternity. How can you stand it?”

“It doesn’t have to be that way,” he replied. “We could petition the High Court—”

“And ask them to make me immortal?” She interrupted with a bitter laugh. “After this debacle of a mission? I’ll be lucky if I’m not thrown out of TAU completely. I totally screwed this one up. I couldn’t have done a worse job if I’d been trying to. I let natives get advanced weapons—hell, I practically *gave* them away—and I allied myself with a weapons smuggler. I violated every regulation in the book.”

“For all the right reasons,” he pointed out.

“Right, wrong. What the hell difference does *that* make? Your boss might care about stuff like that, but Athena isn’t going to see it that way.”

Raven had to admit she had a point there. He knew Athena well enough to know she’d be livid that he’d convinced Val to abandon the agency’s goals in pursuit of higher ones. She wasn’t very accepting of ‘necessary’ alterations to the plan. “There are other ways, you know.”

“Like what? Becoming a vampire? I love you, Raven, and I can accept that you’re one of the undead, but I’m not interested in joining you. I *like* being human.”

“You could always apply to change agencies,” he said.

“I’m sure you could get Sash to take me, but I don’t belong there and we both know it. I’m no mage.”

This was true. “There are rumors of other agencies forming. Or maybe we could talk to Jaz—killing the Shea doppelganger should give you some serious credit where she’s concerned. I mean—why *not* join Mirage if you’re given the chance?”

“I can tell you’ve spent a lot of time thinking about this and I appreciate it. But I just don’t know if you and I can *have* a future. If Athena wants to punish me, all she has to do is keep me on and send me as far away from you as she can. And I wouldn’t put it past her.”

“Neither would I,” Raven muttered. Though she’d never said so, or given any overt sign, he was pretty certain she had a few axes to grind against him as well. *Talk about a perfect opportunity to exact retribution.* “How about we make the most of the time we *know* we have and worry about the future when we get there?”

She met his gaze and, after a long moment, nodded slightly. “That’s the best suggestion you’ve made so far.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” he replied. “I think the Mirage suggestion was a pretty good one too.”

“I know Jaz is one of your friends,” she said with a frown, “but the woman gives me the creeps.”

“She gives *everyone* the creeps. You get used to it.” Jasmine Tashae was not only one of the most powerful immortal magi in existence, she was also known to administer her own brand of justice to those she thought deserving. She defended and avenged innocents, and no one was safe from her wrath should they step over the line. “And maybe ‘friend’ isn’t quite the right word. I’ve known her since she was a kid. That doesn’t make us friends.”

The door burst open behind them and Raven turned to spot the Ermine standing in the doorway, the end of her tail visibly twitching. “I’ve broken his code! You’ll never believe what he was up to!”

“That’s what scares me,” Raven replied. “I won’t *want* to believe it.”

He turned to regard Val, who’d taken a step closer to him. “We need to find you some real clothes. That shift you were wearing does *nothing* for you.” He winked at her and she smiled in response. “I’m sure we’ll be able to find something.”

“Our conversation isn’t finished, Raven,” she informed him. “We’ve got a lot of things to talk over.”

“Eat first,” he told her. “There’s a cafeteria downstairs in the basement—yeah, I know it’s a weird place for one. This Deryk Shea was even more eccentric than *ours*.”

“Nice change of subject,” she grumbled at his retreating back as he followed the ermine out the door and closed it quietly behind him. “Dammit, Raven,” she added. “Every time we start to talk about something serious, we get interrupted. I’m getting sick and tired of it.”

He heard her, of course. No ordinary door could foil his vampiric senses. He paused, fingers still wrapped around the knob, and considered returning to finish their conversation. But duty called, and he didn’t know how to balance professional and personal considerations. The only time he’d ever had to make that choice before hadn’t turned out well. At this point he feared that this time wouldn’t turn out any better than the last.

*Face it, Raven. Romance isn’t for you.*

He ignored the voice as he followed the mustalid down the hall to Deryk Shea’s office. At least there was one problem in front of him he might be able to resolve.



Val stared at the closed door for a long minute, then sagged against the bureau before the mirror. She was exhausted, and famished, and knew that a long road still stretched out in front of her before she could actually rest. She wanted nothing more than to go home to Starhaven and clear her schedule for the next month.

But she knew without thinking about it that even Starhaven would be no refuge this time. She’d have a lot of decisions to answer for, and harbored no illusions that her answers would be well-received.

She pawed through the drawers and found a worn jumpsuit, apparently left by a previous occupant and, with a thankful whisper, discovered it would fit. She donned it and barefoot, padded out into the main corridor.

If she expected to find the place more or less deserted, she was surprised by quite the opposite. The halls were full of hybrids rushing

this way and that, some carrying bundles of papers, others carting other supplies from one place to another.

She stopped a cat—a lithe, muscular panther—and asked, “What’s going on?”

The feline looked her up and down and bared its teeth in what was obviously meant to be a smile, though the end result of the attempt wasn’t nearly as friendly as it intended. “We’re setting up a war room for Commander Scorpio and his people.”

*And who the fuck is Commander Scorpio?* she asked herself, but said nothing. She thanked the cat for his answer and continued on her way, looking for an elevator or staircase leading the basement. Her stomach growled violently and gave a spasm. She needed to eat. Desperately.

And, true to form, she didn’t even make it to the elevator before running into someone else who wanted to have a conversation. “Val!”

She heaved a long-suffering sigh and turned to watch Bryon’s approach.

“You look awful!”

“You vampires are sure tactful,” she groaned irritably. “Does it come with the territory or do you have to take lessons?”

He blinked at her uncomprehendingly and she waved the question away. “Never mind. Do you know how to find the cafeteria?”

“No. But I’ll help you find it,” he replied. He pointed at his nose. “I’m sure this will point us in the right direction. Do you know where to start looking?”

“The basement.”

“Then the basement it is.” He looked from her to the elevator and blinked in obvious distress. “You’re in no shape to take the stairs, are you?”

“What was your first clue?” *Damn, Val, you’re sure being a sarcastic bitch today. And to Bryon, even, who definitely doesn’t deserve it.* “Sorry. I’m tired and hungry.”

He shrugged. “It’s okay. I just don’t like these elevator things.”

She stifled a chuckle. It wasn’t funny. Not really. He was a vampire, theoretically immortal and damn hard to hurt, much less kill, and was

afraid of elevators? Talk about ironic. “I can’t take the stairs and you can’t handle the elevators. Maybe escorting me to the cafeteria isn’t your best idea to date.”

He drew himself up and stared at her. “I can handle the elevator.” To prove his point he walked over and stabbed the ‘call’ button. They awaited the car’s arrival in slightly uncomfortable silence. Val felt a little guilty for being so snippy with him—she’d sounded a little too much like Morrigan for her own comfort.

She was angrier than she’d realized. Angry at Raven and herself. She’d fallen in love with him, abandoned her mission, and gone renegade, and what did she have to show for it? A wasted body and a half-broken heart.

Raven was very good at dodging conversations he didn’t want to have, and, where once she’d taken it as a symptom of the challenges they faced, now she wasn’t so certain. He didn’t seem to want to talk about them, or, if he did, he sure had a funny way of showing it.

Maybe it was true he didn’t have any answers for her, but she’d always thought that’s what relationships were about—discovering the answers together. Then again, what did she know about relationships? Everything she knew were from old books and views from Earth. Romance novels and romantic comedies—which nearly always involved one person lying to the other until finally their duplicity was discovered. Yet, amazingly enough, almost all of them ended happily-ever-after.

The car arrived and they stepped inside, Bryon’s hesitation barely noticeable. She actually admitted to some sympathy for him, after her initial response of disbelief. He was handling the culture shock very well, all things considered.

“He loves you,” Bryon said, out of the blue, as the elevator doors closed and the car began to move downward in response to Val’s pushing the button marked ‘B,’ presumably for ‘basement.’

“What?” Val shot him a shocked look.

“Raven loves you. He just doesn’t know how to express it.”

“Great. That’s wonderful. He needs to stop living in his own goddam head. It’s not like I can read his mind. Just about anyone else’s mind, in a manner of speaking, but not *his*.”

“He’s afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

Bryon shrugged. “He doesn’t talk about this stuff. I just know things—I can’t even say how. He’s afraid to open up, show his vulnerabilities.”

“Well, that’s just stupid,” she snorted disgustedly. “Do me a favor. Tell him I want to talk to him—and I’m not about to wait until dawn to do it. Giving himself an easy out like the approach of daylight isn’t going to fly this time.”

“Dawn’s at least five hours away,” Bryon pointed out. Unnecessarily. She’d already figured that out by looking at the clock in the sleeping quarters in which she’d awakened.

“Yeah, but I know Raven. He’ll manage to stay busy until about half an hour before dawn, then rush over to breeze through a bare facsimile of an in-depth conversation. I’ve had just about enough of his dodging the subject. You pass the word to him—I want to talk to him, and I want it to be for real.”

The elevator dinged and the door slid open. The smell of something tantalizing crept into her awareness and she stepped out, whirling on him as he tried to follow. “Thanks, Bryon, but I can find it on my own from here. Go talk to Raven. Tell him what I said. No more dodging the issue.”

He stood there as the door slid shut once again.



Raven glanced up from the screen as Bryon entered the room, looking somewhat confused and far more hesitant than he’d seen him in quite some time. He straightened. “What’s up?”

Bryon skirted the desk and pulled him away by the sleeve of his shirt. “You need to go talk to Val. She’s very upset.”

Raven frowned at him. “I’m planning on it. But this stuff is fascinating. Deryk Shea was planning on using these troops and their fighter craft, to not only repel the Cen invasion of your world, but to take it over himself. He planned to install a puppet government and rule both worlds.”

“So there *is* a Cen invasion in the works?”

“Definitely. The valkyrie told me that much. They’re fighting amongst themselves, but the pro-war faction is strong enough to launch an invasion, and that’s exactly what they’re doing. And there’s more. That starship is what they’re *all* after. It’s a jump-ship—capable of leaping between worlds, and armed with an assortment of powerful weapons capable of destroying whole cities at a time—and the Cen want it. So did Shea.”

“Don’t the Cen have anything like that already?”

“They did, but their knowledge of high-tech equipment wasn’t advanced enough for them to keep them intact, or to build new ones. They cannabilize the technology of the worlds they conquer, and impress local engineers to do their work for them. Eventually it all falls apart and they’re forced to move on. If that ship is still fully functional, which it may well be, it could be used to launch another attack on *my* home. There’s no telling how successful it would be—our technology has advanced rapidly in the last couple of centuries—but it could be devastating all the same.

“I need to brief Morrigan and Scorpio on this. We need to work out a plan to stop the Cen’s agents from reaching the ship and digging it out.”

“I’ll brief them,” Bryon said, cutting him off. “If you care anything for Val, you’ll go talk to her. This can wait until tomorrow night, if need be. I’m not sure *she* can.”

“Since when were you the ‘love doctor?’” Raven growled at the younger vampire.

“Since I realized you’re so damn stubborn you can’t be bothered to do what needs to be done. The woman loves you and you’re going to throw that away because you’re afraid of it. It’s stupid, and I won’t be a party to that kind of idiocy.”

Raven gaped at him, taken completely by surprise by the sudden anger in Bryon's tone. "Fine. You find Morrigan and Scorpio and bring them up here. Morrigan can read the text as easily as I can. Tell them I'll be back to discuss it when I'm through with Val."

Bryon nodded.

Raven spun on a heel and marched toward the door, his step hitching just slightly when he heard Bryon's whispered "Good luck."

Why did he have the feeling he'd need it? Hell, he'd probably need more than luck.



Morrigan leaned close to Scorpio and let her gaze linger on his soft brown eyes, far more gentle than she would've expected to see on a career mercenary. "So, why'd you become a mercenary, anyway?" She was already in the second stage of her seduction technique, and thought it was going rather well. The attraction was obviously mutual, and Scorpio was enough of a man's man to appreciate her frankness. Or so she thought.

She jumped a couple of inches when Bryon suddenly materialized by the side of their table. Well, not materialized, literally, but he appeared as if by magic, startling the both of them. "Morrigan! You two need to come with me. We know what Shea was doing."

Cursing the vampire silently, Morrigan gave Scorpio a smile that promised they'd continue this at a later time, then turned a dark gaze on Bryon. "And this was so important you just had to run down and tell us about it?"

"Yes," he said, seemingly oblivious to what he'd interrupted. "Raven sent me to get you and brief you on what they discovered."

"Really?" She drawled the word out, feeling her gaze narrow dangerously. "He did, did he? So where is Raven now?"

Bryon seemed to belatedly catch on to the fact he'd come at a bad time, and stuttered a little before explaining. "W...well, he's...he's talking to Val right now."

"And this couldn't wait? Doesn't sound that way to me."

“Well,” he answered back, sounding a bit irritated now, “that was important too. I told him I’d take care of briefing you two if *he* went and talked to Val. She’s pretty upset with him right now and things are going to get bad between them if he doesn’t make the time to deal with it and—”

“Oh, God. Spare me, Bryon. I don’t want to know the sordid details.” She sighed and levered herself to her feet. “Just take us to the damn computer. We’ll take it from there.” She’d been wondering when the other shoe would drop. Raven would only be able to dodge Val for so long before she’d figure it out, then all hell would break loose. As much as she’d wanted to mess with them both early on, she’d grown to like and respect them too much to want their nascent relationship to fail. But the vampire’s insistence on keeping his own counsel had done them no favors.

She eyed Bryon curiously, realizing that *he* must’ve pushed Raven into it, and found herself reconsidering her perceptions of him as well. The provincial youth was growing up into a solid young man, vampire or not. Perhaps he had more potential than she’d realized.

Maybe *he* was a possible future conquest—after she’d hooked Scorpio, that was. At the moment a mercenary commander in hand was worth a lot more than a young vampire with a bright future.

Every conquest had its moment, after all. His would come.

## Chapter Thirty-one

“Are you going to eat that?” Raven asked, grinning down at Val. He’d appeared out of nothingness, as he was prone to do, and yet she hadn’t been in the least bit startled by his abrupt arrival.

“Why? It’s not as though *you* can eat it.” She put the apple slice back down on her tray and peered up at him, curious as to why he was here. Had Bryon actually developed enough spine to tell his hero he was being a jerk? Hard to believe, but not impossible.

He pulled out a chair opposite her and slid into it, propping his elbows on the table and leaning toward her. “You feeling any better?”

“Some,” she answered, with a surreptitious glance around the room. It was empty, with only the clatter of dishes from somewhere behind the buffet counter indicating there were other people around at all. “Are you ready to talk yet?”

“I’ve been ready,” he said, and damned if he didn’t sound like he meant it. “There just always seems to be one more thing to take care of before we talk. And, of course, that leads to something else, and so on.”

“Sounds like an excuse.”

Rather than being angered by that, as she half expected, he let out a sharp laugh. “It does, doesn’t it? Hell, Val, I’ve screwed this all up from the beginning. I’ve done everything wrong. I tried to pretend I wasn’t feeling the same thing you were feeling at first, then I tried to push you away, and then I gave in to it just in time for everything else to get in the way again.”

She blinked at him. “If that’s supposed to be some kind of apology, it’s a damn shitty one.”

“How’s ‘I’m sorry,’ sound to you?”

“Better. Still not perfect, though.”

“Fine. I’m sorry I was a complete asshole, all right?”

“That’s more like it,” she laughed. “I guess I wasn’t direct enough either, was I?”

“What do you mean?”

“Hell, I *let* you dodge the issue rather than making you face it head-on. That probably didn’t help any.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m over two-hundred years old and this is all pretty new to me. The only time I thought I was in love before turned out to be a complete disaster. She wanted me to be something that I wasn’t, and I dragged that baggage right into this thing between us without realizing it was even there. You never really saw anything but me as I really am, did you?”

“What, a maverick agent with a chip on his shoulder the size of a small moon? Oh, I saw you. It wasn’t hero worship that attracted me to you, Raven. At first I thought you were a rude, self-absorbed prick who didn’t understand how what you did affected me. Your water-heater, your pistols, and the derision you poured on everything I’d been taught to believe was like a slap in the face.

“But the weird part is that, in a way, you were absolutely correct. Rules *don’t* matter as much as doing the right thing. Sometimes rules *do* get in the way. You made me realize that.”

“And I guess I never quite got how much that cost you,” he said. “You turned your back on everything you’d been taught and I left you to drift alone while I tried to sort out my own feelings. I *was* a self-absorbed prick.”

“Well, I guess you and I agree on one thing, at least.”

“So where do we go from here?”

She pushed the tray away from her and reached across the table to take his hand. “Are you going to open up to me finally, Raven? I can’t read your mind, I can’t sense your emotions. The only way for me to know what you’re feeling is for you to tell me. And that’s the one thing you haven’t been willing to do.”

“I know.” He squeezed her hand, gently. “Goban didn’t hurt you, did he?”

“Depends on what you mean by hurt. He didn’t rape me, or allow anyone else to, for that matter. If anything, they ignored me. They threw me in a dark room and pretended I didn’t exist, for the most part.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t come for you—” he began, but she cut him off with a slash of her hand.

“It doesn’t matter, Raven. I know why you didn’t and you were right—I’d have done the same thing in your position. You delegated the responsibility for my rescue, and stood by the people you’d sworn to protect. I can’t fault you for that.”

He lifted his violet gaze to hers and smiled thinly. “Really?”

“Really. And if they hadn’t shown up when they did, there’s no telling what would’ve happened. I escaped Goban’s manor, but getting from there to the city in the condition I was in...I’m not sure I would’ve made it on my own.” She gave his hand another squeeze. “You did the right thing, and I appreciate it.”

He stood suddenly, releasing her hand. “You done?”

“I couldn’t eat another bite,” she answered. “My stomach is a lot smaller than it used to be.”

“Good. Then come with me.” He did something arcane and suddenly they were standing back in the room in which she’d awoke earlier.

“I’m not sure if I’ll ever get used to that,” she said with a wan smile. She wanted to climb back in the bed and fall asleep, but this was far more important. It had waited far too long as it was.

Raven led her to the bed and gently forced her to sit before sinking to his knees in front of her. “Can you ever forgive me, Valerie?”

She reached out and stroked his cheek. With its cold hardness, it felt like marble under her fingertips. “You done playing the fool, Raven? Are you actually willing to give us a chance?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“That’s almost a real answer. Care to try again?”

He made a sound between a sigh and a groan. "I've never let myself be tied down to anyone. I guess I've never really trusted anyone that far. I don't know what's changed, but I love you, Val. And I trust you."

"What about Morrigan?" she asked with a teasing smile.

He glowered at her. "That's not funny."

"I thought it was."

Then, suddenly, like a ray of light bursting through a storm cloud, he grinned. "I could ask the same thing of you. She'd be just as happy to tumble with you as me."

That earned him a glare. "Now *that's* not funny. I'm not wired that way and you know it."

"That's what they all say."

She punched him lightly on the arm. She didn't have the strength to put anything into it, and, besides, it would be a lot like punching a marble column. "You going to play square with me from now on?"

"I will."

"Promise?"

He raised his right hand and held up two fingers in a gesture she vaguely recognized. "Scout's honor."

She gave him a skeptical look. "Were you ever a boy scout, Raven?"

"For about three months when I was eleven," he replied. "We cut Christmas trees and went cross-country skiing. I got bored pretty quickly. I've never been much of a joiner."

"Now there's a surprise," she replied, the irony rolling off her tongue unbidden. She leaned forward and pressed her lips against his. It was a sweet kiss, with nothing of lust in it at first, but the lingering touch of his mouth to hers ignited a fire in her belly and, after a moment, she had to pull away. "A girl could get lost in that," she told him.

"Well, maybe now is a good time to get lost," he said, leaning forward and planting tiny kisses along her jaw. Her spine turned to jelly and she sagged against him, a low moan escaping her lips. Their mouths met once more, and it seemed to her that he'd drag her soul out along with her breath, so passionate was the kiss.

Again she was forced to break free, gasping for air. “Okay, Raven,” she said, between pants. “You’re going to have to moderate your enthusiasm on the kissing side of things. I’m only a mere mortal, after all.”

“You’re not a mere anything,” he retorted. He slid his hand up her leg, rounded her hip, and traced lightly up her ribcage.

She caught his wrist just before it closed around her breast. “Not now. It’s not that I don’t want to, God only knows, but we’ve got more important things to think about than sex.” *Plus*, she added silently, *I don’t want him to look at me naked right now*. Her semi-emaciated state disgusted her, and she didn’t want him to feel obligated to make love to her when she looked like a skeleton clothed in skin just because he started it.

He met her gaze for a long moment and nodded. “You’re right. I need to brief Morrigan and Scorpio.”

“Who the hell is Scorpio?” she asked.

“He’s the commander of a troop of mercenaries Deryk Shea planned to use to fight off the Cen invasion back where we started. Everyone’s after that damned starship. That’s the key to all of this. The doppelganger’s notes indicate that the hybrids were to be used as conscription force, and then to guard captured natives while they dug the ship out.

“The still-predatory faction of the Cen don’t care about the world at all. They want to use the ship to get their revenge on Earth Prime for handing them their first real defeat. It’s apparently a jump ship, able to leap between realities, and armed with an assortment of atomic weapons and who knows what else. The Cen want it, and so, apparently, did Shea’s doppelganger. I’m not sure his reasons were any more benevolent than theirs. Dominance and power seems as much a part of who *he* was as it is part of what the Cen are.”

“And the different factions among the Cen?”

“I’m not sure Shea knew what was going on there either. His notes just indicate he knew of their existence. Are you up to participating in the briefing I’m going to give the others?”

She nodded. She wanted nothing more than to lay down and sleep, but knew this was important and that he could hardly spare the time to brief them all separately. The fact that he'd spent this much time with her in the face of what was coming gave her a warm feeling inside that she had to admit wasn't entirely warranted. She'd been on the verge of giving up on them, and it had bordered on 'too little too late.' But it hadn't been too little, nor too late. But it had been close. "We'd better get to it then."

He grabbed her hand as she stood, and transported them to Deryk Shea's office where the others waited.



"I don't understand. What do they think they'll gain by acquiring this ship?" Bryon asked, leaning forward and peering at the image on the computer screen over Morrigan's shoulder. "It's buried in ice and rock. It would take years to dig it out."

"Not necessarily," murmured Scorpio, from across the room. "My engineers could unbury it in a matter of weeks, and I can only assume that the Cen are capable of doing it, too." Morrigan favored him with a quick nod and hit a key combination that transferred the image to the large, six by nine foot wall screen.

"Damn, this thing is primitive," she muttered irritably. "I haven't had to deal with a computer this slow since the late twentieth century."

"I might be able to do something about that," remarked the Ermine, whose name they'd learned was Talia. "I've already figured out the operating system and I could put together a virus that can do a pretty good job of faking better hardware."

"Really?" This caught Scorpio's attention. He'd been a little shocked at first to find the place overrun with hybrids, but Morrigan had provided enough of a distraction for the surprise to wear off. The mercenary commander turned out to be quite the energetic lover, and damn strong for a mortal human. They'd laid waste to an unused office while waiting for Val and Raven to reappear.

She took some satisfaction in noting that the two of them didn't look at all satiated, though she wasn't sure she could blame them for not wanting to engage in any carnal activities considering how drawn Val was looking. She'd never had sex with a vamp, though her active imagination had supplied her with a great deal of detail on the subject.

Chances were that, in her current condition, Val wouldn't make it through ten minutes of the vampire's passionate embrace.

Too bad for them.

She really hoped Scorpio wasn't the possessive kind. He'd probably take it badly if she *did* manage to coax Bryon into an assignation. In the interests of keeping the peace with these newest allies, maybe she'd best either wait until it was all over, or at least until Scorpio was too busy to notice.

The other option, of course, was to simply inform him how it was, and let the chips fall as they might.

The last option was probably best, she decided. She'd never been the kind to sneak around. She liked to do her catting around right in the open.

And for now he'd found something entirely different to be more captivating than Morrigan, a circumstance she found more amusing than aggravating. In short order, he and Talia were bent over one of the notebook computers, talking in low tones as she laid out her method for tweaking the operating system to over-clock the processor.

Who'd have ever imagined the rough-and-tumble mercenary commander was a closet computer geek?

Raven cleared his throat to attract the attention of those assembled, which included not only Morrigan, Bryon, and Scorpio, but the hybrid leaders, Bridget, Claw, and Tuck as well. A couple of Scorpio's lieutenants, non-descript, big-necked fellows who looked enough alike to be brothers, sat in, too.

"Here's what we know now," the vampire said, pointing at the huge wall monitor. "This is the crashed starship we believe the Cen are after. With it they could travel between universes in the blink of an eye, and unleash incredibly powerful weapons on any number of targets. The

technology of the ship is considerably more advanced, electronically and mechanically, than the Cen are capable of creating on their own. They are not a mechanically gifted race. They usually advance by stealing the technology of others.

“You hybrids...” He aimed his gaze at Tuck, Claw, and Bridget. “...were intended to first lead a softening attack upon the human population, to spread fear, then, once the Cen had sent in their ant-soldiers to crush any military opposition, to become the backbone of the subsequent excavation of the crash site. The plan was to have you run the operation and keep the human slaves in line, since ant-soldiers are not capable of dealing with the extreme cold of the polar regions.

“The thing they weren’t going to tell you was that the ship is already claimed, by an immortal by the name of Odin. He’s been working behind the scenes, building the Church of the Three-Fold God into a force that could eventually, using magic, free the ship for his own use. There’s no telling how Odin would’ve reacted to your attempt to dig out the ship, but I’m willing to bet it wouldn’t have been pretty.

“It’s important to keep in mind that Odin’s still on the loose, and we’re not at all sure what cards he still has to play in all of this. What we’re going to do is use Scorpio’s jump ships to secure the sight, then establish a base and ten mile perimeter around the ship. The mercs will hold the outside while the rest of us clean the ship itself out of anything that might pose a threat during the excavation process. Any questions so far?”

“What kind of opposition are we expecting?” Scorpio asked.

It was a good question, Morrigan thought, and certainly one you’d expect from an experienced military commander.

“We threw a monkey wrench in their plans by subverting their hybrid forces and killing one of their valkyrie—it may be a while before the Cen can put another force on the scene to oppose us directly. But they’re bound to have some agents there, perhaps even within the Church. The willingness of a certain faction of the Cen to make use of magic is a new development, and we’re not entirely certain what agenda they themselves might be pursuing. If they’re after the ship as well, I’d say we can expect

some Church troops on the scene before too long, supported by the magic-wielding Deacons.

“If we establish and secure a fifteen mile perimeter, it’s very unlikely they’ll be able to get close enough to hit the base with any spells before your ships can shred their forces. As far as what we’re likely to encounter *inside* the ship...well, your guess is as good as mine.”

“Is it just me,” Tuck interjected. “Or is there an awful lot of conjecture in all of this?”

Raven nodded. “No, it’s not just you. A lot of this is guesswork and extrapolation. Some was Shea’s, some is our own from what we already know. Unlike Shea, we’ve actually been *inside* the ship. Beyond that, part of the problem is that we really don’t know how many factions are involved, and what goals each faction might be pursuing. We know that Odin has some influence with the Church, but we’re not sure that all of it remains under his thumb. And we don’t actually know anything about his ultimate agenda either.

“We’re pretty sure there are at least three Cen factions—the one we all know and love to hate, the new, magic-tolerant crowd, and a group we’re told is interested in more peaceful relations with us. Add this to the possibility that their may be schisms in the Church itself that have little or nothing at all to do with outside influences, we’re dealing with one hell of a lot of unknowns.”

Morrigan was impressed. A lot of leaders might have attempted to gloss over those things they did not know to foster a false sense of confidence, but Raven chose not to go that route. He’d laid all bare for everyone to scrutinize.

“So what’s in it for us?” asked Claw. Had she thought about it, she could’ve predicted this sort of response from the wolverine. Despite the bluntness of his query, she had to admit he made a good point. The hybrids were risking a lot by joining up, and had the least to gain from it. Scorpio and his troops were in it for the money, and Morrigan felt pretty certain Raven was good for it one way or another.

The hybrids were being asked to participate out of little more than gratitude for being freed from the Cen yoke, and that seemed like a pretty

sparse reward if they ended up being killed by the Cen or another one of the myriad of factions involved, in a battle for the ship.

“That’s easy,” Raven answered. “The protection of the immortals and the opportunity to join the growing community on Starhaven, a place completely beyond the reach of the Cen.”

Morrigan nodded. That was good thinking. Not only would they be safe on Starhaven as a group, they’d provide an excellent asset for the agencies, who would give nearly anything to have whole races of operatives capable of infiltrating Cen-controlled worlds without arousing suspicion.

“Sounds like a fucking dog’s breakfast,” Scorpio grumbled loudly. “Not to worry, though. Our craft can take on anything the bugs can throw at us.”

“It’s not the bugs you should be worried about,” Raven told him. “The real issue will be dealing with the Church mages. If they’re smart, they can target your ships as easily as any anti-aircraft battery. What’s worse is if they do it right, you won’t be able to trace the source of the attack.”

“Huh. Good point. What do you suggest?”

A slow, sly smile crept across Raven’s face. “We ward your ships.”



All in all, the mercenary company, which called itself ‘Havoc,’ had nearly three hundred jump ships, ranging from dual-seat fighters to large transport vessels like the one in which Scorpio had originally arrived. It took several days for Raven and Morrigan to ward them all, mostly because they pulled out all the stops to make the wards as potent as possible. Constructing wards with more than three strands was rare, but they actually put across the effort to tie five threads to each, making the defensive response of the spells remarkably violent. While one thread was intended to parry an attack, a second was meant to follow it back to its source, and the third laid down a stream of supercharged ions for the two-pronged lightning bolt to follow.

It was a nasty response and Raven felt undeniably proud of its potential effectiveness. The only way for the Deacons to survive it was if

they were warded to the hilt, and mages didn't tend to ward themselves as a matter of course. Arrogance could be a killer.

If Raven had his way, it *would* be.

The first real hitch they had during the whole preparation phase was Scorpio's insistence during one of their daily briefings on having a clear chain of command laid out, and everyone knowing everyone else's place in it.

Raven cocked an eyebrow in response, Val cleared her throat, and Morrigan snorted loudly. Lady-like she wasn't.

"How 'bout we do it this way? Raven's in charge," Morrigan said. "Val, you, and I will be his lieutenants. She runs the wolves, I'm in charge of the cats and weasels, and you take care of your mercenary troops. In the absence of conflicting orders, any of those under our command should take orders directly from Raven or the other lieutenants. Does that work for you?"

He looked dubious, but hid it behind his coffee mug as he took a drink and gazed across the table at her. "Sounds like chaos."

"What would you prefer?"

"I don't mind Raven being in charge. He's been a soldier, I understand. He's been in combat. But I think I should be the next in line."

This didn't sit well with Morrigan. Her eyes went flat and she leaned forward, catching his gaze within her raptor stare. "My name is Morrigan. I was—I *am*—a goddess of war. Don't presume to throw your macho military crap at me and expect me to swallow it. Not for a flaming second. Am. I. Understood?" She clipped the last three words so sharply they each stood alone, naked and unafraid.

Raven exchanged glances with Val, both of them restraining the urge to smile. Sexism didn't fly where they came from, and even if it was the way things usually worked on *this* Earth, things were about to change.

Scorpio's expression didn't alter a fraction. He nodded once and slid his chair back, standing in one easy motion. "Now *that's* settled, I suppose it's time to arrange for a last maintenance check of the ships."

He swept from the room without another word. “Well,” Val observed quietly. “I don’t think he liked that much.”

“I think you’re right,” Morrigan murmured. “You screw a guy and he thinks he knows you.”

Val shot her a look and laughed aloud. “Funny how that works, isn’t it?”

Raven shook his head and chuckled to himself. No matter how you figured such things, Morrigan was a character. He couldn’t begin to express, even to himself, how glad he was he hadn’t fallen for her not-inconsiderable charms. Of course, their first meeting had gone a long way toward making *that* pretty much impossible.

The hybrids tended to remain silent through the briefings, probably some kind of a holdover from their Cen training. “What was his objection?” Bridget asked him.

“Humans have gender issues,” he told her. “Some men don’t like to consider females capable of doing the same jobs they do.”

She cocked her head, one ear flicking back in a very canine expression of disbelief. He smiled slightly and shrugged. “It sounds unbelievable, I know. But that’s not the worst of it. For thousands of years on my world, men considered women to be property—if not the property of their fathers and brothers, then the property of their husbands. It wasn’t universal, but damn near enough.”

“And she—Morrigan—was a warrior?”

“A legendary warrior, if you believe the stories,” he answered. “I wouldn’t want to try her. She may have gotten soft in the intervening centuries, but I wouldn’t want to bet my life on it.”

She curled her lip into a fair semblance of a human grin. “Neither would I. We follow Val. We know she’s killed a Valkyrie. And the immortal known as Deryk Shea. She hunts well.”

“She does,” he agreed, aiming his gaze in her direction. *She caught me sure enough.*

## Chapter Thirty-two

“This is what we get for making assumptions!” yelled Raven, over the sound of the rattle of machine-gun fire.

Val shot him a sharp look and a lop-sided grin as she ducked back into the trench. He risked a glance over the barricade and grimaced. “Where’s our fucking air support?”

As if conjured by the words themselves, a low whistle filled the air and a jump-ship rocketed overhead, spitting bolts of directed radiation at the oncoming troops.

*Either Shea’s intelligence was completely off, or he pulled a fast one on us from beyond the grave.* Someone besides Morrigan had been supplying the locals with munitions, and, apparently, training them as well. Raven had the suspicion it had been Odin, but he had no way to confirm it until the one-eyed bastard showed up on the scene.

They hadn’t been able to get close enough to find out whether they were using the ship as a base, or if they were just camped around it. Either way, the easy excavation they’d been anticipating had turned out to be a sucker’s bet.

They’d only been here for two days now. This was their second night and Raven was getting downright pissed about the whole situation. Their troops didn’t have the ammunition to stand up to any kind of protracted battle, and, the way it seemed right now, that’s what they were facing.

The enemy barricades were heavily warded, which made any kind of magically-assisted assault nearly impossible. The air support helped, but the Deacons had learned quickly not to target the ships themselves, but just to trust in their defensive arrays to counter their weapons. Only one shot out of about thirty were getting through to do any damage.

*What was that I was thinking about over-confidence just a few days back?* he thought wryly. *It's a killer.*

*Maybe you were betrayed,* said that voice, the one he hadn't heard for months. He ignored it and jumped into the trench beside Val. "You have any ideas?" he asked her.

"I might have the glimmer of one," she replied. "It's risky, but it might work."

"Risky is good enough. We can't take more than another day of this. Our troops will run out of ammo if it keeps up."

"Tell me something I *don't* know," she shot back, a bit irritably. "Sorry. I'm as frustrated by this as you are."

"I can tell." He reached out and ran his fingers through her hair. Even as dirty and matted as it had become, he couldn't keep his hands off it. He seemed to always be wanting to touch her. If he were her, he'd be about sick of it by now. "What do you have in mind?"

She sketched a gently curving line in the dirt floor of the trench, demarcating the line of the enemy barricades. The line formed a half-circle with its open end butting up against the massive bulk of the crashed ship. "We're looking at as many as a thousand human troops in there, all armed with automatic weapons and possessing what I assume to be a massive stockpile of ammunition.

"We can't charge their line because we'd get shredded, and we can't just hang back here and plink away at them. We're likely to run out of ammo long before they do.

"I'm wondering if I can conjure a plane of force and aim it into the center of their barricade. I'm estimating that I might be able to form one thirty to forty feet long. Judging by what I was able to do to Shea's doppelganger, the plane might well slice right through the barricade and whoever's standing behind it. If you can transport a sizeable portion of our hybrid forces close to the barricade, they can use the distraction to break through and gain a foothold on the other side of the wall."

"You weren't kidding about the 'risky' part, were you?" He knew he'd gone dead by the concern reflected in her gaze. She hated it when all semblance of humanity faded from his face, but sometimes he couldn't

help it. He'd already figured out what she wasn't saying out loud. To pull this off she'd have to get within a hundred feet or so of the barricade, well within range of enemy fire. "Fine. I'm going to modify the plan a little, though. Bryon and I will accompany you on your initial charge. I'll use a strand to re-route any fire that comes our way, then Morrigan will transport the hybrids to reinforce us. You didn't happen to get my other pistol back when you escaped from Goban, did you?"

"I was a little preoccupied at the time," she said in a low growl. "I didn't think to reclaim your gun."

"It's not a gun," Raven informed her, lifting the M-16 that had been leaning against the trench wall. "*This* is a gun. It's a sidearm or a pistol."

She rolled her eyes. "Give it up. It's a goddam gun, Raven. So...you want to spread the word, or shall I?"

"You can contact everyone mentally, right?"

She nodded. "I think so."

"Do it. Let's get this show on the road."



Morrigan raced behind Val and the vampires, drawing a thread behind her like a long whip. As the roar of automatic weapons filled her ears, she saw the two vamps stop, put Val down, and watched as the blonde woman raised her hand to point at the barricade.

A rising whistle filled her ears, so high of pitch no mortal could possibly hear it, and, for a second, she wondered what it was. Then she realized that it was the sound of a mono-molecular plane of telekinetic force sweeping forward from Val. The sound rose to a crescendo as something invisible neatly bisected the barricade and the air was suddenly filled with the sound of choking screams. A cloud of red mist rose from the enemy's ranks and Morrigan felt a sudden chill rush down her spine.

The two vamps swept her up again and ran toward the barrier, moving as little more than pale blurs in the liquid dark. Morrigan snapped the thread she carried backward and transformed it into a transit tube.

They vaulted the cordon and vanished from sight, but she could still hear the rattle of weapons fire. One by one, the feline and mustalid hybrids emerged from the other end of the transit tube, running for the barricade with weapons in hand. Morrigan suppressed the strong urge to sprint forward herself, knowing she needed to stay here to hold the transit tube in place, and replace it if made necessary by a possible disruption from the Church mages inside the compound.

Every new burst made her wince. She *hated* being out of the action. She hated being back here, more or less, safe, while they took all the risks.

Across the barricade, Raven released Val's arm and he and Bryon spun in unison, their M-16s spitting blazing death at anyone within range. He picked out a bullet spinning toward Val like slow motion video in his vampiric sight, and nearly screamed when it pinged off an invisible shield a foot from her body.

She had her sword in hand, and was striding forward, meeting up with a knot of soldiers struggling to train their weapons on her. Her rapier arced, and steel barrels sheared away, cut by a blade now as sharp as the crystal weapon in Raven's dimension pocket.

They went down before her like grain before a scythe, and she advanced over their bodies, throwing out her left hand at another clump of soldiers some ten feet away. Another invisible plane of force passed through them, and they were dying even as their bodies tumbled in bloody segments to the ground.

Somewhere to his left Raven spotted a couple of Church Deacons in gray robes, eyeing Val and reaching for passing strands. Raven fired a quick burst and vanished in a swirl of black fog before materializing in their midst. He smashed one from his feet with the butt of his rifle and snatched the other up with his free hand. "You hitched your cart to the wrong damn horse," he snarled. Then he whirled, sending the mage hurtling through a mass of soldiers and into the inside corner of the barrier with a sickening crunch.

And then the cats and weasels were coming over the wall, Tuck and Claw in the lead. The tiger launched himself from the top in an impressive sixty foot vertical leap, coming down in the middle of a squad of soldiers trying to take aim at Raven. Without even bothering to un-sling his rifle from his back, he used his massive clawed hands to rive his way through them. They fell screaming.

The burly wolverine leaped down from the barricade and charged across the killing field, faltering once as a single bullet found his flesh, but without missing a single step. He caught a soldier by himself—a young man barely old enough to shave—and plowed him into the crimson earth under his feet like a furry battering ram.

Then he filled his hands with spitting death and mowed through another squad scrambling madly to get a bead on him.

Breaching the wall had made all the difference. Now the feral savagery of the hybrids came into play, and the close quarters made the automatic weapons carried by the Church soldiers nearly useless.

Raven shifted his focus to the Deacons interspersed through the crowd. They'd been taken by surprise as much as the troops, and were now fighting to come up with a way to defend themselves as well as repel the invaders.

Raven pulled a spell from his web and hurled it at one of them, but not before a Deacon managed to cast a sigil of his own at Claw. Five threads expanded outward from the whirling rune as it unfolded itself. Raven pawed at his own web, trying to find a generic counter, but he was a second too late. Four bolts of fire slashed at the wolverine and he burst into flames.

The last strand snatched him up and hurled him into the sky like a toy soldier launched by a rubber band. Before Raven could do anything for him, he was forced to use the defensive spell to protect himself from a concerted attack by two of the Deacons.

He repelled their spells and vanished from their sights, bounding to where they stood with two thrusts of his legs. He flung the M-16 back and seemed to materialize between them. A savage hooking kick with his heel smashed one to the ground as he ducked a wild swing from the

other. He became a blur, moving so quickly that he was behind the Deacon before the man had a chance to react. Rather than giving him another chance to throw a spell, Raven simply reached out and snapped his neck with a twist of his wrists.

The man collapsed, a puppet who'd lost his strings.

Morrigan paused before the wall and looked up at the flaming ball coursing overhead. She snapped out a strand and pulled it to her. She snuffed the flames by sucking them away into the earth at her feet and stared down in growing horror at the twitching and mewling thing before her.

Then it struck her like a thunderbolt who it was. The remnants of fur clinging to the side of his muzzle kicked the realization into gear. *Oh, my god.* She felt to her knees but stopped herself before she touched him. He had to be in agony. It was a wonder he was even alive. "Claw? Don't try to speak. Fuck!"

She stood and watched in helpless fascination as he shuddered and died before her eyes.

She spun and, coiling her legs under her, vaulted to the top of the barricade. A stray round sizzled across her shoulder, but she barely felt the sting. Her eyes scraped across the compound, falling upon a single figure at the very back, guarded by a dozen or more soldiers.

"Motherfuckers," she hissed, and leaped to the ground. She strode purposely in their direction, faltering by half a step to drive a whitened fist into the throat of a Church soldier who strayed too close. Bullets whizzed by like a swarm of angry bees, but she kept walking. At a distance of fifty feet or so she broke into a trot, then accelerated into a full-out charge.

She'd liked the gruff wolverine a great deal, and she wanted blood in payment for what had been done to him. And if someone was being protected by the soldiers, she was willing to place the blame squarely on his shoulders. Why not?

A single round struck her in the ribs and spun her halfway around, but she continued the motion and whirled back to face her target. She

still couldn't make out any details, hidden as he was by his lackeys and the hot tears streaming down her face, but none of that mattered. The only thing that mattered was wrapping her fingers around his throat and watching the light slowly fade from his eyes.

She grunted as another bullet struck, lodging somewhere in her left shoulder. By the time she reached the wall of soldiers, she'd been hit three more times. None of it had any effect. Painful, but not debilitating. Not to her. The first bullet was already being forced out of the wound as the flesh healed it when she drove the first guard to his knees with a straight kick to the groin. She grabbed his weapon as he fell and, rather than using it as it was intended, she simply used it as a club to batter her way through the clump of soldiers.

Several blows, broken limbs, and skull fractures later, she broke through and found herself staring straight at Goban, who sneered and raised a very familiar black matte handgun. He thrust the muzzle at her and pulled the trigger. The slug slammed into her sternum and stopped. She grinned, and it wasn't a friendly expression. "You know," she said slowly, "maybe we've been wrong all along. Maybe there *is* a God."

She slapped the pistol from his hand and followed with a straight left pulled from halfway across the continent. It came at him with all the power and velocity of one of Earth Prime's anti-grav trains. No mortal could possibly escape or hope to block it.

Goban twisted out of the way and caught her on the side of the head with his elbow.

Val caught sight of a pistol flying through the air, snatched it up with a telekinetic 'hand,' and sent it floating Raven, who stood about fifty feet away. He caught it, turned it over in his grasp, and smiled, though she noticed the smile was a bit grim. She couldn't blame him. Looking around at the dead and wounded, she didn't feel much like smiling herself.

Then she spotted Morrigan, engaged in a deadly dance in the midst of a large group of fallen soldiers, with someone she couldn't quite make

out. They looked fairly evenly matched, which led her to believe it was another immortal. It didn't look like Odin, though.

Bryon appeared by her side and she jumped. "Christ! Don't *do* that."

"Sorry," he said, but he didn't sound particularly contrite. "Who's she fighting?" Then he went completely still, suddenly becoming as devoid of expression and body language as Raven often did. "Goban," he hissed, eyes narrowing to slits. He started forward but she grabbed him by the back of his shirt.

"Uh-uh. She's got him where she wants him. Even if he takes her down, which I doubt, there are still three more of us he has to face. Just wait."

"I owe him." He said it without emotion. It sent icy fingers up her spine. Morrigan *might* try to subdue him. Byron would kill him if he had the chance. So, for that matter, would Raven.

Val wanted answers more than she wanted his blood, but somehow she didn't think either of the guys would see it her way. Bryon because Goban had killed him, and Raven because...well, because he'd kidnapped Val.

Speak of the devil. "Who in the hell is she fight...?—that's Goban." His tone went cold and hard as the ice beneath their feet. "That sonofabitch..." He took a step forward.

"Dammit, Raven...No!"

"How in the hell is he fighting her? He's just a mortal."

"Apparently not anymore," she said. "I don't understand it, either."

"Stop the fight," Raven said. "Just do it. I want to talk to him."

She shrugged and fired a single telekinetic punch at the back of Goban's head. She didn't put nearly as much force into it as she could have. Her power was still growing, she'd already realized. This battle, fierce as it had been, hadn't even really winded her.

Goban went down like he'd been clubbed. Which, when you got right down to it, he had been. Morrigan kicked him once in the ribs for good measure and hauled him to his feet. She dragged his unconscious body over to where they waited.

The surviving hybrids, maybe fifty in all, were moving among the wounded, tending to their fellows as best they could. A few of them had Cen first aid packs, which would probably making treatment a fairly successful proposition.

Tuck spoke in soft tones with one of the mustalids, a young badger, and then made his way over to them.

Morrigan tossed Goban at their feet. "Claw is dead," she said. "I couldn't save him."

"I was too slow," Raven murmured, crouching next to the unconscious Goban. "He was giving you a good fight, wasn't he?"

"Too good," Morrigan said, nodding. "Something's not quite right here." She gave a shrill whistle and raised her arm. Two black shapes descended from out of the sky and landed on the ground nearby, peering up at her with their black, beady eyes.

Val repressed a shiver.

"There's a burned corpse just over the wall," she told her two crows. "Don't let any of your kind near it. Claw deserves at least a decent burial."

They bobbed their heads in unison and took to the air once again.

"I think the answers lie within the ship." Raven turned his gaze to the towering shape looming over them. "Bring him. Tuck—you're in charge until we return."

"Where's Cerberus? And the wolves?"

"I ordered Cerberus to stay back. He doesn't have a lot of defenses against automatic weapon fire. I think Bridget and the wolves are still on patrol behind us. Tuck can fill them in when they get here. Cerberus can take care of himself."

The tiger nodded. "Good luck," he told them, as Raven thrust what appeared to be an empty hand at the crashed vessel. When he took a step forward and vanished, Val followed without a moment's hesitation.



The initial plan was for the feline hybrids to accompany them, but the battle to reach the ship had made that impossible. The four of them

stood in one of the long, curving corridors that ran around the outside edge of the ship. Raven had tried to place them as far up as he could get without getting too close to the bridge. He knew from his last visit that the upper reaches of the craft was completely laced with anti-transit wards.

He paused, sniffing at the air. He held up a hand in warning as Morrigan drew abreast of him.

“What is it?” she murmured softly, gazing past him.

“Something bad lurks ahead,” he replied. He didn’t know what it was, but it made the hairs on the back of his neck bristle defensively. The dry, reptilian scent that stung his nostrils was that of a dragon, but he couldn’t figure out how a dragon could be roaming the corridors of the ship. Even the smaller varieties would need more room to move than this narrow hallway.

He’d heard rumors of humanoid dragons—demi-dragons, they were called. Savage creatures by all accounts, barely sentient, but terrible foes.

A blast of sound like the whistle of steam engine shook the corridor and the sound of something heavy running toward them banged against the alloy of the deck beneath their feet. He holstered his pistol and drew his sword from its dimensional scabbard before striding forward purposely.

The creature rounded the curve and stopped, sniffing at the air, its large, bulbous eyes shining in the dim light emanating from the panels in the ceiling. A ceiling, Raven noted, that it had to crouch slightly to avoid.

Its large, pointed muzzle, vaguely reminiscent of an alligator’s snout, parted slightly, revealing rows of gleaming teeth, glistening with strands of saliva. It snuffled, edging forward, something deep within its tiny reptilian brain warning it of danger.

Its shoulders were massive, chunks of muscle to which were attached large, ropy, humanoid arms as large as a big man’s legs. Black claws as long as Raven’s own fingers tipped each four-fingered hand.

“Well, that’s pretty fucking ugly,” Morrigan said with a grimace.

“It is, isn’t it? Looks pretty dangerous, though.”

“About as smart as a bag of sand, I’ll bet.”

Raven nodded absently. “Smart enough not to come charging at us.”

“Good point.”

“Are we going to just stand here staring at the damned thing?” Bryon growled from behind them. “Let’s go kick its ass!”

“You’ve been hanging around Morrigan too much,” Raven told him sourly. “I can’t believe you just said ‘kick its ass.’”

Bryon shifted the unconscious body on his shoulder and grunted. “What—was the idiom incorrect?”

Raven sighed wearily. “This is most definitely not the time for this sort of discussion,” he murmured, mostly to himself.

He went to magesight just in time to catch Morrigan grabbing a passing strand. He reached out and caught her arm. “Don’t bother. It’s resistant to magic.”

“It’s what? You’ve gotta be kidding.”

“Nope. That’s what I’ve been told, anyway. You can try it if you want, but I’ll bet it’ll just piss it off.”

“Okay—so what the hell is it?” Val asked. “It’s not resistant to what I could do to it.”

“Probably not. It’s a demi-dragon, I think. Some wiseguy tinkered with dragon genes and some other sort of reptile—I’m guessing velociraptor or something of that nature.”

“Then step aside,” she suggested. “I’ll take care of this.”

“No,” he said firmly. “We can’t take the risk of you pushing yourself too far and not being able to dial up the power later. I can handle this beast.”

He charged, the wind bruising his face with the speed of his movement. He skidded to a halt just out of the creature’s reach, boots squealing on the metal floor, and thrust the tip of the blade at the beast’s long torso, aiming for where he thought the heart would be.

The creature vanished with a loud bang as displaced air rushed into the space it had vacated. He whirled, but the corridor was empty but for him and his companions. He knew he’d have to deal with the beast

sooner or later. He would've preferred sooner, but the demi-dragon had obviously had other ideas.

"One thing's for sure," he growled, as he rejoined the others, "I ain't going to run through this goddam ship opening doors like last time."

Obviously remembering the experience as well as he did, Val chuckled and nodded.

He found that he was frowning at her and smoothed his face deliberately. As much as he enjoyed being with her again, despite the present circumstances, so many of her responses—ordinarily natural—struck a note with which he couldn't feel comfortable. She'd been through hell, and slain men en masse without a single expression of regret. Nothing about her going about her business as if nothing had happened rang true in his ears. Or in his heart.

He knew all too well that the guilt over something like that could hide deep within a person, and fester so far below the surface that it could blister and burst without warning. He caught her eyes and noticed nothing but her amusement and this, rather than easing his fears, made him smile sadly and turn away once more. "Odin is probably back on the bridge," he said. "Wouldn't you agree, Morrigan?"

"How should I know?" she answered back, but he didn't miss the tiniest hesitation before her response. She *did* more than she'd told them. No surprise there. "If he gets in our way, I *will* kill him, Morrigan. I hope you realize this. We can't risk having this ship fall into the hands of the Cen."

"So to speak," Morrigan growled.

"So to speak." The Cen didn't have hands. Just tendrils. He switched back to magesight for a moment, intercepted a thread, and cast out a short range transit tube toward the top of the ship. "We're not going to spend hours wandering around down here, running into whatever freak of science happens to pop out of its hole next. C'mon."

He stepped into the transit tube, emerged from the other side, and moved out of the way. The others followed in rapid succession. "Wait here," he directed, and let the darkness swallow him.

## Chapter Thirty-three

Raven melted out of the darkness to find Odin sitting alone in his captain's chair, the flicker of a view screen the only real light on the bridge. "I've been waiting for you," said the one-eyed immortal, not even looking up at him. His single orb remained glued to the flickering images in front of him.

"I thought you might be," Raven replied casually. "Figured I'd find you holed up here."

"I have apparently underestimated you from the beginning. I hardly expected you to be able to kill Tyr, of course, or to find your way to my sanctuary—not once, but twice. You are a most enterprising creature. I figured that by seemingly abandoning the ship the first time, you would take your spoils and leave. I hardly expected to see you back here."

"This time it won't be so easy to get rid of us, even if you *do* have Morrigan's cooperation."

Odin laughed bitterly. "You think I had her cooperation? She has about as much use for me as you do. I escaped her fair and square, though I must admit she didn't put a lot of effort into finding me after that." He shrugged, and swiveled his single eye toward the vampire. "What I can't figure out is why you're back."

"Because I'm not the only one interested in this ship, Odin. As you well know. You lied to me the first time, pretending to be uninvolved in the Church's anti-magic activities. You still run the Church, don't you? You needed an army of mages to dig this vessel out of the ice, and didn't want interference from any unaligned mages. You *knew* this world was on the chopping block, and just wanted a way to escape."

“One mage couldn’t do it,” Odin agreed, after a moment’s hesitation. “But a whole group of them working in concert would be able to free the ship—at least enough for me to make any necessary repairs to get it space worthy again.”

“And then what? Were you just going to leave them here to face the Cen armies?”

“This ship doesn’t require a crew,” said Odin, with a shrug. “I might have brought a few along, but I prefer a solitary existence...for the most part. Since you killed my best friend, I have little use for any other company.”

“What about the monsters that roam the lower levels? Are they not company of a sort?”

“They’re an extra security measure. Nothing else. Tell me, is your friend Goban well?”

Raven frowned, a little surprised by the sudden change of topic. “Well enough. What’s it to you?”

The immortal’s smile was enigmatic. “Nothing in particular. I was just curious.”

“Curious, my ass. How’d you know his name?”

“The walls have ears, my boy. There is very little that goes on in this ship that I don’t know about.”

“That’s bullshit, Odin. You did something to Goban. I want to know what it is.”

“*Moi?* I have done nothing, I assure you. Is he ill?” He was able to affect a tone of concern better than just about anyone Raven had ever met. But no one was that good of an actor. Not even the most subtle nuances of facial expression and body language was lost on the vampire. He saw straight through such subterfuge.

Odin was toying with him. He knew a hell of a lot more than he was telling. “The last time we were on this ship, something changed Goban. He kidnapped Val and tried to use her to form an alliance with the Church. At least, that’s what we *think* he was up to. I want to know how much of that was *your* doing.”

“My dear boy,” Odin drawled, face breaking into a wide and insincere smile. “I had nothing to do with that. That was all *his* doing.”

Raven shook his head. The immortal wasn’t lying, precisely, but he was dancing around the truth. Odin seemed genuinely reluctant to lie outright, which puzzled him. If he had reason enough to hide the truth, why not simply lie?

Well, two could play that game. *Start with a little truth.* “You know your ship has been targeted, right?”

“By whom?”

“By the Cen,” Raven said casually. “Can you imagine what they could do with this vessel?”

Odin winced, shaking his head angrily. “Well, they can’t have it. I’ll blow it up first.”

*Now that doesn’t sound like a bad idea at all.* “You may not have time,” he said.

Odin, who’d been slouching in the captain’s chair, looking amazingly at ease up until this point, sat bolt upright, slamming one huge palm against the armrest. “What are you talking about?” he snapped, his eye blazing.

*Now that he’s taken the bait, it’s time to set the hook.* “Haven’t you been paying attention? Where do you think all those animal hybrids down there came from? We managed to convince them we were working for the Cen too. That’s the only reason they were helping us. They see your Church as a threat—and rightly so. But not if they get here and take the ship before you can get a real army up here. Your five hundred-odd soldiers and Deacons weren’t enough to stop *us*. The next army will march right in and take this ship before you know what’s happening.

“Or do you think you can take on four or five valkyrie by yourself? They’ve got an army on its way right now—two thousand cold-weather hybrids, led by a handful of faithful valkyrie. Even if you have more Church soldiers on the way, they’ll be entrenched before your men get here. And they won’t be anywhere near as easy to dislodge as your pathetic regiment was.”

“They won’t get my ship!” Odin roared, leaping to his feet. “Never!”

“It may be too late to do anything about it. You can’t fight them off. And neither can we. We were going to try to dig the ship out and take it somewhere else, but we don’t have time.”

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll get your friends and get off the ship. I’ll set the self-destruct and meet you out there. Will the hybrids attack us?”

Raven pretended to think about it. “How about we act as if we’ve captured you? They’ll buy that. You set the destruct and we’ll bring you out as if you’re our prisoner, to be turned over to the valkyrie when they arrive.”

The immortal was nodding, an evil grin spreading across his broad face. “You can send some of them in to ‘secure’ the ship...that way we can take some of them out at the same time we destroy it. And they won’t notice us leaving—or be able to do anything about it even if they do.”

“You’re good at this.”

“I’ve had lots of practice. You’re not bad at it yourself. I can’t believe you managed to convince them you were on their masters’ side.”

“Morrigan helped. She knows how the Cen mind works—she played up to that.”

Odin nodded. “She would, the sneaky bitch. All right. Come with me. We’ll set the destruct sequence and meet up with your friends. I don’t like it, but I’d rather see the old girl blown to pieces than let the bugs get their filthy tendrils on her.”

“I understand completely,” Raven replied. “So what do we need to do?”

“Follow me,” said the one-eyed immortal, standing and striding from the room. Shrugging imperceptibly, the vampire followed. He was still a little surprised he’d been able to deceive Odin so easily. Then again, he wasn’t sure the immortal was playing with a full deck. Not only insane, but a bit ragged around the edges as well.

Most of the other immortals had given up the notion of playing at being a god. Odin hadn’t, and Raven suspected that it was either a symptom of his madness, or a portion of its cause. He found himself

wondering if there was a real psychological term for this sort of craziness. One that only applied to immortals who thought themselves to be deities.



“He’s starting to wake up,” said Bryon, nudging Goban with the toe of his boot. The man groaned and raised a hand to his head. “Should I clout him again?”

“No,” Val told him. “I’m curious what he has to say.”

Morrigan gave her a strange look she didn’t bother trying to identify. “If I were you, I’d want to club him again.”

“And you’d have to wait that much longer to get any answers,” Val said in response. “I don’t have that much patience.” She used just a touch of her telekinetic touch to lever Goban into a sitting position with his back against the interior bulkhead.

She crouched next to him and lifted his wobbly head with her hand. “You with us, Goban?”

“Bitch,” he spat.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes.’” She smiled grimly. “I think it’s time we had a chat. I want to know why you kidnapped me, Goban. Who are you working for and why did they want me?”

“I’m not telling you anything,” he growled in response. “You can just go to hell.”

“You already put me there, bastard. And if I can’t get anything useful out of you, there’s not much reason to keep you alive.”

“Then kill me.”

“Not yet,” she told him. “But it’s on the table.” She stood and gazed down at him. He didn’t meet her eyes. What had happened to him? This was *not* the man she’d met—the one Raven had described as one of the only ethical men in the Guard. She couldn’t read him at all now—what she couldn’t figure out was what had changed.

*Something* had. Something important.

Her eyes searched Goban’s face. It had become thicker, wider, in the past several months, and he’d begun to grow a beard—which had started

to silver around the edges. There was something disturbingly familiar about him, but she couldn't put her finger on it.

She honed her mind to a sharp focus and thrust it into his eyes. He screamed, and kicked his feet as if trying to dig himself through the wall behind him. She poured on the pressure, battering his shields, until pain spiked between her own eyes. She'd failed, but he'd nearly passed out himself. He lay there, on his side with his eyes rolled back in his head, chest heaving and moaning aloud.

"What the hell was that?" Bryon asked.

Morrigan tried to shush him but Val shook her head as she rose. "It's okay. I was trying to breach his shields. I don't understand where they came from, or why they're as powerful as they are."

Morrigan shrugged. "Don't ask me. I don't know shit about that sort of thing."

"I do, and I have no explanation. Maybe Raven will be able to find something out from Odin—assuming the one-eyed prick is still aboard."



"I need you to pull that lever over there," Odin told Raven, pointing some distance away toward a bank of machines he couldn't begin to guess the purpose of. They were large, and covered with little dials and buttons, but the lever hanging off the side of one was large, red, and unmistakably not something one pulled by accident.

Shrugging, Raven did as he was bid, walking over and pulling the lever down until it pointed at the floor. As he felt it click into place, he heard a heavy alloy door slam shut and he spun, expecting to see that Odin had locked him inside this mysterious chamber.

Which he had. But he'd locked himself inside as well. He stared at the vampire with a distinctly amused expression peeking out from under his bushy black and silver beard. "Thought you had me fooled, didn't you, boy?"

Raven glared at him through narrowed eyes. "What are you talking about?"

“I know you made an alliance with those hybrids out there—that they no longer serve the Cen. I know you’ve been working to bring my Church to its knees out there in the world. I am not as cut off from things as you thought. Nor am I gullible, or a fool.

“I agree with you that the ship has become a liability we can no longer afford. That is why we have set off the self-destruct sequence. I initiated the process before we left the bridge, but it was necessary to throw that lever to eliminate the final fail safe. Even now the engine’s core is heating up, preparing for a lift-off that cannot and will not happen. When it becomes apparent to the ship’s control system that it cannot vent the energy, it will attempt an emergency override, which has been blocked by the destruct sequence I activated before we descended. Throwing the lever back up will do no good. Nor will trying to reach for mana. This room is shielded from all outside forms of energy.

“In less than twenty minutes, everything within a hundred miles of this vessel will be reduced to its component atoms and the ship will be out of the reach of the Cen forever. As a bonus,” Odin added with a mad twinkle in his lone eye, “I get to eliminate the ‘Redeemer’ at the same time.”

“But you’re killing yourself,” Raven objected, his mind desperately clawing at some way to escape this trap he’d into which he’d allowed himself to fall. *Fool! You thought you could play an immortal? So proud of yourself, weren’t you? He was playing you the whole time.*

“In a way, yes. This body will die. But I’ve already arranged for a backup.”

“A backup body? I don’t understand.”

“Several years ago I stumbled upon a way to project a part of myself into another being. I created a semi-autonomous collection of brain cells—self-repairing and semi-cognizant. I call it a mind-worm. If directed to invade a human host, it enters through a convenient cavity and burrows for the brain, where it takes up residence and starts to replicate itself. In a matter of days, it creates a subconscious version of my persona that can influence the host. In a matter of months, it begins to modify the host’s DNA to more closely resemble its own.

“In less than a year, it turns the host into a copy of me and erases the last vestiges of the host’s own personality and self-awareness. It becomes something of an automaton—little more than a puppet I can direct from afar.”

Raven stared at him in growing horror as he realized the what he was hearing. Odin was explaining, in great detail, what had happened to Goban. “And the host?”

“The host isn’t even aware of what’s happening to him. The worm doesn’t take over the host—it simply provides convenient rationales for doing whatever it takes to advance my agenda. And the host thinks it’s all *his* idea. And any latent tendency to question his own motives for any particular action is suppressed by the worm.

“Quite insidious, really. And you want to know the best part? When *this* body dies, the host is already prepared to accept my escaping soul. I can simply leave this body behind and move on to the next.”

“How long have you been doing this, you sick fuck?”

“About a thousand years,” Odin said mildly, unruffled by the insult. “I’ve sent out nearly a dozen different hosts, and, at one time, enjoyed the thrill of body-jumping between them whenever the mood struck me. Once the original personality is subjugated, I can enter and leave any of the bodies at will, returning to my original body or any one of the host bodies. It’s an astounding achievement, if I do say so myself.”

“How many do you have out there now?” Raven asked, seeing the very beginning of a possible escape plan. If this worked the way he *thought* it did, Odin was missing a very important piece of information that would change everything.

“Only one, at the moment. He’s ready for the final step—total destruction of his inherent personality so I can take up residence once this body is destroyed.”

“How much control do you really have until then? Are you in communication with him?”

Odin frowned. “No. The worm acts on its own, based on my original commands. Once the transition is complete, I can establish a telepathic link between us, but not until then.”

"I see. So you infected Goban with this mind-worm, didn't you?"

"He seemed like a perfect candidate. And you all were so ignorant of it. That's probably the most delicious part of it all. No one ever has a clue until I choose to reveal myself."

"So why did he kidnap Val?"

"Val? You mean your cute little blonde lovely? Probably to use as a tool to force you to do what he—what *I*—wanted you to do."

Raven nodded. "So you don't know where he is now?"

Odin waved a hand dismissively. "No. But that hardly matters now. As soon as this ship explodes, putting to an end any future threat from you and your friends, I will take control of Goban's body instantly at that point, and continue to mold the Church as I see fit. I'm thinking I may want to take a more hands-on approach for the next couple of centuries, at least. Just to protect myself from any reprisals from your employers."

Raven stared at him in silence for a long moment, then grinned savagely. "I've got some *really* bad news for you, Odin."

Odin leaned back against the door, folding his arms across his wide chest. He looked amused. "And what would that be, Raven?"

"Goban's closer than you think."

Odin frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"He's aboard this ship. You're going to blow yourself *and* your host body apart at the same time. Though I'm not really crazy about dying myself, I still think it's a pretty delicious irony. Wouldn't you agree?"

"You're lying!"

"Maybe. But can you afford to take that chance?"

"We can't!" Odin's eyes darted to the lever behind him and his lip curled into a snarl. "Don't even think about moving."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Raven lied, watching as Odin reached behind himself and fiddled with the door's locking mechanism.

He tried to keep an eye on Raven, but he needed to pour too much concentration into the task at hand for the effort to be any better than half-hearted. The whole construct of the lock was alien, and it was pretty clear from the beginning that Odin's blunt fingers were too thick to manipulate the various levers and pulleys that made up its interior.

It was a strange set up, Raven mused, and then realized why it seemed so unwieldy. Odin had sabotaged the original mechanism himself, to keep Raven from being able to jimmy it open should he manage to defeat him. While he'd been pulling the lever, Odin had torn off the outer plate and keypad, which lay crumpled behind a few miscellaneous bits of junk in the corner.

A hiss like a teapot getting ready to boil over indicated he'd succeeded, and, as he stepped forward to allow the door to swing inward, Raven launched himself at him.

Most mortals can follow a vampire's movements, even if they're not quite as fast themselves. Immortals, despite being far better designed than an ordinary human, weren't quite competitive with the colony of cooperative cells that made up a vampire's form. When a vampire decided to move, every single cell in its body joined in the effort. While they usually imitated the human musculature, they were capable of rearranging themselves in several different, even more efficient, configurations when necessary.

Raven struck Odin three times before the immortal could even react. The first blow was a raking motion across the eyes with his extended fingers—not with the intent to cause damage, but just to interfere with his vision for a split-second.

The second blow was a vicious spear-hand with stiffened fingers directly into his throat. He gagged and started to stagger back. That's when Raven kicked him as hard as he could between the legs. As the immortal started to fold, Raven's hand shot out, tangled in the man's beard, and slung him across the room.

Odin struck one of the machines head-first and went down. Raven paused a second to inspect the mechanism, drew his sword from its dimension pocket, and struck the delicate machinery once, slicing through several internal levers.

He dodged through the door and pulled it shut behind him. The lock clicked home with a distinctly final sound.



Morrigan glanced up as Raven stepped out of the darkness. Goban was still laying on his back, breathing hard, and Val was leaning up against the wall, eyes shut tightly as she massaged her temples. “Raven! Did you find—”

“We don’t have time for that,” he interrupted. “Grab Goban and let’s get the hell out of here. Odin initiated a self-destruct sequence and we’re running out of time.”

He threw out a transit tube and they all jumped through one at a time. Morrigan hesitated for a brief moment before following, wondering if Odin was alive or dead. Part of her wanted to save him, if he was still alive, but part of her—the more convincing part—told her to leave him to his fate. He’d chosen it, after all.

She stepped through and found Raven already moving among the hybrids. She could hear his voice rising above the whir of the wind and the low murmur of Bryon and Val talking. Val pulled something out of a pocket and began fiddling with it.

The hybrids started gathering up the injured, and forming a line stretching from the base of the ship to several feet in front of Val. She tossed something on the ground and, in a sudden flash of light, the glowing silver doorway of a worldgate appeared in front of them.

Raven lifted a wounded mustalid in his arms and approached the ’gate. “Val, contact your wolves and tell them to get here as fast as possible. We’ve only got maybe ten minutes before the ship blows. If they’re not here in eight minutes, we’re going to have to leave them behind. You also need to send a message to Scorpio to have his men jump out and meet us on Starhaven.

“Morrigan—take this fellow...” He shoved the injured weasel into her arms. “...and head through the ’gate. Explain to the gate guard what’s going on, and that we’re bringing the hybrids through under a cloak of amnesty.”

She nodded. She wasn’t sure that such a thing existed, but even if it didn’t, she was an immortal. The only people on Starhaven who’d dare interfere with her would be other immortals, and she figured it would take longer than the eight minutes they had to get one to the worldgate

to intervene. All of the refugees would be on Starhaven before anyone could stop them. “Don’t stay too long,” she warned them, glancing between Raven and Val. She let her gaze linger on the blonde woman a moment longer. “If the wolves don’t get here in time, you can’t save them by sacrificing yourself.”

“I know that,” Val growled in response. “Just go.”

Morrigan went.



She stumbled out off the worldgate queue and aimed a ferocious glare at the young red-haired man standing at the control panel on the other side of the duraplaz barrier. “We’ve got about fifty refugee hybrids coming through,” she yelled at him. “Do *not* interfere. If you do, I’ll personally rip your arm off and slap you stupid with it.”

He stuttered some sort of negative and backed away from the command pedestal. “Get on the comm,” she said. “We need healers, and fast! We’ve got a lot of wounded coming through.”

She let her gaze travel past the kid, who’d moved forward again to activate the ’gate station communicator and was speaking rapidly into it.

She exited the chamber and set the weasel on one of the several couches outside. These wouldn’t be the first refugees brought through the worldgate, she mused, but they might well be among the oddest. “Just lie still,” she told him. “Help is on its way.”

She turned back toward the ’gate as more hybrids stumbled through the glowing silver archway. The cats came in a rush, most carrying the wounded in their arms. Tuck brought up the rear, helping one of his fellows with an arm around his waist as he limped across the queue.

And then Cerberus appeared, two large black shapes clinging to his back—her ravens. She breathed a sigh of relief, feeling guilty for having forgotten them. Apparently the dog had not. She resolved to give him the biggest steak he’d ever seen once all this had been sorted through.

Then came the mustalid folk, and it was obvious very quickly that they’d taken the brunt of the damage from the assault on the Church troops. Only about fifteen came through, and every single one of them

bore serious wounds. Some were almost dead on their feet, but every single one of them came under their own power.

Then Bryon was through, striding confidently across the dais toward her. He stopped to help one of the wounded mustalids, a gray and white badger, negotiate the steps to the floor while trying to protect a leg obviously suffering from a compound fracture of the tibia. The badger grimaced, but accepted the vampire's assistance.

And then Val and Raven stumbled through along with Bridget and her wolves, Raven carrying what looked to be Goban's unconscious form tossed over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. He let his gaze fall on the 'gate guard and made a chopping motion with his hand. The silver arch vanished behind them.

In the distance a klaxon began to ring.

## Chapter Thirty-four

A crowd had gathered, a crowd of armed and alarmed Starhaven residents. They stood some distance away down the hall, murmuring amongst themselves, fingering their weapons expectantly. They were all mortals, mostly human, and they eyed the newcomers suspiciously.

“Are any of you healers?” asked Val, scouring the crowd with her gaze. “This isn’t an invasion—it’s an escape!”

She was pleased to see her control agent, the very elf who’d originally sent her through the worldgate, step from out of the crowd. “An escape from what?” he asked.

“It’ll be in my report,” she growled in response. “Now are you going to call some fucking healers in, or are you just going to stand here and watch these people suffer?”

His eyes flicked over at the wounded hybrids and a cloud passed over his face, a brief expression one might have mistaken for contempt. She felt her hands balling into fists at her sides. “Never mind. I guess I already know the answer to that. Morrigan!”

In a twinkle the raven-haired immortal was by her side. “I don’t know how much influence you have here, but if you have any at all, get us some goddam healers.”

Morrigan gave her a curt nod and turned toward the crowd with a flat, empty gaze. “Do you know who I am?” she asked, her voice little more than a whisper, yet carrying farther than anyone would have imagined it could. “Anyone who isn’t doing something to help five seconds from now is going on my list. And *no one* wants to be on my list.”

“Get the hell out of my way!” came a booming voice from the back, and Val looked across the crowd to see a huge, bald, black-skinned

figure striding purposely toward them, literally shoving people aside as she came.

People shrieked and shifted, and, ahead of this imposing figure came a swarm of small, gray-skinned creatures that snarled up at the larger humans as they darted through the throng. Goblins. Which meant that the large black figure was...Kali.

She was as much a legend as Raven, or the immortal standing beside her. Kali—another hero of the Cen War, and a power in her own right.

Clearly annoyed, Kali snatched up the elf by the back of his shirt and tossed him backward into the crowd. She stopped in front of them, nearly seven feet of broad-shouldered, magnificent female power. “What’s going on here?”

She wasn’t speaking to Val, which made the sudden surge of panic that rose in her belly fade somewhat. No, she was looking at Morrigan, and not in a manner that suggested anger. Something unspoken passed between them and Kali broke into a broad grin. “You’ve sure shook things up,” she boomed to Morrigan. “Did I hear you say you need healers?”

Morrigan nodded, after an unreadable glance toward Val. “We do. We’ve got several wounded, some seriously.”

Raven appeared by her side, Goban held in front of him. “But first we need to get this guy checked out. He’s got some sort of malignant worm in his brain that needs to be excised.”

“Malignant worm?” Kali frowned down at him. “And you are...?”

Raven cocked his head and grinned up at her. “You mean you don’t recognize me, Kali? I look a little different these days, thanks to Odin.”

“Odin? What the hell does *he* have to do with anything?” She blinked at him a few times and then took a step back in shock. “Holy shit. Is that you, Raven?”

“In the flesh. Odin was operating behind the scenes on the world to which Val and I were assigned. Causing trouble. He’s probably dead now, but a part of him lives on in this fellow here. I’d like to get that taken care of as soon as possible.”

Kali nodded and grabbed Goban with one of her four hands. "I'll get right on that. You folks stay put and I'll rustle up some healers to help with the wounded. Good to see you, Raven. And Morrigan? Good job."

She scooped Goban up as if he were a child and strode back through the crowd, which parted in front of her without any sign of hesitancy this time. One of the goblins looked up at Val and cackled. "Pretty lady." He spun and followed his mistress into the throng.

"Okay," Val murmured. "That was weird."

Another voice, this one also female, broke over the crowd. "I'm sure you all have something better to do." The throng scattered like seagulls before a pack of dogs, revealing the approach of another group of people, maybe ten strong. They were led by a woman who, while not as tall as Kali, was certainly as physically imposing—Athena. Beside her strode a giant, looking for all the world like a wizard out of a fantasy novel with his flowing white beard, long wild hair, and white robe. A third figure, this one considerably smaller than the other two, clad in what looked like a forest green karate gi, walked beside him, black hair framing a face nearly too beautiful for words. Jasmine Tashae. The Lady of Blades.

On the other side of Athena came a figure Val didn't recognize, of a size with Jasmine Tashae, with sandy blond hair feathered perfectly around an oval face and piercing blue eyes the color of a summer sky after a cleansing rain. She couldn't say why, but something about that clear gaze told her that the man saw far too much than he should.

A chill ran through her as she glanced over at Raven, who'd gone stock still, staring at them out of a face suddenly carved from white stone.

The immortals had arrived.

Raven's eyes darted to Athena as she spoke, her voice slick and sharp as the edge of a razor blade. "You mind telling me why there are two hundred small jump ships requesting permission to dock?" Protocol dictated that she address her own agent first, and it spoke volumes that she'd instead choose to question him. It was a calculated insult, and he

knew the nuance hadn't been lost on Val either. Even Morrigan's eyes had changed to little chips of flint as she stood watching.

His own gaze flicked back to the their companion, the one whose face was so achingly familiar he almost felt as though his heart had started to beat again. Of course, that was just as impossible as the man standing in front of him being who he appeared.

A doppelganger? Then he heard the unmistakable sound of gas-driven servos, the same sound he'd heard in the darkness beneath the Shea's corporate headquarters. Rather than answer Athena's question, he asked one of his own. "Why are you in the company of an android wearing *that* face?"

It was an incredible feat of engineering, he had to admit. The expression of shock the creature wore was nothing short of miraculous. It *looked* like a human, except for a slight tinge of gray to its skin. A mortal probably wouldn't have noticed.

There was no chance these immortals hadn't. There had to be a reason they were accompanied by an artificial man wearing the form of one of his best friends, and his long-dead commanding officer from the Cen War.

Then it struck him that Athena and the other immortals had recognized him instantly, despite the changes. He looked nothing like he had. He knew it from the reactions of others. But they'd known him instantly.

The android smiled enigmatically. "I told them you'd be changed," he—*it*—said.

Raven felt his jaw tighten. The voice was even the same. He swallowed and took a deep breath. He didn't need to, but air was necessary to speak, and he planned to do a considerable amount of talking. Or yelling.

"Calm down, Raven," murmured Fenris Wolf, stroking his beard. "This is not what it seems."

"Not what it seems? A fucking machine is wearing Justice Breed's face and you're acting like it's one of *you*?"

Fenris was Raven's boss, but he was also a friend. He didn't take offense at his tone, though he cocked his head and gave him a warning glare. There was only so much insubordination he'd be willing to tolerate.

"We can talk about all of this later, Raven," Athena said tersely. "I want to know why a bunch of mercenaries are demanding landing privileges."

"Because we told them to meet us here," Morrigan growled, giving Athena the evil eye. They'd never gotten along, and it was never more obvious than it was at this moment. "They're working for us."

"Oh, that makes me feel so much better," the Amazonian immortal snarled back at her. "Working for who, precisely? You, Morrigan? Or Raven?" She shot a cold glare at Val. "Or my very own agent in your midst?"

"All of us," Raven snapped back. "Do you have *any* idea what we just accomplished? We just saved us all from a whole bunch of trouble. A large jump-ship armed with nuclear warheads just exploded only hours before being taken by agents of the Cen."

"You mean like the ones you brought here?" she asked snidely. "A bunch of cats, wolves, and mustalids? How do we know they're not operating under Cen orders even now?"

"Have you *always* been this paranoid, Athena? They just ran into a goddam meat grinder for us. Hardly something that a bunch of Cen agents would do." Morrigan turned away in disgust, then turned back again once she'd looked on the wounded again for a moment. "Get us some healers for these people, dammit!"

To Raven's surprise and considerably dismay, Athena looked to the android as if for confirmation. *What the hell?*

The android nodded. "Get some healers down here. I don't want a single one of them to die on our watch. If they helped Raven and Val, we owe them."

Raven stared at him—*it*—in amazement. What was this creature's game? And why were the immortals deferring to it?

He flinched as those cool, ice-blue eyes turned to regard him once again. "All will be made clear soon enough, Raven. Athena will be

pursuing a complaint against you and Valerie, and the complaint will be heard in open court in two days. I suggest you get ready.”

“Get ready? What does that mean?”

“Talk to your allies...You’re going to need all the help you can get with this one.”

The android nodded to Athena, and they both turned and walked away. Fenris lingered a moment, his dark eyes somber. “I can go to bat for you, Raven, but I have no authority to speak on Val’s behalf.” He shifted his glance to her and shrugged helplessly. “Athena isn’t at all happy with you. Your only chance is if ArchAngel decides in your favor.”

“ArchAngel? Is that what that...creature calls itself?”

“Stop making assumptions, Raven. It doesn’t suit you to be so close-minded. ArchAngel says big things are afoot. You can choose to be a part of them, or you can continue being a dick. Your choice.” He turned and followed the others, leaving an amused looking Jasmine Tashae, who hadn’t said anything throughout the whole exchange.

“I’ve been told not to tell you anything,” she said. “ArchAngel wants to explain it to you himself.”

Raven grimaced. “Thanks much. I’m sure that’ll come as quite the consolation.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you worry too much?”

“Coming from you that’s just silly, Jaz.”

She allowed herself the tiniest smirk and shrugged. “Maybe. I can understand your suspicions...if I were you I’d feel the same way. Just don’t let them get the best of you. Try to keep an open mind.”

“What kind of game are you immortals playing?” he growled, taking a step in her direction. She lowered her head and stared at him warningly. He pulled up and glanced away. There may have been a few immortals he’d be willing to face down, but Jaz wasn’t one of them. She wasn’t one of them who usually threw her weight around anyway.

Here on Starhaven that dubious honor applied to Athena—but she’d been doing that for a long time. Thankfully she’d been relegated to the sidelines during the War. She would’ve politicized every strategy and dragged the whole effort under with her need to micro-manage.

He knew. He'd worked for her back when she ran the Paranormal Affairs Commission back on Earth Prime in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Jaz he trusted. To a certain extent. She didn't play games. She was as up-front as they came.

He sighed. For the past ten years he'd been able to forget about all of this—to pretend like the world on which he'd been assigned was his home. But, no, Starhaven was his home, as much as it could be said he *had* a home. Earth—the world the immortals called 'Earth Prime' had been where he'd been born, but he hadn't gone back in a very long time. He was afraid he'd never recognize the place.

"Are you okay?" Val asked, looking concerned.

He glanced at her and nodded. "Are you?"

She snorted. "I think I'm out of a job. Or, at the very least, I've made an enemy of my boss."

"You wouldn't be the first. Chances are she won't try to have you killed, at least." Jaz grinned at her and made a gun with her forefinger and thumb and mimed shooting herself in the head. "She doesn't take rebellion well."

"Rebellion hell. *We're* the ones out in the field, having to make snap decisions as to what will work and what won't. We don't have time to consult the policy manual every time."

"All sarcasm aside," Morrigan put in, "I don't think Raven's ever read a manual in his life."

"Hey—I *am* the manual," he shot back. He threw his arm around Val and drew her close to him. She resisted a little at first, then melted against him. "I wouldn't worry too much about Athena. Either things will work out fine, or they won't. If nothing else you'll earn yourself a long vacation someplace exotic."

"I've had just about enough of exotic locations," she said irritably. "People keep trying to kill me in them."

"That's an agent's lot in life," he replied with a broad wink. In truth he was a little concerned about Athena's antipathy toward Val, but he wasn't going to say so out loud. They'd have to deal with that in its own

time. “You wouldn’t happen to be looking for some new Mirage agents?” he asked Jaz, only half in jest.

She shrugged. “Maybe. Could be. But I’d recommend you wait until the High Court convenes before you make any decisions in that direction.”

“Great. More wait and see. Well, Val, I’d guess you have a choice. Either go to TAU housing and hope the bitch hasn’t blocked your access, or just come with me while I rustle up a room for myself. That is, if you don’t mind sharing a bunk with a corpse.”

“You’re not a corpse,” Val told him, laughing. “And at least you wouldn’t hog the covers.”

“This is true. Though there’s no natural rhythm here on Starhaven for me to follow. I don’t sleep much here. After a while even vampires need some downtime, and it’s hard to know when to take it without a sun to mark the time.”

She hadn’t thought of that. “Is that healthy?”

He nodded to Jaz and Morrigan and they headed off down the hall just as a group of what he assumed to be healers arrived on the scene. Some were mages—recognizable in magesight by the spells hovering around them—and some were not. *Psis, most likely*, he mused. People like Val who’d learned to merge their telekinetic talents with their knowledge of anatomy and biology. Or so he assumed. He knew even less about that end of things than he did of magical healing.

“I don’t know about healthy,” he told her, once they’d passed, “but I know I get pretty goofy if I don’t get at least *some* rest now and again. That’s another way we vamps are different than the immortals. The original immortals, at least. They don’t have to sleep. An hour or two of meditation every few days seems to suit them just fine.”

“That’s kinda creepy when you think about it. No wonder half of them are crazy.”

He snorted gracelessly. “You might be surprised. Most of the immortals you know now aren’t from the original group—the ones who fled their homeworld when it was more or less destroyed by the Cen. Of all of them, only Athena holds any kind of power here on Starhaven.

Fenris was an ordinary man until Loki changed him—back in the days of myth—and Kali, well, she’s an example of what happens when you ignore the law of unintended consequences.”

There were a lot of things about the immortals she didn’t know, Val realized. Like most of her fellow agents, she’d taken a lot on faith. They lived forever, could survive nearly any injury, and had powers most humans couldn’t imagine. She’d always assumed that the immortals were all of a kind, but now Raven was telling her that it wasn’t true. That even the immortals here had different origins from one another. “Kali is *what?*”

He turned a corner and led them down an adjacent corridor, this one considerably narrower than the Hall of the Worldgate, with a ceiling no more than thirty feet above their heads. “The Cen tried to turn Kali against the human race, thinking that just because she was a criminal, she’d be willing to sell out her own kind. They gave her a symsuit and it healed the chemical imbalance in her head that made her the fucked up individual she was. At least, that’s the theory.

“She turned against them and earned her place fighting beside us in the War.”

“What about Jaz? You knew her back on Earth, didn’t you?”

“She’s a bit of a mystery. She was mortal before she got into her little war with Athena, but came back several months later as an immortal. She’s never advertised how she did it, and I have a sneaking suspicion she has a secret formula tucked away somewhere. Jaz holds her cards close to her chest. The only people she confides in are Artificer and that goddam imp of hers.”

Val knew who Artificer was. The thin, balding mage-engineer who ran Magitech. All the agents were familiar with him. Magitech made most of their gear, including their agency symbols, portable ‘gate modules, and Personal Communication Devices.

Which reminded her—she needed to get a new one. Goban had taken hers from her before throwing her in his dungeon. Of course she had no idea if she’d be able to get one on agency credit, or have to hope that her

back-pay had been credited to her own account. There was no way she could afford to replace the PCD, particularly with anything that wouldn't scream *alien* on any low-tech world she happened to visit, with what she'd had in her account before accepting the assignment.

She wouldn't put it past Athena to freeze her account. Agents were pretty much at the mercy of their employers in this respect. At least until they gained enough of a reputation on their own merits to warrant special consideration. "I need to go by Magitech," she told him.

He nodded. "I was thinking the same thing myself. I need to replace my PCD."

"Replace? I don't ever remember you wearing one."

"Mine was destroyed a few years back. I didn't really have any use for it anyway, considering that my old one wasn't equipped with any kind of inter-world connection. Since I was alone there, except for Cerberus, who couldn't use a PCD even if he needed one—which he didn't—it seemed pretty pointless to request a replacement."

All very logical, of course, and so typically Raven. Had he bothered to jump back and pick up a new PCD, he could have had one *with* the inter-world connection chip installed. But, of course, he wasn't really interested in communicating with the folks on Starhaven anyway. He liked to think of himself as a loner, but, somehow, when given the opportunity, he accepted leadership as if he was born to it and really seemed to enjoy being part of a team.

Just another one of the internal contradictions that made him the man she loved.

They turned the last corner leading to the teleport disk and ran into Scorpio and a group of his pilots heading in the opposite direction. He gave them a nod and a smile, but he was fairly radiating hostility.

Raven, of course, seemed oblivious. "Glad to see you got out of there in time," he said.

"Almost didn't," Scorpio shot back. "We lost five ships that didn't make it before the damn thing blew. Over fifteen of my men didn't get out."

"Sorry to hear that."

A muscle in Scorpio's jaw jumped and he nodded. "To make matters worse, some muscled bitch showed up at the docks and read me the riot act about permission. Said you didn't have the authority to give it to us."

"Athena. She's talking out her ass."

Val glanced over at him in surprise. *She* wouldn't have put it that way. As one of the Agency heads, she had a lot more authority than Raven, and had every right to question his decisions. Or so read the agency charters *she'd* studied. Not that that sort of thing carried a lot of weight with him.

"She threatened to confiscate my ships. She tries that, she's going to be biting off a bit more than she can chew."

"She's not going to confiscate your ships, Scorpio. She's bluffing."

Val's eyebrows shot up as he threw an arm around the mercenary and led him back down the corridor a few dozen feet, murmuring in tones too low for her to hear. After a moment, the man's face twisted into a grin and he nodded violently.

*What the hell is he up to now?* She was almost afraid to ask. She'd thought he'd been bad back on Bryon's world—and then the thought hit her. Where the hell *was* Bryon? In the confusion after their arrival, she'd lost sight of him and the wolf pack, as well as Cerberus. She wasn't crazy about them wandering around Starhaven unsupervised. No telling the kind of trouble they could find.

She hoped they'd just become involved in helping the healers sort out the ones most in need of aid, though she found it a little difficult imagining Cerberus being one hell of a lot of assistance in that regard. She nodded politely at the mercenary troops and waited for Raven and Scorpio to finish with their little male-bonding session.

When they returned, Scorpio was still grinning as if Raven had handed him the keys to the Starhaven weapons lockers. "We're going to see if we can pitch in and help move some of the injured," he said. "Be seeing you around, Raven." He motioned to his men and they headed off down the corridor again.

"What the hell was *that* about?" she asked Raven, who favored her with an enigmatic smile in response.

“We’re going to make Athena very uncomfortable in the next few days—maybe uncomfortable enough to completely forget about being pissed at you. She’s going to have bigger fish to fry.”

Val digested this and decided she didn’t like the way it settled in her stomach. “What do you mean?”

He sighed. “Okay, Val. I get it. It’s not fair for me to keep you in the dark when I was pissed off at the immortals for doing the same thing to me. But I also don’t want you dragged into something that isn’t your fight. Fenris is okay, but Athena tends to be a major pain in the ass. We plan on adding a new agency to the roster here, someone else to take up some of the slack in council. Scorpio is going to petition them to allow him to establish a new agency—a mercenary agency the others can use when needed. Athena will vote against it, Fenris will more than likely vote in favor, and the Stewards will abstain. Artificer will probably see them as new customers, and Jaz will back him up. She’ll *hate* it. Especially when I petition the Court to create another new agency on top of it.”

“When you *what?*” Val exclaimed. “How long have been thinking about this?”

“All of about fifteen minutes,” he admitted. “But isn’t it just a great idea?”

She had her doubts, but she wasn’t going to mention them now. “And what, pray tell, would this agency represent?”

“We’d be bodyguards. We’d assign agents to watch other agents’ backs. No more going it alone because the original agency didn’t have more than one operative available to send. Do you know how many agents we lose every year because there aren’t enough to go around?”

She shrugged. She honestly had no idea. “And you’re assuming you could recruit enough operatives for *this* agency when the other two can’t because...?”

“Because, unlike TAU and Sash, I don’t plan on trying to recruit and train—indoctrinate—them from childhood on. I’ll recruit people who already know how to do the job, from Earth Prime and other universes.”

They reached the teleporter and stepped onto the dais together. “Magitech,” he said, and the corridor faded from view, replaced an

instant later with a bustling hallway filled with people of nearly all description, from humans and elves to goblins and even a few hybrids.

“You plan on running this agency yourself?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Nope. I’m going to get Morrigan to run it.”

Val stared at him in shock. “And you’ve talked to her about this?” She already knew he hadn’t. Not if he’d only had the idea fifteen minutes previous.

“Nope. But she’ll agree.”

“And you know this how?”

“Because the agency will have another purpose. We’ll also train assassins.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No. As much as we’d like to pretend it’s not true, we both know that assassins have a viable role to play in some of our missions. Imagine how much easier it would have been if we could’ve just sent someone in to take out the officers of the Church without having to fight a bunch of—mostly—innocent guardsmen. I could’ve also used an assassin in my battle with the underworld.

“As much as I hate to say it, I can only be in one place at a time.”

She shook her head, genuinely dismayed by what he was suggesting. “I don’t like it, Raven. Assassins? It seems so...barbaric.”

“What’s really barbaric,” he shot back, stepping off the dais and holding out a hand, “is sending young men and women to die in a war that could be avoided by taking out the one responsible for the motivation in the first place.”

She took his hand and let herself be helped off the dais, even though she really didn’t need the assistance. “I don’t know...”

“It’s not your problem, Val. I’ve got plans for you anyway, and they don’t include assassinations or playing bodyguard.”

“You have plans for *me*?” The revelation stunned her. “And what gives you the right to make *any* plans for me, Raven?”

“The fact that I love you and want you to be safe and sane. Do you really think you can wreak the kind of destruction you did on all those soldiers without eventually suffering for it? I know you’ve relegated the

memories to a big black hole in your mind, but they *will* resurface, sooner or later. I'm guessing sooner. You have a tremendous talent, but I think using it to destroy is a waste of your potential. I'd like to see you turn it to more constructive pursuits."

"Okay—what are you getting at?" She didn't want to even think about his analysis of her eventual response to her using her gift as a weapon as she had. Not just a weapon, but a weapon capable of killing many people in one fell swoop.

She shuddered.

He pulled her into an oblique corner and leaned close, pressing his lips against her cheek. "Seeing those healers running to help the wounded hybrids made me realize how truly unique your gift could be, if you were trained in the medical arts. All you need is the education and you could knit bone, regenerate flesh, and save lives. What if there was an agency here on Starhaven dedicated to healing rather than killing and destruction?"

"It's worth talking about," she acknowledged. "But I'm years away from heading such an agency." It was actually a very good idea. Right now TAU and Sash maintained their own healing corps—TAU's devoted to the psionic end of things, Sash the magical, with the Stewards taking up some of the slack when necessary. If they could house all the healers under one roof, and give them an agency to call their own—with their own agency symbol and freedom to act as their conscience saw fit...

"Maybe. I'm going to repeat a question I asked you before. If I could offer you immortality, would you take it?"

"I don't want to be a vampire, Raven."

"That's not what I'm suggesting. I think Jaz has a way to make immortals. I want to petition the Court first, but if it's denied, I'm going to ask Jaz. I want to know if you'll accept."

She nodded. "I'll accept."

"Good. One more question. Your telekinetic talents have grown tremendously...have any of the others?"

She nodded. "I'm having to keep myself behind pretty strong shields to avoid reading just about every mortal I come across."

“That’s what I thought. I think I have a way for you to learn all the medical stuff you need to know in record time. Especially if you become immortal.”

She caught his drift and felt her eyes grow wide. “Will that work?”

“It just might. We’ll have to wait and see.”

## Chapter Thirty-five

Val shifted her weight around and laid her head on Raven's chest, sighing contentedly. The last twenty four hours or so had gone amazingly well, all things considered, and she was feeling better about things than she had in a long time. They were no longer personally embroiled in a war against a world's major power, and the Cen agenda had been tripped up once again.

Her credit was much better than she'd been worried it was—apparently Athena *hadn't* frozen her assets—and Artificer was more than happy to replace her PCD with something even more non-descript than the one she'd worn on assignment. He'd even suggested she wait a few months and purchase one of the next generation, since they'd be relying on symsuit technology rather than the old, clunky digital variety. She'd decided to go with the tried and true, however, since she needed to be able to communicate effectively *now*, not three months from now.

Raven had managed to arrange for a whole suite rather than the general rooms typically available to most agents in between assignments. Even here on Starhaven he had far more influence than she'd realized. Not because he was a hero of the War on Earth, but because he was a rather high-ranking Sash agent.

She'd never asked him *how* high, exactly, but figured he was probably only a couple of slots down from Fenris himself.

She felt his fingers drag through her hair and moaned a little, snuggling closer even as sleep fell farther away. Her brain had shifted into wakefulness now, and only laziness and comfort could keep her abed when there were things to get done.

Though there was something to be said at this moment for both laziness *and* comfort.

Then the door buzzer did its thing and she sat up with a mild curse. She nudged Raven, who turned his head and grinned at her. "Tell 'em to go away," he said. "And we'll spend a few more hours in bed."

"Just because you're indefatigable doesn't mean *I* am," she replied. "Besides, maybe it's important."

"How important can it be?" he grumbled, but sat up.

She let her eyes linger on his pale, muscular chest for a moment before turning to grab a robe off the back of a closet door. "Would you put a robe on, please?"

"Modesty is *such* a ridiculous concept," he retorted with a wink. But she noticed as her hand edged toward the control panel he moved a little quicker toward the other robe. By the time it slid open he was as clothed as she was.

Standing in the doorway were Morrigan and Bryon, and they weren't alone. Cerberus and Bridget were with them. "Can we come in?" Morrigan asked. She didn't look happy and that pretty much soured Val's good mood on the spot.

"Of course," she replied, stepping out of the way. "What's going on?"

"The Court meets tonight at eighteen-hundred hours. Athena already approached me, and suggested that if I get in her way, she'll get me banned from Starhaven permanently. She means to go after both of you."

"C'mon in," Val told her, feeling her initial good mood evaporating. "Want some coffee or breakfast? This unit's got a top-of-the-line autochef."

"Already ate," the immortal replied. "But thanks anyway."

"How are the injured hybrids?" Raven asked, coming out of the adjoining bathroom. "And did you find anything out about the android?"

"Just that he showed up about a month ago and had everyone eating out of the palm of his hand within minutes. No one knows much more than that."

"What does a vampire do in a bathroom?" Bryon asked, following Morrigan through the door and regarding Raven curiously.

“That’s quite the personal question,” Raven said pointedly, shaking his head. “One I’m not going to answer. So, tell me, how do you like Starhaven so far?”

The younger vamp shrugged. “It’s okay. Not nearly as creepy as that other world where you took me. But I don’t think I want to stay. Things are still unsettled at home, and I should be there helping to tear down the Church.”

“It could use all the opposition it could get,” Raven agreed. “We can send you home now, Bryon, but you might want to wait until after the Court meets. We might be able to send you back with some extra resources.”

“Extra resources are good,” Bryon said with an exaggerated shrug. “I can wait a few more hours.”

“Something just occurred to me, Raven,” Val broke in. She was actually a bit surprised that none of them had realized this earlier. “Didn’t you say Shea’s doppelganger wanted you to kill someone, and then pitted you against an android? What if this ArchAngel was the one you were supposed to kill?”

He gave her an odd look. “What could Shea’s doppelganger possibly have against him?”

“That’s the big question now, isn’t it? I suppose we might find out come eighteen-hundred hours.”

“That we might. How is your pack doing, Bridget?”

“Good,” she said. “Morrigan helped us get settled in spare housing. I’ll say it’s a lot different from where we came from.”

“That’s a good thing, right?”

“You have no idea.”

The door slid shut as Raven motioned for them to find someplace to sit. Morrigan took a seat in an over-stuffed chair, Bridget pulled up a stool, and Bryon dropped to a lotus position on the deep azure carpet next to Cerberus, who stretched out to have his belly scratched.

The door buzzed again. Since Raven was now the closest to the door, he went to answer it. The door slid open, revealing a pair of figures in

what looked like bright white symsuit armor with a stylized phoenix emblazoned across the breast.

They might have been twins, so similar was their appearance. Both were elves, with the sharp, vulpine features, upswept ears, and golden hair of their kind. “Raven?”

“That’s me. What can I do for you?” he asked warily.

“Lord ArchAngel requests that you attend him in his office,” the elf on the right answered.

“*Lord* ArchAngel? Since when was this a fucking monarchy?” he growled in response.

They flinched, and glanced at one another. Val walked over to stand beside him and laid a hand on his arm. “Maybe you should go see what he has to say.”

“ArchAngel isn’t a *he*,” Raven spat. “ArchAngel is an *it*. Androids are not living beings, and they sure as hell can’t be male or female, all cosmetic appearance to the contrary.”

“Fine. Then go talk to *it*. I don’t know how ArchAngel managed to acquire so much authority in such a short time, but we’re going to need his—*its*—goodwill if we’re going to get what we want out of the Court.” She watched as her words sank in and he seemed to relax slightly.

“You’re right. Okay. I assume you mean now?” he asked the elves. They nodded in unison. “Fine. Wait here while I put some clothes on.”



Raven wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting, but this wasn’t it. ArchAngel’s ‘office,’ as it were, was a small, non-descript room not far from the chamber where the Court met around a large oak table. The room was sparsely furnished with a desk, a couple of chairs, and a view screen currently showing a image of a waterfall in a rainforest somewhere, the sound of rushing water from the speakers barely audible even to Raven.

ArchAngel looked up as the two elven warriors ushered him inside, dismissing them with a curt nod. He—*it!*—motioned to the chair on the other side of the desk and Raven reluctantly took a seat.

Raven didn't like it, but even he seemed unable to consider this creature an it, especially sitting here in front of him. He looked too much like his old friend and former commanding officer, and something about his demeanor made it impossible to think of him as simply a manufactured *thing*, as much as he wanted to.

ArchAngel didn't bother with a preamble. He met Raven's gaze squarely and said, in a voice as natural as any man's, "I imagine you have a lot of questions."

Raven suppressed his first reaction, which was to respond with a smartass remark, and shrugged. "I've got a few."

ArchAngel nodded. "Of course. But before you ask them, would you mind if I told you a little story?"

*A story? What is this, kindergarten?* He shrugged again. "It's your office. Your rules."

ArchAngel chuckled, an astoundingly normal sound. Even in the few brief moments he'd been here, Raven had begun to realize that this was no ordinary android. Whoever had created him had been a remarkable engineer. "I suppose I'll start at the beginning. That's usually the best place to begin.

"A boy was born to very extraordinary parents. The father was one of Earth's richest men, and the mother a well-respected and influential law-enforcement officer. Neither of the parents were ordinary humans, and the pregnancy that arose came as a complete shock to those that knew them both. The father's people were assumed to be infertile, but something about what had been done to change the mother had created a pairing that could produce children."

Raven saw exactly where this was going, but he didn't interrupt. The way he figured it, he might learn something he didn't already know.

ArchAngel continued. "The boy was born with amazing gifts, the scope of which weren't immediately apparent. He was astoundingly precocious, walking and talking before the age of a year. He also had a way about him that allowed him to charm just about anyone. He was reading by the age of two, and hunting information on his own by the time he was four.

“Everyone recognized that he was gifted, but only his father and mother recognized exactly how much so the boy was. He could make things happen. He could not only influence people far beyond anything that had ever been seen before, but he could influence events as well.”

ArchAngel paused and leaned back in his chair. “There was once an episode of an old television program, before the advent of HD technology, called ‘The Twilight Zone.’ This particular episode featured a boy who could do wondrous things, but he used his gifts to gain power over others. The people in the small town in which he lived dared not utter one word of condemnation for anything he did—no matter *how* evil, cruel, or callous they were, for fear of being punished by the willful child.

“The boy I’m describing was very much like the child in this episode of this old show. He could do almost anything, even affect causality far in excess of anyone’s imagination. But his parents were good people, and they taught him right from wrong very early. And it didn’t take long for the boy to realize that to reveal the extent of his powers would make others fear him. So he hid these powers, and pretended to be a more or less normal child—gifted, yes, but nowhere near as powerful as he actually was.

“He strove to be as normal as possible in a world that was increasingly abnormal, and he surrounded himself with a variety of ‘freaks.’ People who were as different as he was, but who were never allowed to know his secret. As the child of extraordinary parents, he could reveal some of his abilities—his great strength, stamina, and dexterity, as well as his intellect, but he feared the repercussions should he actually show others exactly what he was capable of.

“Then a war came—his planet was invaded by some very dangerous creatures, and he was forced to put on the mantle of a military leader. He knew that he would be called upon to make a huge sacrifice sometime during the conflict. Seeing possible futures and their outcomes was part of the nature of his talent.

“He knew that by making this sacrifice, he would begin a chain reaction that would save his friends, his family, and his world. So he made it without hesitation.

“He didn’t know whether he’d survive or not. In fact, in some ways, he didn’t survive, for the more or less human body he wore was utterly destroyed at the epicenter of a massive nuclear explosion. And, had he been more like other people, the story would have ended there.”

He paused, and searched Raven’s eyes with his own pale blue orbs. “But it didn’t end there. The explosion freed him from the shackles of physical existence, but it did not kill him. He became a thing of mind, of spirit alone. Not a ghost, for no part of his essence fled to other realms. He roamed the world to which he’d brought that engine of destruction for nearly twenty years—an observer and, through the exercise of the power he possessed, something of a beneficial influence as well.

“He found a way to communicate with those who were receptive, and began to generate dissent among those who didn’t agree with the war, with the practices of the god-like race that had controlled this other world for so long.

“He fostered a revolution of a sort. But even then his work was only beginning. He learned how to travel to other universes without the use of technology or magic. He learned how to leap between these worlds by will alone, and he traveled and learned. Years passed, and then decades. And then he came upon a dying Earth, where a remnant of society lived in seclusion, trying to eke out an existence in a world so hostile to life that it’s hard to describe.

“The remnant of humanity that existed there was made up of scientists and engineers—the cream of the crop who’d seen the approaching disaster and found a way to escape the worst of its wrath. But they were dying as well. There were not enough of them for a viable gene pool, and many were too old to breed anyway.

“The traveler saved them by taking them and their installation to yet another universe, and giving them the chance to rejoin a functioning society. As a reward, one of the scientists—probably the most brilliant of them all, found a way to create a physical shell for the traveler to use. To inhabit. Energy became matter once again and the traveler found himself once again able to move among the living as if he were one of them. It

was then that he decided to return home. Or, at the very least, to find some of his old companions and make a new home among them.”

He fell silent. Raven stared at him, mind trying to grasp what he'd been told, and finding himself accepting it, regardless of how incredible it seemed. As cynical as he could be, he knew the ring of truth when he heard it, and ArchAngel's story was too implausible to be a fabrication. In an infinite universe, anything is possible, and sometimes the most unlikely things turned out to be fact.

His mouth moved and, after a moment of being unable to speak at all, a single word squeaked out. “Justice?”

ArchAngel smiled, and it was a wholly human smile. “I've missed you terribly, old friend. You have no idea how much.”

And then Raven was crying, bloody tears streaking down his face like crimson rain. He swallowed hard and took a deep breath. Vampires didn't need to breathe to live, but there were many more reasons to breathe sometimes than just to capture oxygen. If he didn't take that breath, he'd be sobbing like a baby and he knew it.

He stood, the chair toppling to the floor behind him, and barreled around the desk, taking ArchAngel in his arms and lifting him off his feet. He pressed his face into the synthetic flesh of his friend's neck and breathed a scent that wasn't human, but one that he'd forever-more associate with the man who'd meant more to him than almost any other in all of his existence.

They stood like that for a long moment, and then broke apart. Raven clapped him on the shoulder and gazed into his eyes wonderingly. “It all makes sense now. Of course you'd be given authority here, if everything you say is true. You've done more for the human race, and to impede the progress of the Cen Empire, than any thousand agents have managed.”

“I cheated,” ArchAngel told him a bit sheepishly. “I decided that this place needed a more rational hand guiding it than Athena's, and so I changed reality to suit my purposes. I'm no more authoritarian than my father, when you get right down to it, but this place is something of a zoo. It needs someone to be in charge—someone who's *not* a control freak.”

Raven laughed aloud. “Justice—this is just so amazing. I’ve got to introduce you to Val. I mean a *real* introduction, not that dance we did when we first arrived back.”

“Val? Is that the young blonde agent Athena’s so pissed at?”

“That’s the one. I’m in love with her, Justice. I mean, really, totally, and completely head-over-heels, dumber than a brick, in love with her. She’s strong, smart, courageous, and she makes me feel like a real person again.”

ArchAngel smiled. A bit wistfully, Raven thought, with an inward wince. He realized belatedly how this must sound to a man who’d never had the chance to know any kind of romantic love.

Justice had spent his early years surrounded by freaks, and then come of age during a time of terrible war. He’d never had the opportunity to meet a girl and fall in love...not even the innocent puppy love that most mortals enjoyed. His whole life had been one a collision course with destiny, and he’d known it all along while the rest of them had remained ignorant of his eventual fate.

“I’d dearly love to meet your lady,” he said finally. “She sounds like an amazing woman.”

“She is.” Raven walked back around the desk, lifted the chair, and sat back down. “But I’m worried about her.”

ArchAngel frowned. “Worried? Why?”

Raven outlined their experiences and what had happened to the both of them, from his initial assignment there, to their encounter with the doppelganger of ArchAngel’s father on that other alternate Earth. When he was through, ArchAngel’s face had gone slack in a particularly convincing imitation of a human expression of shock. “She killed a doppelganger of Deryk Shea?” He didn’t bother to outline how impossible that actually seemed. His father was known as being pretty much indestructible. Untouchable, unbreakable, and nearly godlike in his invulnerability.

“Yes. And god knows how many mortals. She’s a walking engine of destruction, Justice. I think that’s one of the reasons she hasn’t really come to terms with it—she can kill dozens, if not hundreds, of men

without even expending much effort at all. I don't think it's hit her how real it all was.

"That's why I want her to retire as a field agent. She's earned it, no matter what Athena thinks. She didn't fulfill her obligations to TAU there, but that just wasn't possible. It was only a matter of time before the natives got their hands on advanced weaponry anyway—Odin had a stockpile in his ship, and the Church was his baby."

"Yes," ArchAngel mused. "The Church. What do you plan to do about them, anyway?"

"I'm going to turn my fledgling loose on them," Raven chuckled. "I'd like to give him some training here, but he's in a hurry to get back to the fight. He's not going to be patient enough to learn what we could teach him."

"There's not much you can do about that, I'm afraid. He's got his own path to follow. You'll have to take consolation in the fact that you already gave him as many of the tools he's going to need as he'll allow you."

"There is that," Raven admitted. "I'm going to ask Val to marry me."

ArchAngel cocked an eyebrow. "That's a bit extreme, don't you think? Marriage, as an institution, is virtually unknown here. Hell, from what I understand, it's not even all that common on Earth Prime anymore."

"It's what I want. And I hope to hell it's what she wants too. I'm not sure if I could take it if she said 'no.'"

ArchAngel chuckled dryly. "I suppose you'd like her to be given immortality, wouldn't you?"

"Of course. Rumor has it Jaz has some sort of serum, though that *is* just a rumor."

"Not just a rumor. And you know as well as I do that there are other ways as well. You can approach Jaz if you'd like, or I could see what I can do. Athena's not going to like it, but offending her isn't going to break my heart."

"That's good news. Well, I guess I'd best fill you in on what we're planning for the Court this evening. We're going to submit petitions for three new agencies. An agency of healers for Val—I want her to learn to

use her talents constructively—a bodyguard and assassin’s agency for Morrigan, and a mercenary corps for Scorpio.”

“Morrigan?” ArchAngel let out a barking laugh. “Oh, that’s going to go over well. Especially since Morrigan and Kali are already planning on submitting two petitions to start agencies of their own.”

“What?” This was news to Raven.

“Indeed. That’s why Morrigan ended up in the middle of your last assignment—why she was smuggling weapons there. They want to start an agency devoted to thumbing its collective nose at TAU and its rules. I already know their reasoning and, regardless of how much controversy it’s going to spawn, I happen to agree with it. Sometimes the only chance people have of escaping death at the hands of a tyrannical regime, or a more powerful enemy bent on genocide, is to be given access to arms they wouldn’t ordinarily be able to acquire. Technological purity doesn’t trump the right of the downtrodden to defend themselves.

“I’m with you on the agency devoted to healing. I think that’s a damn good idea all the way around, and it’s a bonus that it will help your lady friend in particular. The Stewards usually get stuck with that end of things, and they’ve got enough to do keeping Starhaven running smoothly.

“I’m a little less thrilled about the whole mercenary idea, but I’ll give you guys the chance to make the pitch. If it’s a good one, I’ll support it. And I’d recommend selling *your* idea as a bodyguard agency first and foremost. And since Morrigan’s already got an agency proposal of her own, you’re going to have to volunteer to head it yourself, at least for the time being. There’s no way any single entity will be allowed to head two separate outfits.

“And I’m not going to influence the voting for *any* of the proposed agencies. They’ll have to make it through on their own merits. I’m even going to insist on a secret vote, so I don’t influence the outcome even by accident.

“If you do manage to get Val to agree to marry you, I’ll put together a wedding ceremony that won’t be forgotten as long as Starhaven exists.

Which will probably be for a very, very long time. Of course, you first have to get her to agree. She'll probably think you're crazy."

"Most likely," Raven said. "Have you gone home yet?"

ArchAngel shook his head. "No. I'd like to see my father again, but I'm not sure how he'll take me being the way I am. And I'm not sure I can take going back to find out my mother is dead and gone. Or an old woman. It *has* been over two hundred years, after all."

This reminded Raven of his own mother, and how he'd never quite gotten around to getting back in touch with her after he'd vanished during the battle against Veronica's zombies in the caverns beneath Central Oregon. He'd written letters he'd never sent, and picked up the phone dozens of times, but could never work up the courage to place the call.

He regretted it now, of course. She'd deserved much better than he'd given her. He tried very hard not to think about it, but it was things like this that flashed his guilt like a big neon sign to his subconscious.

*Yes, Raven, you were an asshole. So what else is new?*

The voice was back. He'd decided that he wasn't going insane...he'd just been supplied with a far too active conscience, and an over-abundance of imagination. That's what made him a good mage. Without imagination, magic was impossible. "I should get back," he said suddenly, rising to his feet.

ArchAngel did the same. "What are you going to tell them?"

"The truth. That an old friend has returned. They'll figure it out for themselves eventually. And I'm hoping that Val just trusts me. She wanted me to give you the benefit of the doubt anyway. It's because of her that I actually came here today. My first impulse—"

"Was to tell me to go fuck myself. Yeah, I figured as much. See you at the meeting tonight, Raven. I'll be rooting for you, even if I don't show it."

"I'll keep that in mind, Justice." He turned and strolled to the door, which opened as he approached. "You should really consider going and seeing your father. Just because you have an eternity to do it doesn't mean you should wait that long."

“Yeah, I know. Get out of here. Your woman is waiting for you. She’s probably wondering if I’ve eaten you or something by now.”

Laughing, Raven turned back around and walked out.

## Chapter Thirty-six

Morrigan paused in the doorway and scanned the room, taking in every figure sitting at the long wooden table. At the head was the new boss man, the one they called ArchAngel. Sitting on his left, several feet down the table, was Athena. Across from her was the immense bulk of Fenris Wolf, his long white beard coiled on the table top like an albino snake as he doodled in a notebook off to one side. He was left-handed, she noted absently.

Farther down the table sat Jasmine Tashae and the mage-engineer Artificer. Jaz was leaning back, eyes closed as if she was catching a quick nap before the whole thing started. Artificer was fiddling with some gadget in front of him. His need to tinker bordered on the obsessive, but that came as no surprise. Everyone pretty much knew that about him.

The petitioners, of which she was one, were relegated to the far end of the table from ArchAngel. The others were already there, sitting in relative silence except for Raven and Val, who were holding hands and whispering to one another. She smiled and shook her head. What good did it do to whisper in a room full of people that could hear a ant fart at fifty feet?

She walked in, nodded to her fellow immortals, and took a seat with the other petitioners. Kali offered her a wink and a grin, and she grimaced in response. Her nerves felt like someone had been banging on them with an electrified baton. She'd already begun to regret making this agreement with the Goblin Queen, and hoped the whole thing didn't blow up in their faces.

Raven had returned from his meeting with ArchAngel in an oddly jubilant mood, but she didn't take that as any kind of positive sign.

ArchAngel had proved to be quite adept at bringing people around to his way of thinking, and she wasn't sure that Raven's change of heart about the man—or android, rather—was something about which she felt particularly comfortable.

She took a seat and waited for someone to start the proceedings.

After a moment, ArchAngel cleared his throat. This struck her as fairly ridiculous, considering there was no reason at all for an android to do such a thing. But it did have the desired effect of drawing everyone's attention.

"We'd like to welcome all you to this Court meeting, and thank you for your participation. As you all know, the High Court was established in order to deal with agency issues in particular, and was in no way meant to supplant the authority of the old Starhaven Council."

He referred to the old guard here, the original leaders of Starhaven before the immortals had arrived to set up shop. The 'Council' still met, but it was a formality these days. The agencies and their operatives made up a sizeable chunk of the construct's population, and the High Court's decisions tended to affect more people than anything dreamt up by the Council. It was little more than a collection of figureheads anymore.

"The immortals sitting at this table right now represent the four interworld agencies. Athena for TAU, Fenris for Sash, Jasmine for Mirage, and Artificer for Magitech. It has been brought to our attention that five of you are bringing forth petitions to add new agencies to the roster and it will be the Court's job today to determine whether these additions are warranted and in the best interest of Starhaven and those who depend on us for protection against the Cen threat."

Rather pretentious sounding, mused Morrigan, but she couldn't really fault him for wanting this to carry the earmarks of a historical meeting. It could well turn into that, and, as such, the language of the initial moments was of particular significance.

"We would hear Scorpio's petition first," he announced.

The mercenary stood and coughed into his fist. He didn't waste any time getting to the point. "There have been many times when agents of TAU and Sash could use a solid military force to back them up in times

of conflict. People who are trained and willing to use advanced weapons and other equipment to defend against Cen incursions and other serious threats. I propose that the Court considers including Havoc in its roster of interworld agencies, and allow us to set up shop here on Starhaven. Thank you.”

He sat back down.

Fenris was nodding. Jaz and Artificer were exchanging meaningful glances, but, unfortunately, Morrigan wasn't able to gauge the content of their meaning. Athena looked as though she'd bitten into an apple and found half a worm.

“I think that if this ‘Havoc’ were allowed to become a resource for agents in the field,” she said slowly. “They may come to rely on it rather than on their own ingenuity and abilities. I’m going to have to vote ‘nay.’”

“There’s a surprise,” Fenris grunted sarcastically. “He’s absolutely correct when he says that sometimes the agents *do* need strong backup. And these are supposed to be secret votes, Athena.”

She shrugged unconcernedly. “I’m not afraid to let people know how I’m voting. I’m not sure why anyone is.”

“The votes will be kept secret,” ArchAngel said, in a tone that brooked no argument. “Please press the red or green button under the table in front of your seat.”

After a moment he nodded. “It seems that Havoc has been accepted into the fold. Welcome to the Court, Scorpio. Have a seat at this end of the table. You will be allowed to vote on the next proposal.”

“I don’t like this at all, ArchAngel,” said Athena, affixing him with an icy glare.

“Duly noted,” he said. “Next up is Raven, speaking on behalf of a proposed agency called ‘Bane.’”

The vampire stood, nodded toward the immortals and cut to the chase. “Too many times our agents are sent into the field with no available backup, and have to rely on locals for support. I think an agency of bodyguards to assist and protect the operatives of the other agencies while on assignment will increase their chance of succeeding in their missions—whatever missions they happen to be.”

“Vote,” intoned ArchAngel, without even giving the Court the opportunity to debate the suggestion. After a minute, he said, “The ‘ayes’ have it. Welcome to the Court, Raven. Please take your seat amongst us.”

This time Athena’s glare was hot, and Morrigan was amused to note that it affected ArchAngel no more than the last one had. He took no outward pleasure in her obvious distaste for the proceedings, but Morrigan had the feeling that he was chortling heartily somewhere behind that placid face.

Could androids chortle?

“Next up. Kali, for the creation of an agency called the Triwar Guild.”

“I object,” said Athena, before the Goblin Queen could say a word.

“To what?” ArchAngel asked in a bored tone.

“To the fact that you’re ramming these proposals down our throats. We’re not even getting the chance to debate them.”

“Debate is overrated,” he shot back. “Let’s just take it on faith that you’ll argue against each and every one of them and nothing will come of it, and let the goddam thing come to a vote without dragging it out for days.”

She looked as though she was about to swallow her tongue. “You’re on *their* side,” she snarled.

“I’m on the side of the agents,” ArchAngel told her placidly, totally unruffled by her growing anger. “Anything that gives them a better chance to survive and succeed in their missions is something we *ought* to approve.”

“This whole thing is a joke!” she snapped. “I don’t know what I was thinking even bothering to show up. You’re going to do what you want and the hell with anyone who disagrees.”

“Athena,” he said calmly. “Do us all a favor and sit down and shut up. I doubt any of us want to listen to your theatrics. Go ahead, Kali.”

The four-armed immortal made the argument Morrigan had expected, and, after a few moments deliberation, the votes were tallied and Kali took her place with the other Heads of Agency. Athena looked as though her head was about to burst and it was everything Morrigan could do to keep from laughing aloud.

Then it was her turn. “Sometimes just smuggling weapons in isn’t enough,” she said. “Sometimes people are under the thumb of a government so powerful and so corrupt that they don’t have the will to fight. They cry out for someone to help, but there *isn’t* anyone to help. I’d like to form an agency that fosters revolution—agents trained in propaganda, organizing, and civil disobedience, with all the resources of the interworld agencies behind them.”

She was surprised and more than a little pleased to see Fenris nodding. She hadn’t really expected support from that direction, but she’d take what she could get.

She was absolutely thrilled a few minutes later when the vote came down in favor of the creation of the “Knights of Anarchy.” The agency name was a little tongue-in-cheek, but Kali thought the Court took itself a little too seriously and needed something a bit more humorous to lighten things up.

Kali had a weird sense of humor.

Morrigan took her seat at the other end of the table and smiled encouragingly at Val, who looked about as nervous as a person could without completely falling apart. “I propose the creation of an agency devoted to healing alone—so the responsibility will no longer be on the shoulders of TAU, Sash, and the Stewards.” She looked around, as if realizing for the first time that the Stewards weren’t represented here at all.

Morrigan could have told her why. The Stewards refused to participate. Somehow she felt like that would change now. Having others to bear some of the brunt of Athena’s blunt manner might make all the difference in the world.

Then again, it might not.

“You’re not a healer,” Fenris grunted, interrupting her.

“No,” she agreed. “I am not a healer. Yet. But with the Court’s indulgence, I believe I could turn my telekinetic talents to good use saving lives rather than taking them. We need healers, and we need healers that can defend themselves in the field. You immortals have no idea how dangerous it is out there for the agents—and expecting them to

return to Starhaven every time they're injured seems wasteful to me. What if the healers could go to *them* instead?"

Athena snorted. "The way we've been doing it seems to work just fine."

"Well, is *fine* good enough, Athena? Or can we do better?"

Morrigan hid a smile and nodded to herself. Val had found her voice, and she wasn't letting the immortals intimidate her. This was a good thing. They'd never respect someone they could bully.

"That's enough debate," ArchAngel announced suddenly. "I call for a vote."

"I'm not voting for someone who's not only mortal, but doesn't even possess the talents necessary to be an operative for such an agency," Fenris broke in. "I'm sorry, Val, but I don't like it."

"If she were an immortal, would you feel differently, Fenris?"

"Maybe. But that's entirely beside the point. It's not as if—" He stopped abruptly, staring at ArchAngel. "You wouldn't."

"I would. Something of which many of you may be unaware, but any resident of Starhaven is technically immortal. Time does not exist here as we would understand it. Only through a subtle and heretofore unrevealed manipulation of an artificial temporal field have the agencies been able to age their young students to adulthood. Operatives *only* age while off Starhaven. Mortal operatives, that is," he said with a nod at Raven.

Morrigan had suspected this for quite some time, but it was nice to have it confirmed. No time. That explained how mortals such as George Harrigan the weapon smith had been around so long. He wasn't immortal, as some people suspected, just taking advantage of Starhaven's existence as someplace outside of the normal flow of time. Harrigan didn't leave Starhaven, therefore he didn't age.

No one knew how long he'd been here either.

"What do you think, Jasmine?" ArchAngel asked out of the blue. The raven-haired immortal gave him a pointed look in response and shrugged.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Do you think she’s worthy of the chance to become one of us?”

“I do. And so does Raven. He wouldn’t be considering asking what he plans on asking if he didn’t.”

“And what might that be?” Athena asked, clearly annoyed by the whole issue. She’d planned on censuring the woman, and, instead, found out that ArchAngel was considering giving her the ultimate gift. That was enough to piss off someone with far more tolerance than Athena displayed.

“That,” Raven cut in, “falls under the ‘none of your fucking business,’ category, Athena. And, yes, there *is* such a category, believe it or not.” He turned to Val, who was scanning the faces around the table with a puzzled expression, and stood. He moved to her side, swift as thought, and laid a hand on her shoulder. “Valerie Winn. I love you and would like to ask for your hand in marriage.”

The room went dead silent for a brief second. Then Athena laughed aloud. “You’re an anachronism, Raven. There’s no recognized institution of marriage on Starhaven.”

“Maybe there should be,” ArchAngel remarked, not even glancing her direction. “I appreciate what you all are trying to do here, but I think you take it too far sometimes. These people need more than duty and self-sacrifice to keep them going. They need lives. *Real* lives, not just an existence dedicated to the furtherance of their agency’s goals.”

Val stared at Raven, literally speechless for a moment. Had he actually asked her to marry him? She couldn’t believe it. Athena was right—there had never been a wedding on Starhaven as long as she could remember, and assumed that it had been unknown for far longer than that. From what she understood, marriage, as it was originally intended, had become something of a rarity even on Earth Prime. It was primarily a religious ceremony, held for religious reasons, and religion had fallen out of favor during and after the War. At least among those who’d remained on Earth rather than escaping to the stars.

They'd gone through so much in the last year, she thought. Together *and* apart. And he was asking her to share his life with him, not just for the foreseeable future, but forever. He was asking for the ultimate commitment, considering he was fighting to have her made immortal.

He'd come a long way from the uncertain, emotionally burdened man she'd met—it seemed so long ago—and the fact that he'd screwed up the courage to ask in the first place seemed a validation of how she felt about *him*.

“Yes,” she said, the word tumbling from her mouth with no conscious intent to form it. But as soon as she said it she knew that she meant it. She wanted to spend the rest of her life delving the depths of the mystery that was Raven, even if that life lasted for eternity.

Somehow she knew she'd never be bored.

“Then it's settled,” ArchAngel boomed, clapping his hands together. “There will be a healing agency—we'll call it ‘Helix’—Valerie will become immortal, and head this newest agency, and we're going to throw a wedding the likes of which no one has ever seen in *any* universe!”



Meanwhile, elsewhere on Starhaven, in a virtually unknown laboratory, a young healer held a test tube up to the light, peering at the thin worm wriggling in the small amount of fluid at the bottom. He licked suddenly dry lips and slid the beaker into a rack on a nearby counter. He quickly tapped something out on a keyboard, the words flashing on a nearby screen.

He glanced through the one-way glass into the adjacent room, where the patient lay, still sedated, on a medical bed that was currently monitoring his heart-rate and other vital signs. Extracting the worm hadn't seemed to have any negative effects, but they were watching him closely nevertheless.

If everything the healer been told was true, this worm could hold the key to immortality and he planned on making use of it whether it was approved by his superiors or not.

He smiled and glanced back at the worm. This was his ticket to a bright and eternal future. No matter the cost. He'd pay any price to become one of the elite.

The End (for now)

## About the Author

Saje has been a Northwest native for most of his life, and currently resides in Tacoma, WA, with his wife and an assortment of furry kids. He's also the proud father of two bipedal children as well, but they currently live elsewhere.

When not writing, he's either working, thinking about writing, or doing both at the same time. This tends to cause a bit of confusion when he's standing at a sixth-floor window gauging the distance between the building in which he works and the adjacent parking garage and wondering whether a vampire could easily make the leap.

He happens to believe a vampire could make that leap, but he's reluctant to discuss the matter with his co-workers.

Saje is the author of two well-reviewed novels so far, "Loki's Sin" and "Of Man and Monster," by Wings ePress, and is currently awaiting the publication of the next two novels in his genre-bending paranormal science-fantasy series, the Infinity: Earth Saga.

He's a recipient of the Loveromances Rising Star award for "Loki's Sin," which also received the prestigious Staff Pick award as well.

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*You have been exposed to subversive influences:  
for your own security and well being, you will now be terminated.*

## Homeland

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*Available in digital and paperback at Samhain Publishing*

Tracy Dwayne Jocelyn Higgs has a problem. Not only is he a Security Officer saddled with a girl's name, he has awoken to find himself in a vast shopping mall with no recollection of how he came to be there.

Worse still, the mall is under almost constant terrorist attack. The security apparatus operates a permanent state of emergency and none of the other terrified inhabitants of the mall have any idea how they came to be there or how to get out.

Stalked by the obsessive femme fatale Mandy, shadowed by the annoying Information Officer Simms and in love with the no-nonsense Doctor Jodi Francis, Higgs must find out where he is, get in touch with his feminine side and save the inhabitants of the mall before he is terminated for his own security and well being.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Homeland*:

The Reverend Michealod stood in his pulpit, lungs bursting as he led the congregation in a rousing chorus of "America the Free". Behind him hung a huge star-spangled banner, which largely obscured the mural of Christ crucified on the wall beyond. The reverend felt at his happiest here, all the nagging doubts of faith left behind. Nothing like a good song to move the spirits along, he always said.

He glanced down at the electric organ, an imposing instrument below the pulpit, tastefully backed with light pine veneer and currently pumping out music at an entirely sensible level of decibels. It worked entirely on automatic of course—nobody actually played it. The reverend viewed it as a truly remarkable innovation, an electric organ which had over a thousand of the Lord's finest hymns stored away in its memory banks. He simply needed to select the ones he wanted before the service

and put in the running order. It even had a repertoire of moving classical pieces to play during the hushed intimacy of Holy Communion. No need for some poor aging spinster to spend hours practicing, only to make a fool of herself with wrong notes halfway through a rousing chorus of “Abide With Me”. No, these days, what with the electric organ and the church kneelers mass produced in Taiwan, nothing came between the faithful and the serious business of worshipping the Lord in a schedule which fit in with the busy timescales imposed by modern life.

Higgs and Simms stood in the middle of the congregation. Simms was singing enthusiastically, his eyes closed, little globs of spit accumulating at the corners of his mouth. Higgs didn’t feel quite so inspired. It wasn’t that he didn’t believe, quite the contrary. Without the thought that some higher authority directed everything, life was not worth living or fighting for. He was firm in his faith, he said his prayers, he confessed his sins and he took Holy Communion. But he was distracted, he could not put the thought that Jared had lied to him out of his mind. It niggled away at him, got under his skin. He should trust Jared. He had to trust Jared. But he was sure he had not been mistaken. The momentary look on Jared’s face had betrayed him when he claimed Higgs’ notes had been destroyed.

Higgs’ chain of thought was broken suddenly as the lights dimmed. The music from the organ slowed, descending in pitch as it did so. The congregation slowed its singing to match, the poor reverend having to force his mouth into contortions to keep time. Then the lights came back and the organ worked its way up to the correct tempo. *Another brownout. Another brownout nobody is prepared to admit happens.* Higgs made a mental note to investigate the power sources for the mall.

The song came to a rousing and triumphant ending and the congregation began to sit. The Reverend quickly took the microphone in the pulpit. “Er, no, please remain standing.”

The congregation reversed their momentum and struggled to their feet.

“Hands on your bibles, please.”

Higgs picked up his bible from the shelf on the back of the pew in front of him. The Reverend held his bible up and the congregation followed suit.

“Repeat after me. I swear...”

“I swear...” the congregation replied as one.

“By almighty God...”

“By almighty God...”

“That I am not...”

“That I am not...”

“A terrorist, a subversive or an infiltrator.”

“A terrorist, a subversive or an infiltrator.”

Higgs got halfway through the last response and stopped. He looked sideways at Simms. Without any visible hint of irony, Simms repeated the line, a tear welling up in his eye.



The congregation filed out of the chapel slowly. The reverend had taken up residence at the exit, limply pressing the hand of each person as they left. Behind him, automatic assault rifle in hand, stood one of the immense armored androids. *The reverend back home would have had something to say about assault rifles in church*, Higgs thought a little sanctimoniously.

As they moved up the queue to the reverend, Simms leaned over to Higgs.

“Most moving, Higgs, most moving.”

“What are you on about now?” Higgs winced away from Simms’ breath.

“The ceremony. It’s the test. I’d say that you passed with flying colors. Now you’ve completed that, you can resume your duties.”

Higgs was incredulous. “What, that was it, promising that I’m not a terrorist?” He spoke loudly, unconcerned as to who might overhear. They had reached the reverend and the android at the door.

“Well, yes.” Simms was clearly confused that Higgs should be having difficulty with this apparently simple concept.

Higgs laughed loudly and faced Simms with his hands on his hips. "But I could be a terrorist but just say that I'm not."

A sudden space opened around Higgs. Simms was on the floor with his hands over his head before Higgs could blink.

"Overruled."

The android lowered its gun. Higgs was sure it glowered at him. Simms slowly got up as a low mumble of conversation resumed around them.

"Higgs, you are really pushing it, you know," hissed Simms. "I don't know why you haven't been terminated already."

"Don't tell me that you doubt Homeland's judgment, Simms?"

Simms looked around in panic at the android. "Of course not. I, no, definitely not."

The android didn't move.

The reverend reached out and shook Higgs' hand, a damp, weak little handshake, the sort Higgs found quite annoying. Why bother with a handshake like that?

"Interesting thing you said back there about lying about not being a terrorist," the reverend began. "You know, I've often wondered the same thing myself—"

A burst of gunfire ripped through the room. Higgs looked down. He was still holding the reverend's hand but now it had the distinction of no longer having a reverend attached to the end of it. Higgs' mouth dropped open.

*She controls the elements, but he controls her heart.*

## Nuermar's Last Witch

© 2006 A. E. Rought

Nuermar's history is whittled in ruins, its prophecy carved in stone. Maelis, child of the Prophecies, is the last of her kind—a green-eyed witch, and the only one whom the stones of Nuermar say can channel the Elements. She alone has the power to vanquish the evil that reigns over her land. But without the greatest element of all, she has no hope of winning such an impossible battle.

A turncoat-assassin holds the key to her ultimate triumph. Yet the destruction of her village and the brutal slaughter of Maelis' family lies on Joran's hands. Can she overcome her hatred in order to fulfill the Prophecies and channel the ultimate Element—love?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Nuermar's Last Witch*, by A.E. Rought:

Maelis Keshnar's tears fell unchecked. Dust rose up with each breath to smart and sting her eyes. Crouched as she was, she felt her heart thunder in her chest, an unsteady rhythm as it pounded in impotent rage. She squinted at the pouch her grandmother had forced into her hand before slamming the door on her hiding place.

Maelis was not prepared for it; she hated it already—yet that was a paltry emotion compared to what was to come.

Fireballs were lobbed through the windows to crash in puddles of flame against the back wall. The doorjamb cracked and gave way as the door flew open, crashed against the wall and sent pots and jars flying from their shelves. From her hidden vantage, Maelis watched her grandmother, Niomi, spin to face the door as an intruder swept in with a swirl of black robes. With surreal speed, he closed the distance between them and his large, tattooed hands snatched at the old woman as she turned to flee. Niomi threw her thin arms up in defense. He cinched the fingers of one hand around her wrist and whipped her around to face him.

Niomi's face paled in panic. A guttural cry escaped her lips only to be smothered by his heavy palm. Still, she struggled. Her feet flailed, kicked at his legs and knocked over storage baskets all around them, to no avail; he overpowered her.

He forced her into a chair. With one hand pressed against her chest, he searched the floor with the other. His hand came upon a knitting basket which had spilled over in their brief confrontation. His fingers curled around a wound, woolen ball and the cloaked man bound Niomi's wrists with her own yarn.

"Tell me where the Talisman is," he said. "Tell me where to find the Witch."

From her place of hiding, Maelis could not see his face for the darkness within his hood. His voice was disembodied. There was no point on which to focus her rage.

"Tell me, woman!" he snapped, and he moved his ink-worked hands as if he meant to throttle Niomi. He hesitated, his fingers grasping for her and then drew back. His retreat seemed more a gesture of annoyance than sympathy, as if he summoned tenuous inner resolve not to choke Niomi to death in his rage.

Not enough sport in strangling an old woman, Maelis thought, her anger increasing.

"I cannot," Niomi whispered. She looked deep into the darkness of the hood, peered into the face Maelis couldn't see. "Don't you understand? She is my grandchild, all the family I have."

He recoiled again, though whether moved by Niomi's words, or simply still considering her a nuisance, Maelis couldn't tell. Niomi hung her head and acted as though the intruder was no longer present. She waited bravely to die in silence rather than to speak Maelis's name or disclose her whereabouts.

"Very well," the man said. He balled his hands into tight fists, his posture rigid, his voice strained as if he spoke through gritted teeth. "I pray that she is worth it. May the gods have mercy on your soul."

With that sacrilegious petition and a final whirl of his vestments, he walked out and left Niomi tied to a chair in her burning home.

She's safe! Maelis rejoiced. I need only to free her and we will escape all this!

But no sooner had Maelis entertained that thought than another man entered Niomi's home. Like the first man, he sported tattooed hands, blackened robes, but he was slighter of build, shorter than his fellow. He strode straight to the chair where Niomi was bound, reached out, wrapped his hand around the old woman's neck and squeezed.

"Tell me," he growled.

No other words were necessary.

Niomi knew the information he wanted, but she would not give it. Her will did not waver and her body did not struggle as he crushed her throat. Her faded green eyes glared at her murderer until death closed them. Her body went limp and her head slumped down on her chest.

*No!* Maelis's heart cried out. *Not my grandmother!* She remained silent where she hid, unable to move, struggling to suppress the primal scream which threatened to break loose.

She could no longer watch; nor could she look away. She seethed in rage of depths unknown as this second cloaked figure ransacked the hut. A black, horrid hate wound its way into her heart and mind as he turned over furniture, shredded cushions with his dagger, knocked shelves off the walls. After a fruitless search, he kicked over an oil lantern and stormed out, without even a glance at the woman he'd killed.

The door, coated in licking tongues of flame, slammed shut and Maelis rushed to her grandmother's side. She knelt in front of that cursed chair and untied Niomi's hands. They were still warm and soft, as they had always been in life. Yet now they were motionless and gave no comfort. Maelis's eyes brimmed with tears as she laid her head in Niomi's lap, like she had done so many times as a child. Maelis kissed her grandmother's hand and her tears soaked into the simple dress the old woman wore.

"No more hiding," Maelis sobbed. "No more pain."

The blaze behind her mocked in crackled laughter.

Just then, a cry rang out in the streets, "Burn them all! Destroy the Witch's village!"

Maelis could see the murderer through the shattered window frame. He flung a lit torch against the side of their house, and the brittle wood and thatch immediately erupted in voracious flames. Ringed in fire, the man appeared inhuman, cloaked in darkness that eddied around him as he leapt astride his horse.

He spurred the steed, and shouted again, "Burn them all! The Talisman is not here!" He raised a whip and his hood fell back, revealing a young man no older than Maelis herself, his face, which might have once been handsome, now chiseled and made ugly with anger and hatred. The great horse turned, thundered away and took Niomi's murderer with it into the dusk.

Her own life was now in danger as the building burned down around her. The roof timbers groaned and gave way. The flames began to snap at Maelis as even her family's singular magick which had so long protected the hut dissolved in the heat. The only escape left to her now was Niomi's tunnel in the cellar leading out to the banks of the pond.

Maelis spun on her heel and ran toward the door to the cellar. The leg of an upturned chair caught her thigh, pitched her off balance and made her stumble. Burning beams crashed around her. Walls collapsed, and a shattered door jamb struck her arm and knocked her to the ground. Fire raged, devoured her home and every other. All around, the screams of the dying faded into the roars of growing fires. She rose on shaking limbs, forced herself to move again, so that her grandmother's sacrifice would not be in vain.

The blaze was nearly too much for Maelis, and her eyes felt raw from heat and smoke. She closed them out of instinct and fumbled blindly for the handle to the cellar door. The scorching metal of a latch singed her palm. Maelis turned it and tumbled against the hard dirt floor below. A rib cracked, her head struck the floor, and consciousness threatened to desert her.

Maelis coughed bloody spittle as she struggled to catch her breath there in the cool shadows. She struggled upright and scrambled her way up the slope and toward the far end, away from the stench of murder and toward the fresh air and wet smell of the healing mud beside Sunar's Pond.

Once through the tunnel and out the other side, Maelis stood alone; an open and easy target. But, her safety was not her concern. Her sudden loss, her impotent rage reigned.

Anger rose up like bitter bile in her throat. So much had changed, both within and without. Where once she knew joy, only sadness remained. Her jaw muscles clenched. She knotted her fist around the pouch in her hand. Her fingers curled so tightly that her knuckles whitened and her fingernails dug into the flesh of her palm. Blood welled up, soaked into the blue velvet, but Maelis didn't care. She couldn't. She could scarcely hold herself upright; her spirit besieged, her battered body threatened collapse. Only her will kept her moving, a will that spun with savage speed into a fury every bit as heated as the flames she'd only just escaped.

Maelis cocked her arm back, fist raised high. No prophecy could soothe her pain. *Nothing that this pouch could contain is worth so many lives*, she thought.

She inhaled a deep breath and readied herself to heave the bag and its culprit contents. Then, her grandmother's face rose in her mind—her grandmother holding the very pouch she held, and telling Maelis to take it and hide. Maelis had followed Niomi's directions, and in doing so witnessed her grandmother's murder. *She died to protect me*, Maelis mourned. *My grandmother died so that I might live to harness the power this Talisman controls*.

That truth struck her brutally, with a nearly physical force.

Her grandmother, the only family that she had ever known, had died to protect Maelis from the armies of Lord Nemenon. The entire village had shared Niomi's fate. The fires, meant for Maelis, had taken them all while she herself remained unscathed. The fires, meant for her, had taken them all. Her furious resolve failed, trickling away like the rivulets and streams feeding the pond by which she stood. She fell to her knees in the mud. Memories, so fresh and painful, deluged her mind.

"They were peaceful!" Maelis cried into the night air. She collapsed to her knees, tears blinding her vision, heartache blinding all else.

In silence Maelis vowed that she would avenge Niomi's death. The cloaked men would feel her wrath. In the pouch hidden close to her

breast was the magick talisman to destroy them all. Maelis would discover its contents and harness its powers.

*I will bring retribution.*

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