

LADY SILVER

Warlock Chronicles, Book I



BOBBIE R. BYRD

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For Thomas:

You are proof that miracles happen.

I thank God you happened to me.

Love you eternally.

A FEW THOUGHTS FROM YOUR HUMBLE AUTHOR:

This has been a long time coming. A long road traveled, full of bumps, weird turns, potholes from hell, and exclamations of, "Where the shit am I?" on more than one occasion. But when I look at the finished product presented here, I realize it was worth the time, the effort, and the cussing and discussing.

When I think of what I want to say here, my mind races over so many names, memories, and experiences that I feel I want to mention and should mention. But that would mean writing another entire volume's worth of my ramblings, and no one wants to get bogged down in the quagmire that is my mind on most days.

So, I'll keep it short and sweet. First, to my sister Jeannie K. Holmes, author of the Blood Law novels, your passion for all things literary is contagious, and for that, I am eternally grateful. Your imagination knows no boundaries, your wit and sarcasm are pure perfections, and I firmly believe with every ounce of my being that you will one day get a "bestie hug" from Melkor. To Mary Lofton, my sister who will always be a year older than me, I have to thank you for your support and encouragement. You read my unpolished work and gave me the feedback I desperately needed. I counted on you and you came through with flying colors. You are the best!

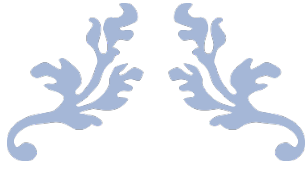
To brother Joe Byrd, I thank you for your wackiness that keeps me smiling, and for hiring my son so he's out of my hair all day at work. Huge help! You are vicious with a hammer but you sure know how to smoke a pork butt. Love you dearly, baby brother. And brother Jim Byrd, what can I say? You are one of a kind (thank God!) and I would not trade you for the universe on a gold platter. You've always been a little light shining in the darkness that gives me a direction when things seem lost.

Which brings me to my beloved sister Carolyn Williams. You had to leave this world way too soon but you didn't go down without a courageous fight. You trusted me with your life and death, and I hope you garnered some degree of peace knowing I had your back all the way. I miss you dearly, I love you endlessly, and as I told you the last time I saw you, I will find you again. So get ready, Big Sis. You ain't seen the last of me yet!

Finally, I want to thank my fellow writers who helped me so much through this process. You know who you are, and you guys ROCK!

And....that's enough of my ramblings. Go read my book and enjoy!

Bobbie R. Byrd



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PROLOGUE

“Pause comms.” Syndria massaged her temples. Dealing with anyone on the black market was stressful, but negotiating with Perlow Thol was a singular form of torture in itself. A glance at the chronometer on her data tile told her she’d been at it now for almost an hour. The tile’s flickering screen only aggravated her headache. She looked over the displayed test results, then turned back to her comm console. “Resume comms.”

Settling back in her chair, she propped her feet on the desk. “Read me the stats on each bonded realm grouping, and include the declination percentages.”

A man’s voice against a background of soft, hissing static sounded from the comms link. “You just want the averages, not the numbers on each warlock?”

“Right.”

“Okay. Here’s what we have in stock: three Elemental warlocks, four Corporeals, four Phantos, and three Astrals. There are two females of each type; the rest are males.”

Syndria laughed. “What else would they be?”

“Ha, ha. Real funny. You done?”

She frowned. “You have no sense of humor, Perlow.”

“I’m a slaver, not a comedian.”

“Obviously. Get on with it.”

He cleared his throat. “The three reds—the Elementals—can all manifest in the four fundamentals: fire, air, water, and earth. Average declination is uniform in each and steady at fifteen percent when exposed to ANI stimulation.”

“Fifteen percent is acceptable. We’ll take them. Next?”

“The greens are a bit stronger. That’s somewhat surprising, them being Corporeals. But their ability to manipulate physical matter declined by only twelve percent on average when tested.”

“Good. Give me those, too.”

“The Phantos warlocks didn’t fare as well. This set of yellows are not up to the usual standard; hence the reduced price I agreed on. They held their own in mind control, illusion, and dream intervention. But they dropped by twenty-one percent in psychometry and healing. That brought their average declination to seventeen percent on ANI stimulation.”

She drummed her fingers on the chair’s armrest. “What about the blues?”

“The Astral warlocks performed about where I expected they would. We tested them on transmutation, short-range teleportation, energy flow disruption, and telekinesis. They were all consistent and tested out at a fourteen percent declination.”

Syndria swung her legs off the desk and sat up. “Okay, Perlow. I’m not thrilled with the Phantos warlocks you’re offering, but I’ll take them at the reduced price. Give me the others, too. Make sure they’re wearing inhibitors before you deliver them.”

“Deliver to where?”

“The CF1703 facility. I’ll make certain your payment transfers in the morning.”

“I’ll deliver as soon as the payment clears,” he said. “As always, a pleasure doing business with you. Will you

need any more? Or perhaps I can interest you in some human specimens?”

“Don’t need humans, Perlow. Warlocks only. Any type—red, blue, green, or yellow. The color of their aura doesn’t matter. Just make sure they can channel the magic from their bonded aetheric realm.”

“Perlow Thol deals only in the best. You know that. Give my regards to your High Council friends. I’m heading back to the *Firedrake*. Call me when you need more warlocks. Until then. Thol out.” He broke the commlink.

Syndria shut down her comm console before heading for the door. It was nearing time for the evening meal, and she didn’t want to be late. At the CF1703 prison facility, the warlock chef was a convicted multiple murderer but nothing short of a wizard in the kitchen.

With the transaction completed, she could put thoughts of Perlow Thol and his black-market slaving operation out of her mind, at least for a few weeks. That would go a long way toward relieving her current headache.

She’d have time to concentrate on her actual work, the task set for her by the One, the Being, the God of Rycappa. Nothing could prevent her from fulfilling the will of her god. Her name would echo in reverence through the halls of the House of Rael for her accomplishments and unwavering devotion.

“We shall die that We may live.” Mumbling her religious mantra, she headed for the mess hall.

CHAPTER 1

She lay naked on a rough-hewn stone table, shackles encircling her wrists and ankles. Her pulse thundered. Tubes jammed through her nostrils into her trachea forced air into her lungs, painfully swelling her chest. The hoses paralyzed her vocal cords, preventing her from screaming.

My name is Lelisa...My mate is Faarsan...My chi—oh, shit! What are they doing to me?

The black market raiders slapped an inhibitor collar around her neck immediately after they broke down the door of her home. So quick—no time to react. Rifle fire...screaming...her family...blood on the walls...

My child is Lilith...My mate is Faarsan...LeLisa is my—what's that noise? Is someone there? Help me!

She couldn't see—they'd sealed her eyelids using a laser cautery. Tubes of various sizes invaded her body to drain away waste.

My mate is Faarsan...My child is Lilith... Where's my baby? Lilith! Please, is someone there? Electrical humming. Moving closer. *What is that? What's that noise?*

Cold, metal-smooth hands grabbed each side of her shaven head, holding her immobile. The humming rose to a screeching pitch. The metallic, seared-meat smell of burning flesh billowed around her. *A laser scalpel. My forehead.*

Pain burned through her head; panic raced through her veins. Muscles contracted, she balled her fists, nails

cutting into her palms until blood dripped to the stone beneath. Her body reflexively tried to thrash, to dodge the cutting beam of the scalpel, but the restraints on her arms and legs wouldn't budge.

Please...stop!

The scalpel circled the dome of her skull, slicing through skin, muscle, and bone. Blood trickled from her forehead, ran into the well of her closed eyelids, the warm liquid cooling, coagulating to mat her lashes.

Something wriggled around inside her skull like maggots through a rotting carcass. Panic gripped her; the horror petrified her. She teetered on the edge of consciousness. *My magic...use my magic.*

The inhibitor collar around her neck denied her access to the magic native to her warlock blood. The current of aetheric energy was there, waiting for her command, but she couldn't touch it.

A mechanical voice. Dispassionate. "Initiate cellular integration."

Pain. Burning, searing pain.

* * *

Glyndra squinted against the sun's unrelenting rays scorching down on Endara VI. This side of the planet was currently in its solar phase. Derella's Rapture, the only spaceport on the globe, sweltered beneath twenty-seven hours of unyielding sunlight. When darkness finally came, it would rule the city for the same number of hours.

Derella's Rapture enjoyed its reputation as a haven for the lawless and illegitimate; everything and everyone within the city had a price. Like the other buildings in town, the ramshackle bar on the corner looked neglected. The town's few permanent residents weren't interested in aesthetics; as long as it functioned, the appearance didn't matter.

Glyndra stepped from the searing heat into the bar's cool gloom. She removed her goggles, pulling more of her unruly gray hair from its ponytail. Endara VI's notoriously clingy dust hadn't spared her—it clung to the age lines at her eyes, around her mouth, and across her forehead. Not one to dwell on vanity, she didn't bother brushing the dust away, proud to display the trophies of her almost one hundred years of life.

The packed room held an assortment of patrons—mercenaries, bounty hunters, probably more than one assassin, female and male prostitutes, gamblers, slavers quibbling over the price for a young girl, two who were probably military deserters—the usual crowd.

Low creaks and groans from the wall-mounted cooling units mingled with the background noise of hushed, secretive conversations.

The Worm Hole, ill-kept and violent, was a favorite meeting place for those looking for trouble or hoping to cause it. Regulars indulged in all manner of decadent pleasure and illicit commerce. Though Glyndra saw nothing considered illegal in the eyes of the local authorities, she was no fan of what passed for normal in Derella's Rapture.

The few patrons who noticed her arrival returned to their drinks as she removed her jacket and tied the sleeves around her waist, leaving the military insignia on the cuffs in full view. That was usually enough to ensure her safety, for a short while, at least.

When her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she approached an isolated table near the back wall.

"Lookin' mighty tasty, Commander," Denosto said when she took a seat across from him.

She glanced at the four empty flagons. *He's been busy.*

A lecherous smile creased Denosto's face. "My current state of near-fatal dehydration has my eyesight

fading, but it would take more than that to dull your radiant beauty." Ample jowls quivered under his sparse and graying beard, and an audible wheeze accompanied each breath. His bulk spilled over the sides of the straight-back chair that creaked in protest with each movement. The sparkle in his dark brown eyes, however, belied his degraded physical state. He was not a man to underestimate.

"Put a lid on it, De. I don't have much time. The admiral expects his shuttle back within the hour. What've you got for me?"

He slumped back in his seat. "Too good to share one drink with me? It ain't like a work-weary warlock comes across a lot of employment opportunities around here."

She smirked. "Work-weary, my ass. If you wouldn't steal from everyone who hired you, you might find more jobs."

"Hell, a man's got to make a decent living. Can't do that working a legit job."

"Tell you what. Give me something worth my coming to this hell hole, and I'll see you get your drink."

He clapped his hands and laughed. "Now, that's the Glyndra I know and love."

She smiled. "So, what've you got?"

He reached into his shirt pocket, pulled out an antiquated storage chip, and slid it across to her.

She examined it closely. "Looks to be in decent shape, but that doesn't mean it's readable."

"Oh, it's readable. You got my word on that."

Glyndra nodded toward a male prostitute. "Your word and thirty Imperial bronzes will get me an hour with that guy."

Denosto clutched the center of his chest. "You wound me, dear lady! If I didn't know better, I'd think you actually doubted my word."

"I *do* doubt your word, and you know it. So, cut the crap and tell me what's on this chip."

"I don't know."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Then how do you know it's readable, or it'll interest me?"

"It's readable. *I* just can't read it." A sly grin oozed across his face. "It's written in pre-Cataclysm warlock."

Her fingers closed around the chip. "You'd better not be shitting me."

"I'm for-truthing you. The writing's so old, I can't read it. And I couldn't find no warlock who could."

"How many did you show it to?"

"Just a couple degenerates I sorta trust."

She pocketed the chip and tossed him a silver Imperial coin. "That should keep your thirst quenched until the lunar phase starts."

He laughed and raked the coin from the table. "Yes, ma'am, Commander Glyndra. That'll do nicely."

She stood and untied her sleeves from her waist. "You know how to find me if you come across anything else. You know what I'm looking for."

"Yep, sure do."

He called for another flagon while she donned her jacket and headed out the door.

* * *

Admiral Devon Bastion strode through the corridor of the Imperial star-runner, his solid footfalls signaling to those ahead to make a path. For those not heeding the sound, a simple glance at the towering admiral was enough to move them aside. At two meters in height, Bastion stood shoulders-and-head above most men. His coal-black hair and beard framed his rugged face, and the gaze from his steel-gray eyes could wither the soul of anyone unfortunate enough to evoke his anger.

The two Imperial guards outside the emperor's quarters snapped to attention at the admiral's approach. The metal doors slid open as the ranking guard stepped aside and said, "He's expecting you, Admiral."

Bastion's sword slapped against his thigh as he crossed the room. The polished marble floor shone under the overhead lights and reflected on the study's sleek curved metal walls. The meta-glass outer wall looked over Endara VI spinning lazily on its axis.

The planet was essentially a giant dust bowl, with only one significant body of water near the northern pole. Scattered shallow lakes and muddy oases pock-marked the vast stretches of desert lands. Though bone dry on the surface, it harbored vast underground aquifers that kept the indigenous population from dehydrating. Hydroponics and low-moisture livestock kept food on the table—most of the time, at least.

Bastion made a perfunctory bow to Emperor Ahlaric, then stood, impassive, the wooden desk between them. The engines of the emperor's star runner, the *Monarch*, droned with a rhythm that marked the seconds ticking away.

Ahlaric glared at the admiral while fidgeting with a small vial. Inside, a black powder sucked in the light around it.

Bastion cleared his throat. "Your Majesty summoned me?"

Ahlaric dipped a bony finger into the vial and withdrew it covered in powder. He massaged it into the stained patch of skin on the inside of his wrist and then offered the admiral the vial. "Will you join me, Admiral?"

Bastion remained stolid. "I'm on duty."

"*I'm on duty*," the emperor mocked in a high-pitched whine. "Oh, for fuck's sake! You're like a goddamned robot. Relax now and then. You'll live longer."

Bastion waited stoically for the emperor to explain why he'd summoned the admiral so urgently to Endara VI. The emperor's eyes fluttered closed, and his face flushed. He leaned his head back and drew a slow, deep breath—his usual reaction to a dose of Tranquil Dark. When he opened his eyes, dilated pupils almost obscured his green irises.

"I've made my decision regarding the Lumorta system," Ahlaric said. "I've recalled our diplomats and negotiators. Those Lumortan traitors have defied me for the last time. The official decree is being drafted and will be forwarded to you once vetted. As the capital planet in the system, Myra will bear the brunt of the punishment. You will purge all cities with a population of half a million or more."

Bastion's hand tightened on the pommel of his sword. "That will eliminate at least half of Myra's population."

"Exactly. Survivors will think long and hard before they turn a treasonous hand against the crown again."

"I'll need to mobilize an attack force if you want simultaneous attacks on all cities. The *Maelstrom* alone would have to purge by sector. That would take longer."

"It's tempting to blow the bastards to hell all at once." Ahlaric applied another dose of Tranquil Dark to his wrist. "But the lesson will linger if the attack takes time. You and the *Maelstrom* can handle it alone."

"If Your Majesty will indulge, has the High Council approved—"

The emperor pounded a fist on the desk. "I will *not* have your impudence, Bastion. *I* am Emperor, *not* the High Council. You answer to *me*. Get that through your head, or I'll have you dragged out and flogged."

Bastion fixed dispassionately on the emperor's gaze.

Ahlaric ran a trembling hand through his thinning brown hair. His squat, emaciated frame hid beneath pale,

dry skin marred by a crepe-like texture that looked like it should crackle when he moved. "There is one more thing. You'll take Chancellor Lasko with you."

"Chancellor Lasko is not a member of my crew."

The emperor grinned. "He is now. As of today, he is my liaison to the *Maelstrom*."

"Will there be any other changes to my crew?"

"Not at the moment. I've concluded my business here at Endara VI. We'll break orbit in a few hours and return to Kallagor. I'll be at the palace in Mithara City when you have something to report. Signal me there, but make certain it's not at some *ungodly* hour of the night. Now get the fuck out of my sight."

Bastion bowed, then strode from the room.

Guards moved out of his way as he hurried to the shuttle bay. He rushed up the ramp and took a seat next to Glyndra.

"How's our boy today?" she asked.

"Take us back to the *Maelstrom*," he instructed the pilot, then turned to her. "Worse each time I meet with him."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure, but it'll have to happen before long. I don't know if the empire can survive his rule much longer."

She settled into her seat and wrapped an arm around his as the shuttle cleared the *Monarch's* docking bay.

"Emperor Ahlaric won't sit on the throne forever. You'll make certain the empire and her peoples survive until then."

"You're an eternal optimist, Glyndra." He tilted his head back and closed his eyes. "I would really enjoy killing the bastard."

CHAPTER 2

Bryanna D’Isaac drifted in the aetheric stream like algae in the warm waters of the Lastern Sea on Eramoor, her homeworld. This was her sanctuary—she opened a gateway into this extradimensional stream of energy whenever the stress of life closed in. Every warlock’s birthright allowed him or her to channel the power of the Flow. That set her race apart from humans and formed the basis of historical animosity between the sister races.

Silver luminescence surrounded her in an undulating, spectral tube with veins of red, blue, green, and yellow energy woven through it. This was her bonded realm, the source of her magic. Floating in the current relaxed her—most of the time—except when *it* called to her across the Flow’s threads. For the past ten years, since she first discovered how to open a gateway at age fifteen, she’d endured the strangeness of this call that reached out to her.

Not an actual voice—more like a jolt of electricity, carrying an echo of emotions with it. Terror, loneliness, desperation, despair—all coursed through her when she sensed its cry.

“Tell me where you are,” she whispered. The aetheric stream danced over her like soft alabanda fleece dragging across her skin. “I feel you, but I can’t find you.”

The phantom call was more intense and insistent now—escalating desperation permeated it. Yet, no answer came when she responded. It never had.

*Someone—or something—*needed her to find it—that’s all she knew for certain.

The customary emptiness settled over her—another call unanswered. Her aura seeped out as she focused the magic. The silver light pulsed in tandem with her heartbeat as she opened a gateway back to the physical world. Like an aperture telescoping open, the oval portal began as a pinpoint flash of light, which expanded to an opening large enough for a person to walk through. Shimmering, sparkling, blue-white bolts of electricity danced around the edges of the passageway.

The *Wolverine* command cabin appeared through the portal where T’Laan, her lifelong companion and only friend, sat at the navigation console.

“Any luck, kid?” T’Laan asked—his usual question when she returned from the Flow.

The gateway telescoped closed and faded, and her silver aura dissipated as she sank into the command chair. The *Wolverine*’s usual clanking and moaning reduced to background noise.

“Nothing.” She slumped and threw a leg over the chair arm. “No response, no sign it heard me or even knew I was in the Flow.” She picked up her computer tile and logged this latest attempt. *One more failed effort to add to the ten years’ worth I’ve already logged.*

When finished, she let the tile slide to her lap and focused on T’Laan managing the aging controls. Watching the workings of the android’s body fascinated her. Plasticon gelform mimicked human contours and proportions over the metallic skeleton. The gelform was semi-translucent with a natural olive tint. The sleeveless shirt he wore did little to obscure the hypnotic glimmering of the lights racing around under his skin. His electro-

plasma network generated blue pinpoints of light, like fireflies floating up and down his spine and out to his extremities. The faint glow of his central processor occasionally shone through the black, hair-like sensor filaments on his head.

“Picking up a sleeper drone going mobile,” he said. “Looks like we nicked the perimeter of its scan net.”

“Shit!” Her computer tile clattered to the floor as she leaped to her feet. The military drones remained dormant in open space until something registered on their scan nets. Then, like a spider reacting to a fly in its web, the sleeper drone sprang into action. “Can we knock it out?”

“Unsure. I can’t locate its operational sub-band. We really need a sensor upgrade.”

She leaned over the display, watching closely. “If we could afford it, we’d get one. That drone makes it out of the Well, it’ll report a quarantine breach, and there’ll be military vessels crawling all over this sector. Can we catch it before it leaves?”

“It’s possible. I say we go for it.”

“I agree. Put the forward view on the vidscreen.”

She retook the command chair. T’Laan punched the runner into max drive, and the *Wolverine* shuddered.

* * *

Brow furrowed, hand riding his sword’s pommel, Admiral Bastion strode the corridor of the battlecruiser *Maelstrom* toward the lift. He barely acknowledged the men and women he passed on his way. His crew had proven their loyalty over the five years he’d commanded the Imperial flagship. They trusted his judgment and instincts, which had served him well as he’d risen rapidly up the ranks. But now, those instincts told him to proceed with caution.

Bastion stepped out of the lift. His first officer, Commander Rhola, announced, "Attend the deck." The crew snapped to attention.

"Resume." Bastion sat in his command chair.
"Report, Mr. Rhola."

Rhola stood beside Bastion. The forward vidscreen showed a perimeter defense station, one of hundreds of thousands linked together like a string of pearls to mark Well space boundaries. "The perimeter station's security android reports no unusual activity in this sector before the sleeper drone lit up."

"What triggered the drone?"

"Unknown. The signal is weak but directly on course for this defense station. Interference from Well space is preventing it from remotely relaying its data. We can't access it until it clears the Well. ETA ten minutes."

"Odd," Bastion said. "A sleeper drone hasn't gone active in this sector in over a year. We'll wait, find out what set it off. Helm, hold position."

"Aye. Holding position."

* * *

"Got a lock on it yet?" Bryanna asked.

"Not yet," T'Laan replied. "It's activated evasive protocols. The nav computer can't compensate quickly enough. I'm manually adjusting course heading."

Bryanna held the arms of the command chair as the *Wolverine* pitched violently. She grunted when the ship jerked in the opposite direction and slammed her ribs against the armrest. "Our stabilizers are misaligned again. I'm getting pounded back here."

"I can't set weapons lock. We should back off."

"Line up on the drone and fire the cannons in a spread pattern. Don't wait for a weapon lock."

"We're almost on the border of Imperial space."

Bryanna stood and braced herself against the chair's arm. "Keep going. That drone will get us arrested for quarantine violation. I'm not ready for an Imperial jail cell. You shoot the damn thing, and I'll punch us through the security grid."

She closed her eyes. Adrenaline surged into her bloodstream as her silver aura blazed outward. "I can do this," she whispered.

Maintaining a shield around the *Wolverine* was easy enough. But packing that shield with enough energy to punch a hole through a military defense grid was another matter. She risked loss of control over the magic—her greatest fear.

T'Laan fired a rapid salvo from the forward cannons. The drone dodged, but T'Laan jerked the *Wolverine* hard in pursuit. He lined up on the drone's trail again, ready to fire another round. "Perimeter defense station coming into sensor range. Impact with defense grid in three minutes."

"I'm ready. Take out the drone!"

He fired a widespread, repetitive cannon burst. The *Wolverine* creaked and shuddered with each barrage.

* * *

"Admiral, we've detected pulse cannon fire inside the Well," Commander Rhola said. "The sleeper drone is under attack."

"Who's firing on the drone?" Bastion asked.

"Looks like a star-runner, one of the older class models. It isn't squawking ID."

"Have they slowed for the defense grid?"

"No, sir. They've accelerated and maintained fire."

Bastion sat forward, gaze fixed on the vidscreen. The only ones likely to fire on an Imperial drone were Well

raiders, black market runners, or slavers—none of which he dealt with amicably.

“Stage Three alert. Helm, move to intercept. Notify the perimeter station security android to prep a grid window on my order. Standby forward guns and get an Encasing Particle Snare ready.”

“Spooling up EP-snare, aye,” Rhola said.

* * *

Bryanna shook her head, flinging away the trickle of sweat that rolled down the side of her face. The magic flooded through her as her aura expanded to fill the cabin. “Hurry up, T’Laan!”

He fired again. “When I give the word, you’re up.”

The explosion of the drone lit up the vidscreen.

T’Laan pumped a fist. “Ha-ha! Nailed it!”

Straining to contain the magic as the *Wolverine* closed in on the defense grid, Bryanna yelled, “T’Laan!”

“Okay, kid. This is going to be close. On my mark...three...two...one...mark.”

Bryanna screamed and unleashed the energy. A burst of radiant light engulfed the *Wolverine* as silver lightning crawled over its surface.

The *Wolverine* slammed into the defense grid. The impact burned through the energy network with explosive bursts of blue-white lightning that coursed over a cloud of smoky silver light. A roar like a tornado filled the cabin. The sting of ozone and the crackle of electricity exploded from the ship’s consoles.

One by one, the ship’s control stations sparked and smoked.

“We’re through,” T’Laan shouted above the din.

“Pull it back, kid!”

Bryanna clenched her fists, gritted her teeth, and trembled as she strained to contain the power surging through her. She focused on reining back the magic.

T'Laan shouted over the roar. "Shut it down, kid. We're through the grid into empire territory, but we're not alone."

Bryanna slumped into the command chair as the last of her aura faded. She closed her eyes against a wave of vertigo.

"—powering up their EP-snare and hailing us," T'Laan said.

"Who? Who's out there?"

"It looks like a battlecruiser. A big one."

She opened her eyes and straightened. An Imperial battlecruiser sat off their port side. She recognized the class from the lessons T'Laan had taught her about military ships. *Know your enemy.*

The octagon-shaped cylinder core had twelve expansive hexagonal rings connected to it with thick spokes. Each of the bands housed between twenty to thirty levels. Docking bays and pod launch tubes occupied each end of the cylinder.

It dwarfed the *Wolverine*.

"Talk to them. I can't yet." Bryanna squinted against the cabin lights.

Over his shoulder, T'Laan asked, "You okay, kid?"

"I'm getting there."

A voice crackled over the audio system.

"Unidentified vessel, this is the Imperial battlecruiser *Maelstrom*. Identify yourself and provide travel authorization."

T'Laan's hands froze over his console.

Bryanna's breath caught in her throat. "*Maelstrom*? Did he say *Maelstrom*?"

"That's Admiral Bastion's ship."

Her face blanched. “We can punch back through the grid to Well space. He probably won’t follow us there—”

“It’s too late to run. We’d be space debris before we even turned around. Let me talk to them. Maybe I can bluff us out of this.”

She nodded, her mouth suddenly desert dry. Every warlock knew Admiral Devon Bastion’s reputation. Under his command, the military enforced the emperor’s decree forbidding the use of magic. Emperor Ahlaric blamed warlocks for the death of Empress Elyahna ten years ago, though no one faced charges for the crime. That was his excuse, anyway. Most saw it more as a manifestation of much deeper-seated hatred.

It was common knowledge Bastion tolerated no deviation from that law. A warlock either wore a permanent inhibitor collar that blocked the connection to the Flow or consented to a Tranquil Dark infuser implant. The drug effectively changed a warlock into a barely functional zombie.

I can’t do either of those. I won’t.

“*Maelstrom*, this is the cargo vessel *Wolverine*. Navigation android T’Laan speaking.” His voice was calm, non-confrontational. “We are traveling on a commerce transport authorization via the Merchant’s Guild of the Triad. Our destination is Gaalyrad, the fifth planet in the Vakora system.”

“Prepare for boarding and inspection, *Wolverine*,” the voice instructed.

Bryanna met T’Laan’s gaze. “What do we do, T’Laan? I can’t think—”

“Breathe, kiddo.” He held out a hand to her. “I’ll take care of this. Our best play is to sell them bullshit and hope they buy it.”

She grasped his hand, the paralyzing grip of her fear ebbing. He’d always taken care of her, protected her, even from herself. She smiled. “I’m okay.”

He squeezed her hand, then faced the comm console. “*Maelstrom*, this is *Wolverine*. We are traveling under the legitimate authorization from our Guild. We will gladly supply you with our travel permits. However, under the Empire’s trade agreement with the Triad Merchant Guild, we are not required to submit to search without legal representation from the Barrister Guild in attendance. I apologize for the inconvenience and will contact the Guild immediately to expedite their dispatching of a certified Barrister to our location.”

A momentary pause, then another voice came over the audio link. “*Wolverine*, prepare for towing. You are being detained.”

A chill ran up Bryanna's spine.

“So much for bullshit,” T’Laan mumbled as the blue EP-snare beam lit up the external vidscreen. “Looks like we go to Plan B.”

Bryanna’s voice was a hoarse whisper. “We have a Plan B?”

* * *

“Triad Merchant Guild confirms the runner’s registration, Admiral,” the comms crewman reported. “Vessel is being towed to holding Bay Twelve. Airlock clear in five minutes.”

“Have a security detail meet me there, and bring an inhibitor collar.” Bastion crossed to the lift. “Commander Rhola, you have the bridge.”

Bastion tensed as the lift door closed. He replayed the image in his mind of the star-runner, electrical fingers dancing through a silver glow over its surface. His instincts told him there was something quite interesting on the *Wolverine*.

His security detail waited at the holding bay door, along with Chancellor Lasko.

Bastion scowled at Lasko. “Why are you here, Chancellor? This doesn’t concern you.”

Chancellor Lasko, thirty centimeters shorter than Bastion, stepped back and straightened his jacket over his paunchy body. He smoothed his sparse blond hair with chubby fingers, and his face flushed. “I’m merely here to observe. In my capacity as the emperor’s liaison, I am His Majesty’s eyes—”

Bastion looked over Lasko’s head to his security team. “Defensive actions only. I want the occupants of that vessel separated and isolated for my interrogation. Once we have them secured, I want a thorough search of their ship.”

With a crisp salute, the security leader replied, “Yes, Admiral.”

“Where’s the inhibitor collar?”

“Here, sir.” A security man handed it to Bastion.

“If anyone needs interrogating,” Lasko said, “I insist on being present. You don’t seem to understand my function here. You can’t—”

Bastion grabbed Lasko’s shoulder, his fingers blanching white as they dug in. “Let me make this clear. Get in my way, or interfere with my men in any way, and I’ll personally toss you out an airlock. Clear?”

When the admiral released him, Lasko staggered back, rubbing his shoulder. “Yes, Admiral. Clear. Absolutely.”

“Let’s go.” Bastion punched in the door’s release code.

The *Wolverine* sat in the center of the holding bay.

* * *

Bryanna peeked through the cargo hatch viewport.

“They’re here.”

A towering, commanding man cut through the formation of guards as they broke to surround the ship. His

dark, imposing presence captivated her attention—the black, shoulder-length hair and trimmed beard, bronzed skin, a deep-set scowl frozen on his face, the coldness of his eyes. Muscles rippled beneath his shirt and pants as he moved. A dagger hilt stuck out of his boot and caught the light. But it was the sword strapped to his side and the neural-electrical disruptor pistol resting on his hip that riveted her.

Bryanna's hands trembled as she hugged herself and shivered. "They have NED pistols and rifles ... and Bastion has his sword."

"Let me do the talking," T'Laan said. "Stay behind me and try not to draw attention to yourself."

"I hope we know what we're doing."

"So do I."

T'Laan opened the hatch door that extended out and down to form a ramp. He stepped out and stopped at the bottom. Bryanna followed, coming to stand behind him.

"Excuse me, sir," he said to the approaching admiral. "May I ask who is in charge?"

"I am." Bastion motioned for two of his men to go up the ramp. They brushed past Bryanna and stood between her and the *Wolverine*.

"Greetings." T'Laan smiled. "May I ask why we're being detained? We're traveling under a Triad authorization for interstellar commerce, in accordance with the Triad's merchant contract with the empire. We would be pleased to produce authenticating documentation to that effect if you so desire."

The admiral stared past T'Laan at Bryanna. "I am Admiral Devon Bastion, commander of the *Maelstrom*. I'm detaining you for violating Imperial Well quarantine and for the destruction of Imperial property, specifically a sleeper drone."

As Bastion started up the ramp, T'Laan blocked his path. "Hold on. We are *civilians*. You can't detain us on a military vessel."

Bastion arched an eyebrow. "I *am* detaining you, android. What *condition* you're in during that detention is up to you."

"Don't you dare touch him!" Bryanna put herself between them. "When did the empire start harassing merchant civilians? I'm sure you've heard of the transport contract with the Triad Merchant Guild. It's been in effect for nearly a hundred years."

Hands on hips and glaring at the admiral, she fought a growing unease as his eyes moved over her body. She held his gaze when he returned it to her face.

"A contractual merchant agreement doesn't absolve your culpability in the destruction of the drone, nor does it negate the quarantine order," Bastion said. "You violated Well space and you took out the drone. That's sufficient grounds for your detention."

"A navigation error on my part landed us in Well space," T'Laan said. "Glitch in my system."

Bastion glanced at him. "A navigation error didn't take out a sleeper drone."

"The drone was an accident—a misfire of an old missile," Bryanna said. "We entered Well space by mistake and were trying to get out. That's all. Search the ship if you like. We have nothing to hide."

"I doubt that. Guards."

Bryanna searched his steel-gray eyes. *He knows.*

She wheeled as the guard moved up behind her. Magic surged inside her, like a jolt of electricity, feeding off her fear and anger. "No, no, no! Not now," she whispered.

"Bryanna!" T'Laan's shout reverberated through a tunnel as a silver light engulfed her in a brilliant cocoon. It

undulated around her in a gossamer cloud with pinpoint pulses of glittering platinum.

She cried out when a bolt of energy flashed from her aura and recoiled as it struck a guard. It engulfed him in a web of lightning, then settled on the NED-rifle in his hands. The weapon disintegrated in an instant, and the guard staggered back, crying out. The stench of seared flesh assailed her.

Bryanna whirled away, her stomach heaving, when her jaw exploded with pain. The taste of blood filled her mouth, and her head spun. Knocked off her feet, she landed squarely on her back. Bastion stood over her, his sword centimeters from her throat. Blood marred the knuckles of his other hand.

His eyes were as cold as the depths of space. “Power down, my lady, or I *will* kill you.”

Her jaw throbbed, and she licked the blood from her split lip. She closed her eyes and forced her aura to recede.

Bastion stepped back. T’Laan hurried to Bryanna and helped her to her feet. She glowered at the admiral and spat blood as tears of pain and anger rolled down her cheeks.

Chancellor Lasko ran up beside the admiral. “Did you see what she did? I’ve never seen an aura like that. She’s a *warlock* and not restrained! That’s treason. I stand as a witness against her. You must neutralize her, Admiral Bastion.”

Lasko slinked back under threat inherent in the admiral’s cold stare.

Bastion pulled the inhibitor collar from his belt and faced Bryanna. “Put this on.”

T’Laan pushed Bryanna behind him. “That’s not necessary, Admiral. She won’t—”

Bastion leveled the tip of his sword against T’Laan’s forehead. The guards pointed their NED-rifles at the android. “She *will* wear an inhibitor collar.”

Bryanna grabbed Bastion's arm. "No! Don't hurt him." She tried, to no avail, to pull his sword arm away from T'Laan.

He extended the collar to her. "Put it on. *Now.*"

"Let T'Laan go. Give him back the *Wolverine* and let him go."

Bastion frowned. "This is not a negotiation. No collar and I rip out the android's central core processor and throw its chassis out with the other refuse."

T'Laan touched her arm. "Bryanna, don't—"

"Make your decision, my lady," Bastion said. "You *will* wear the collar, regardless of your android's fate."

Bryanna's hands trembled as she took the collar from Bastion. She wrapped it around her neck, then tugged her silver hair from under it. She hesitated. "Please, don't make me wear this."

He pressed his blade harder against T'Laan's forehead, piercing his plasticon skin. "Decide."

"You son of a bitch." She snapped the collar closed. The segmented metal contracted like a snare. She winced as the electrode pierced the skin over her spine.

Bastion sheathed his sword and took a step forward, towering over her. "You may feel some side effects while the collar syncs to your nervous system."

"You saw my shield surround the *Wolverine*. That's how you knew."

"Yes." Bastion clutched her arm and drew her close. He told the guards, "Take the android to the brig. If it gives you any trouble, throw it out an airlock."

Bryanna reached for T'Laan. "No. Let me go with—"

A wave of vertigo crashed over her, and she slumped against the admiral. He gathered her up in his arms and followed the guards to the airlock.

Her head lolled against his chest. She closed her eyes and swallowed against growing nausea. “You will not harm him.”

“That, my lady, is entirely up to you.”

CHAPTER 3

Something moved in the Flow: an elusive phantasm. LeLisa had felt it before. The *noesha*—the Prime—warlocks called it. When *noesha* used magic, warlocks across all aetheric realms recognized it. Still, no one knew its origin or identity.

Frantic, the tortured warlock tried to force her presence into the Flow. *Noesha! I'm here. Please, someone help me.*

The clang of metal on stone: an android. Coming closer. “Surge in neural activity. Countering.”

Another android, behind her head. “Cascade event detected. Adjusting ANI buffer threshold to compensate.”

The things digging into her head pulsed, sending searing fingers of agony down her spine.

Savage, withering pain.

* * *

There were days when being the Head Archivist on the *Maelstrom* was every bit the dream life Glyndra thought it'd be. The massive Imperial flagship boasted crew and equipment for much more than military operations. Exploration, diplomatic ventures, and scientific discovery were all part of its mission.

Though she'd trained in archaeology, ancient artifacts and history remained her passions. That's why

she'd been so excited about the chip from Denosto. Precataclysm artifacts especially fascinated her.

Glyndra drummed her fingers on the desk and glanced at the archaic storage chip suspended in the extraction globe. "Dammit, will you hurry up?"

She loved her job, but days such as this were not her favorite. Enduring mundane, tedious work was a part of historical discovery. Inside the transparent globe, the chip remained suspended in a gray, translucent solution that swirled feverishly around it. The microscopic robotic revitalizers—the MRRs—were making progress, albeit slowly. It'd been over four hours since Glyndra programmed them to salvage information from Denosto's chip. She disliked working with the MRRs to get to the relics' treasures, but it was the most efficient extraction method.

She looked up when Lieutenant Morgan appeared at the door. "What've you got, Marissa?"

"Have you heard the news?" Morgan smiled, her white teeth a stark contrast against the black hue of her skin.

"What news?"

"Admiral Bastion's detained an old star-runner that violated Well space. One of the crew is an android—a fully upgraded, free-will android."

Glyndra cocked an eyebrow. "A free-will android? You don't see that every day. There's maybe—what? A couple of hundred free-wills in the empire?"

"That's not all. A rogue warlock was on board."

"The admiral capturing an unrestrained warlock is nothing new."

Morgan raised her eyebrows. "She has a silver aura."

Glyndra looked up sharply. "A *what*?"

“A silver aura. She attacked a guard, but the admiral back-handed her. She went down, and he forced her to put on an inhibitor collar.”

The MRR chimed—the chip was ready to give up its secrets.

Glyndra checked her computer tile, authorized the transfer of information, and the chip's data spooled. “This is all in the ancient pre-Cataclysm warlock language. Clear my schedule for the next two days.”

“Aye, Commander.”

* * *

Jamerion folded his arms over his chest and stared out the window onto his garden below. He'd been back on Rycappa, his homeworld, for only a week, his duties as a member of the Imperial High Council of Advisors keeping him in Mithara City, the Imperial capital on Kallagor, for longer than he liked.

A tall, gangly man with a completely bald head and neatly trimmed light brown goatee sprinkled with gray, he much preferred the warmer climate of Rycappa to the colder, dryer region surrounding the Emperor's palace in Mithara. If Kallagor weren't home to the Imperial throne, he'd be quite content never to visit the planet at all.

His residence sat a few kilometers from one of the countless small villages dotting the countryside of Rycappa's largest continent. Home for over twenty years, his modest estate stood tucked away at the end of a little-traveled road.

That's why the cloud of dust billowing from the lane caught his attention. He wondered who occupied the approaching auto-conveyance. He sighed and turned from the window. *It looks like the garden will have to wait.*

A few moment later, Jamerion heard the conveyance come to a stop, followed by a soft rap at the door.

“Come,” Jamerion called as he entered the foyer. He smiled and shook his visitor’s hand. Not only was Khoren a fellow member of the High Council of Advisors, but he’d been Jamerion’s friend for many years. “Khoren, good to see you again. I wasn’t expecting you for another two weeks.”

Khoren frowned. “We have a problem.”

“Come, sit.” Jamerion guided Khoren into the study and toward a desk at the back of the office. It was a cozy space with a warm fire glowing in the hearth. Shelves packed with books and scrolls lined the walls. Two cushioned chairs sat opposite the ornately carved wooden desk. “What’s our problem?”

Khoren took a seat and ran his fingers through his disheveled brown hair. One of the youngest members of the High Council, Khoren’s almost forty years hardly showed in his cherubic face. A full quarter meter short of two, his wiry build only added to the impression of youth. Many took his physical appearance to mean him immature and gullible, a mistake regretted by most who made such assumptions. “That jackass of an emperor, what else?”

Jamerion chuckled and seated himself behind the desk. “Oh, come now. It can’t be *that* bad. Our man at the palace will take care of it, I’m sure.”

“Our man has little control over our beloved emperor. The drug-addled fool has been on Endara VI whoring through the slums of Derella’s Rapture.”

Jamerion leaned forward. “What are you talking about?”

“About two weeks ago, Ahlaric indulged in a couple of days of debauchery in Derella’s Rapture. Bastion met with him there.”

“What did he want from Bastion?” Jamerion asked.

“He ordered the admiral to the Lumorta system. He wants a purging attack launched against Myra.”

“Don’t be silly,” Jamerion chuckled. “The Emperor can’t order a military purging attack on any member planet of the empire without High Council approval. I certainly didn’t approve of such a move. Did you?”

“It only takes a simple plurality on the Council; you know that. Ahlaric could have gotten his purge attack approved without you or I knowing anything about it. He could easily intimidate or bribe six Council members into approving whatever he wants. He’s done it before.”

“Well, that’s true. But I think I’d have heard something about it by now if it happened.”

“High Council approval or not, legitimate legal orders or not, Bastion and the *Maelstrom* are on the way to Myra with orders to wipe out a couple hundred million people. Not that I particularly care about that, but our facility is on Myra. We could be exposed.”

Jamerion shrugged. “We’re already shutting down our ANI facility there. I checked with Syndria this morning. She’s got everything on schedule. I don’t see the problem.”

Khoren scowled. “The problem is, once the purging attack is done, Bastion will poke through the ruins of his handiwork on Myra. If our facility isn’t completely destroyed, there may be enough evidence left to put the admiral on our scent.”

“We’ve been at this for over two years now. Bastion hasn’t suspected anything so far. I think between his normal duties as head of the entire Imperial military and the increasing insanity of our beloved Emperor, Bastion’s attention is tied up elsewhere. I don’t think our harvesting of magic energy from warlocks is on his radar.”

“And I suspect it’s just a matter of time before Admiral Bastion comes poking around, not just among us High Council members. You know as well as I that the

House of Rael zealots and the Alpha-Transcendent are moving into other Imperial systems. Hell, Syndria is more radicalized now than she was a year ago.”

Jamerion shook his head. “The Alpha-Transcendent is an ally we’re lucky to have. You forget I’m a native Rycappan; the House of Rael is my homeworld’s only officially sanctioned religion. My parents pledged my soul to the One, the Being at my birth, just as all Rycappans do.”

“But you’re not bat-shit crazy like so many of the Raelians. I’m telling you; this religious zealotry is going to get out of hand, and that’s going to eventually attract Bastion’s attention. I personally have no desire to feel his sword slicing open my gut.”

Jamerion’s gaze shifted to the window, his brow furrowed. After a moment, he said, “Hmmm. Perhaps we can turn this to our advantage.”

“How?”

“We knew from the start we’d have to deal with the military eventually, that we’d have to take down Bastion before it was over.” Jamerion reached for the wine bottle on the desk. He poured two glasses and slid one to Khoren. “What if we use the purging of Myra to rid ourselves of the good admiral?”

Taking the glass, Khoren settled into his chair. “Okay, you have my attention. What do you have in mind?”

* * *

After the two guards left his cell, T’Laan searched his new accommodations and found what he expected—a bare metal bed, a food dispenser, and a retractable wall latrine. The surveillance globe hovered at the ceiling in the front corner.

He considered his situation and quickly made a plan. He was under surveillance—no doubt of that—but not an automatic deterrent to taking action. Getting caught doing something that could potentially save Bryanna from whatever Bastion had planned for her was preferable to doing nothing.

He focused on the off-line food dispenser and pried off the touch interface screen. It took less than a minute to access the unit's inner works. Food dispensers were as far as teleportation technology was widely utilized in the public domain. Organic and inorganic matter could safely teleport at the level of quantum entanglements, meaning food and utensils transported without a problem. The only caveat—the organic matter couldn't be alive. If alive at the point of departure, it wasn't when it reached its destination.

The military utilized teleportation on a limited basis to expedite supply line logistics. No living personnel traveled through quantum teleportation methods; only non-organic supplies and service bots were transported using quanta-port technology.

Such a powerful piece of technology required a lot of computer systems interactions. That meant a potential opening could exist for some creative commandeering of computer resources, which would greatly enhance his budding plan's chances for success.

By breaking into the food dispenser's teleportation module, he may be able to manipulate a connection with the data particle pathways. In that case, he should be able to access the ship's utility information perimeter grid and, from there, connect into an information subsidiary network. That should intersect with the command sub-pathways at some point.

Once in, he could do a system-by-system search until he came across usable information. It would take time and some luck, and he'd essentially be in a race with the

guards dispatched to investigate his intrusion after its detection.

An easy decision: better caught doing something than sit complacently doing nothing while Bryanna suffered. With a sharp twist of his left wrist, he popped open the storage compartment in his forearm and retrieved his set of tools, then snapped his wrist back into place.

He faced the food dispenser. “Well, brother, let’s have a conversation, machine to machine, shall we?”

* * *

Snippets of sound danced at the edges of Bryanna’s awareness. A man’s voice. Vaguely familiar. *Who the hell is that?* She wanted to move, but there was a disconnect between her mind and body. The voice again. *What’s he saying?*

“...inform the Myran queen the time for negotiation has passed.”

Myra. That lay in the Lumorta system, ten light-years from where the *Wolverine* entered the Well. Sensation crept back into her legs and arms, numbness giving way to generalized tingling and small muscle twitches. Her eyes fluttered open. *Damn!* The light stung, willing her eyes with tears. She closed her eyes and laid motionless.

As the mental fog cleared, she recognized the admiral’s voice. “I am with the warlock now. Bastion out.”

She jolted upright, eyes flying wide “Shit!” Bryanna closed her eyes against the building pain that shot down her spine. She fell back against the headboard.

Admiral Bastion leaned against the wall across the room. “Move more slowly. The inhibitor collar is syncing to your neural system. It’ll be done shortly, and your body will acclimate.”

Bryanna drew her knees to her chest and squinted against the pounding in her head. She was in a bedroom with one open doorway and one closed. A blackout shield covered a round viewport to her right. “You have no right to hold me here. I’m a civilian. This is a military vessel.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “The barrister threat again?”

“What do you want from me?”

He pushed away from the wall and moved to the foot of the bed. “We can start with information. What’s your name?”

The inhibitor collar vibrated again, the electrode digging in. She clutched her neck.

“That means the collar is synced now,” he said. “Don’t try to channel energy from the Flow. You’ll regret it.”

She drew a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and swung her legs to the side of the bed. “Bryanna D’Isaac. I am a citizen of Eramoor, the third planet in the Triad, and you have no right to detain me.”

“You’re a rogue warlock in empire territory. You came aboard with no Tranquil Dark infuser implanted nor a registered permanent inhibitor collar. The law requires you have one or the other. That’s enough justification for me to do with you as I see fit.”

She stood and waited for the dizziness to pass. “Why not simply execute me and be done with it? Isn’t that what you do to warlocks who violate the emperor’s insane decree?”

“Insane or not, the law is binding.”

She brushed past him, going through the open door into the outer room, and stopped in front of a large open viewport.

His reflection in the meta-glass grew as he moved in close behind her—so close, his body heat countered her chill.

“You will be confined to these quarters indefinitely,” he said. “Guards will be posted outside the door. If you require anything, your comm station is functional but limited. The food dispenser is online.”

“What do you want from me?” she asked.

“I told you, we’ll start with information. Why were you in the Well?”

“T’Laan told you. A navigational error. You saw our ship. It’s an outdated rust bucket. All the systems are shit.”

“My team is going through your ship right now, including the navigational logs. The truth will come out in time. Why were you in the Well?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

Bastion grasped her shoulders and spun her to face him. “Do not try me, my lady. It will end badly for you and your android.”

She jerked away and faced the glass. His reflection looked back at her. She swallowed, then asked, “How long will you hold me prisoner?”

“As long as I want.”

“Do you always get what you want?”

“On my ship, yes.” He rested his hands on her shoulders. His touch sent waves of heat through her. “Your silver aura should not exist. I need to know why it does.”

“Why not ask me why you’re the murdering monster *you* are? The answer will be the same—I *don’t know!*”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t care.”

“Why didn’t you kill the guard in the hold? You could have killed us all, for that matter. Why didn’t you?”

“Unlike you, Admiral, I do not easily kill people.”

“I do quite easily. A point you should remember.” He took his hands away.

Her heart pounded as his steps receded, and the outer door locked behind him.

Magic stirred inside her, but she forced it down, her fingers brushing across the inhibitor collar. She returned to the bedroom to lie across the bed and curl around a pillow. *T'Laan, we've got to get off this ship.*

* * *

Bastion entered his quarters and went to his comm console. He checked in with his security chief to verify there would be two guards posted outside the warlock's door at all times.

Stripping off his shirt, he headed to the bathroom. After washing Bryanna's blood from the back of his hand, he stood before the mirror and traced his fingers over the stripes of puckered scars crisscrossing his chest.

Childhood memories stirred—the lash's barbed thongs soaked with his blood and glistening in the sunlight as the next blow came raining down. His mother's hands clamped tight on his wrists, holding him down, letting it happen. The sound of laughter from the warlocks watching it happen. The crack of the whip in his dreams for years afterward, drawing his tortured screams anew in the depths of the night.

Casting the memories aside, he went to the bedroom and pulled a fresh shirt from the closet. He returned to the comm console and signaled the bridge. "Put us back on course for Myra. TLD to F2."

"Aye, Admiral," Commander Rhola said. "Resuming course for Myra in the Lumorta system. Trans-light drive to factor 2."

"Bastion out." His comm sounded again: a priority call from Emperor Ahlaric. Bastion noted the emperor's eyes had glazed over, and his cheeks flushed as the image resolved on the screen.

After a moment, Ahlaric said, “Admiral Bastion. Where are you?”

“The *Maelstrom* is en route to the Lumorta system, Your Majesty, as ordered.”

“Excellent.” The emperor chuckled. “This is marvelous timing. I received a report from Myra. Their beloved bitch of a queen has died. It seems the traitorous, cock-sucking whore unexpectedly fell over in the middle of dinner. Such a shame! The whole planet is in turmoil.”

“I take it Your Majesty is not surprised by the queen’s untimely demise?”

“Of course not. But that can be our little secret.”

“With this turn of events, it may be possible to convince the interim leaders on Myra to comply with Your Majesty’s directives without the need for a purging assault. Does Your Majesty desire to make any changes to my orders?”

The emperor toyed with his gold stud earring. “No. No changes. I still want you to blast those treasonous bastards backward a couple of thousand years. Maybe then they’ll learn their place. And they’ll be an excellent example to any other planet contemplating defiance of my rule.” He paused to rub Tranquil Dark into his wrist. “There is one more thing. Round up the heir to the throne and the rest of the royal family—every last one of them. Send them to the Delmaran mining colonies. They can enjoy the squalor there until I try them for their crimes.”

“Will there be anything else?”

“I think that should do it, don’t you?” The emperor laughed. “I will await your report.”

“As you command.” Bastion sat for a moment after the screen went blank, a growing rage against the emperor smoldering. His comm-link signaled again—the warlock’s quarters.

“My lady,” he said as Bryanna’s image resolved.

“I’m sorry, Admiral. I was trying to contact the brig.”

“Any outgoing call from your comm station automatically routes to me.”

Her lips pursed. “I would like to speak to T’Laan.”

“Request denied. Is there anything else?”

“Please, Admiral, it’s a simple request.”

“No.”

“Give me a reason. What harm can it do?”

“My reasons are my own. Anything else?”

The screen went dark.

* * *

The Alpha-Transcendent looked through the meta-glass roof of his upper-level sleeping cubicle. Three of Rycappa’s five moons were visible in the cloudless night sky. The other two would rise shortly after dawn. Perhaps he would survive the night to see them.

He left his room, but made certain to leave the door open behind him. Should he not return, the open door would signal the traditional welcome to a new Alpha.

As he descended the staircase, he paused to look out a window at the city surrounding the temple compound. Good fortune allowed his birth on Rycappa, to be a native son of the system. To have served as Alpha-Transcendent honored all the citizens of Rycappa and the Idona system.

Idona was one of the Empire’s most prosperous star systems. Its primary planet stood out as a beautiful, blue-green pearl orbiting the system’s E7-3 sun in the golden zone where life could flourish.

Humans and warlocks found Rycappa nearly six thousand years ago, during the diaspora caused by the cataclysmic events that formed the Well. The other planets in the system, except for the two gas giants, were rocky worlds rich in minerals, metals, and rare elements. Other

than scattered mining clusters—which were mostly automated—these planets remained uninhabited.

Rycappa's capital city, home of the Imperial Governor and the Trade Assembly, boasted over six million people. G'Layla was the bustling center of government and commerce for all of the Idona system.

It also proudly claimed itself home to the House of Rael, the only official government-sanctioned religion. The vicars of Rael were the most revered figures in Rycappan society. The splendor and ceremony accompanying a vicar's visit fueled festivals and celebrations.

It was to a single Raelian Alpha-Transcendent that all clergy and worshippers paid homage. The Alpha rarely appeared outside the Temple Proper in G'Layla. Vicars were the only clergy allowed in the presence of the Alpha-Transcendent, and such audiences were infrequent.

The Alpha made his way to the inner sanctum. After removing his robes, folding them neatly, and placing them on the stool beside the door, he put his palm on the identification pad affixed to the wall. A moment later, the door swung open.

Entering, he paused a few feet inside, making sure the door closed and sealed behind him before moving further into the gloom that filled the room. He reached the altar and knelt, his naked body shivering in the cold. Bowing his head, he whispered the required prayer of soul submission, offering his life if that was the god's desire.

He placed his palms flat against the frigid stone. His body trembled, and his muscles twitched. The ever-present worm-like fibers tunneled beneath his skin, causing excruciating pain, but without them, he would have no physical connection to the One, the Being, his God of Rycappa.

It was a torture he would bear at all cost.

He closed his eyes. Blood dripped from his nostrils, coalescing into worm-link tentacles on the floor. They

writhed until they encountered his body, where they attached themselves like leeches and burrowed beneath his skin.

A red light pulsed inside a semi-transparent gemstone embedded in the center of his chest. Viscous tendrils snaked from the jewel into his flesh, throbbing with peristaltic waves. A luminous scarlet fluid circulated between the stone and his body.

“Our time wanes.” His voice sounded like an amalgamation of two, like opposing speakers talking over each other. It reverberated through the inner sanctum. “We will die so We may live.”

He cried out as light erupted from the gemstone. It shifted like a kaleidoscope—first red, then blue, green, and yellow—undulating and shimmering. It washed over him and churned outward to engulf the altar. The squirming filaments burst through his palms to tunnel into the platform.

The magic of the Flow channeled through the wriggling tethers. He relaxed against the stone, allowing the stored aetheric energy to replenish the presence of the Being inside him.

CHAPTER 4

Entering the engineering sector, Admiral Bastion returned the salute from Commander Thomas, his chief engineer.

“Resume, Commander. I need you to enclose a guest quarters in an ion-fluxer containment barrier.”

“Aye, Admiral. That’ll only take a few minutes. Where do you want it, and for how long?”

“Deck 112, quarters JY42. Maximum power around the clock, indefinitely.”

“Max power for 30/10. Aye.”

“Also, I want the cabin ready to flood with di-trillium gas on my command.”

“Di-trillium gas?”

“Standard safety protocols with external venting.” Bastion turned away. “Let me know when it’s set up.”

“Yes, Admiral.”

Bastion went to the nearest lift, surprised to find it empty when the door slid open for him. It took several minutes to make the trip to the *Maelstrom*’s central core, then across the intersection of two of the ship’s massive rings before arriving at his destination.

Chancellor Lasko stumbled back when Bastion stepped from the lift. “Ah! Admiral. I was on my way to the bridge to speak with you.”

“About?” Bastion pushed past the chancellor to continue down the corridor.

Lasko hurried to catch up. “The warlock, of course.”

“What of her?”

“I’d like to know your plan for her. Your intentions should be included in my next report to the emperor.”

“It doesn’t concern you.”

“Considering her aberrant nature—”

“Chancellor Lasko.” Bastion stopped abruptly.

Lasko shuffled to a halt. “Admiral, please, if you’ll just listen to me—”

“*You* listen to *me*. She’s my prisoner, and I’ll deal with her. That’s all you need to know.”

“I hear you, Admiral. But not only is she a rogue, non-compliant warlock, she also violated the emperor’s Well quarantine. That’s two crimes—and ample justification for execution under the law.”

“I’ll dispose of her when I’m done, not before.”

“Fine, Admiral. Have it your way. In the interim, however, I’d like access to her, to personally interrogate her on behalf of the emperor.”

Bastion glared at the Chancellor.

Lasko continued. “In my capacity as liaison—”

The admiral stepped forward, overshadowing the Chancellor. “Hear me well, Lasko. The warlock is in *my* custody. You are *not* granted access. Do I make myself clear?”

Lasko stepped back. “Yes, Admiral. As you wish.” He bowed and scurried toward the lift.

Bastion entered the archives sector and went directly to Glyndra’s office. He knocked on the door jamb. “Permission to enter, Commander.” Glyndra sat at her desk, oblivious to everything but the computer tile in front of her.

She looked up and greeted him with a warm smile. “Devon! Just the man I needed to see. I have to cancel dinner tonight. I had to schedule a last-minute practice

session. Our Hover Blaster team plays in the tournament tomorrow night, and we've got to lock down our strategy. I'm really worried those brutes from Munitions are going to kick our asses. If we lose, we're out of the semi-finals."

He took a seat across the desk from her. "I don't like you playing that game. You know that."

"Yes, I do. And you know I love playing. We've had this conversation enough times already. We don't need to rehash it again."

"True. So, moving on. What have you got?"

She handed him her tile. "About halfway through the translation, I found an encrypted file. There's no key for it in the *Maelstrom's* database."

"You have access to all the known keys."

Glyndra shook her head. "Not this one. It isn't in the Imperial database."

The admiral scrolled through the files. "Have you sent it to comms, to the decryption team? See what they can do with it?"

"I talked to Lieutenant Graine this morning. Her people are working on it, but she didn't sound optimistic. The language on this chip is pre-cataclysm. The closest match I've found is an ancient warlock dialect. Very obscure."

He slid the tile back to her. "Tell me."

"It appears the chip holds information about some device. I believe it was originally stolen from an upper-level government facility. I don't know where it originated, but it seems to be high-tech. I may need some of Commander Thomas's people from engineering to go over it with me. It's rather deep."

"Pull in whatever resources you need. I want this information."

"I'm not sure what this device did, but I'm thinking—and this is purely hypothetical—it involved tapping into the Flow. For what purpose, I don't know."

“Explain.”

“It’s more a feeling than anything else. I managed to extract some partial schematics, and there’s definitely a biological component. Whether it’s part of the device itself, or an outside source, I don’t know. But if I’m correctly interpreting the snippet of a legend I found for one schematic, there’s mention of something called an ‘aetheric interface.’ Whatever the hell that is.”

Bastion got to his feet. “Find out. Whatever it takes.”

“Aye, Admiral. You’re not going to tell me about your warlock prisoner?”

“Not yet.”

“You know I’m dying of curiosity.”

“You’ll live.”

She smiled. “You should come to our Hover Blaster game tomorrow.”

“I have no desire to watch you kill yourself.” He winked at her before walking away.

* * *

T’Laan manipulated the utility pathways with care, taking time to investigate each intersecting link. Without a console for visual readouts, he had to connect the particle pathways through a diagnostic circuit in his palm. This gave him an internal image of the schematic normally read on a console. He entered each system, backed out, and sealed his entry path whenever it proved to be a wrong turn.

He considered throwing a few glitches into the disposal systems and smiled at the thought of hundreds of latrines malfunctioning, but ultimately decided against it.

Snaking steadily through, node by node, he finally ran across a security sub-system intersection. He locked into it and maneuvered through the access blocks. “Come

on, Bryanna. I know you're in here somewhere. Hang on, kid. I'll find a way out of this."

* * *

"Don't touch anything, especially my specimens." Syndria didn't look up from her work as Jamerion and Khoren entered the room. Ordinarily, she would be a bit self-conscious about her auburn hair standing out, but the buildup of a static charge in the shimmering electrical field undulating around her wasn't unexpected. Besides, it was only Jamerion and Khoren. She didn't consider them anyone worth the expenditure of any degree of emotion.

Jamerion moved to the nearest table and stood over the female warlock's body. Her mottled gray skin suggested she wouldn't survive much longer. The network of squirming filaments invading her brain continued to drain her life as well as her magic. They were shutting down this ANI facility, so a replacement warlock wasn't necessary.

He glanced across the room at Khoren, then focused on Syndria. "Khoren and I only have two jumps with our bi-phasic teleporters before we'll need one of your DNA-reassembly-and-augmentation treatments. When will you be able to provide that for us?"

She glanced at him, a frown on her face, then quickly returned her attention to her work. "I explained to both of you that the bi-phasic teleporter technology wasn't to be abused, that exposure beyond the limited parameters set into the devices would be fatal."

Khoren smirked. "If you'd figured out a way to modify quantum teleporters, we wouldn't need to expose ourselves to bi-phasic radiation."

She shook her head. "You two jump around the universe like you own every inch of it."

“We don’t own it,” Khoren chuckled, “not yet, anyway.”

She gave him no reaction, continuing to work behind the warlock's head with her computer tile in hand. A tether connected it to a panel on the side of the ANI machine in the center of the ring of tables. She shifted her gaze from the tile to the rope-like cord stretched from the ANI to the warlock. The tentacles and fibers tunneling through the warlock's brain sprouted from that tether.

Returning her attention to the tile, she said, “I’m returning to the CF1703 facility when I’m finished. Come there when you’re done here and I’ll administer the R-and-A treatment.”

“We’re expected back in Mithara by morning, Kallagor time,” Jamerion said. “Can we postpone the treatment for another couple of days?”

Syndria shrugged. “Sure. You can postpone them indefinitely if you want. But you’ll fucking die. Your choice. Now shut up and let me work.”

The warlock’s yellow aura was dissipating. When it vanished, Syndria said, “Verify aetheric collection complete on specimen number three.”

A metallic voice emanated from the octagonal machine. “Aetheric collection, specimen number three, complete.”

“Initiate disconnect, specimen number three.”

Syndria stepped back from the captive warlock, aware of Jamerion and Khoren closely watching her. A mechanical beam from the ANI swung about to hover above the naked warlock. A telescoping arm with a grasping hook stretched down and positioned itself behind her head. The mechanical claw extended toward the warlock and clamped onto a gelatinous umbilical protruding from the top of her brain to connect to the ANI base.

With a jerk, the claw ripped the invading network from the warlock's brain and dropped the bundle of bloody cobwebs onto the stone beside the dying woman. Syndria moved near again as the hooked arm withdrew.

Jamerion stepped closer, his face reflecting horror and fascination as the withering filaments and tentacles quivered beside the warlock. The gelatinous mass coalesced, forming a transparent, solid cube the size of a gambling die. Syndria stowed it into a pouch clipped to her belt.

"How much longer is this going to take?" Jamerion asked as Syndria stepped to an adjoining table where a male warlock with a flickering green aura lay shackled.

"It takes as long as it takes," she said. "We can't leave these specimens connected to the ANI. That would risk the system feeding back on itself."

Khoren jerked the tube from the nose of a dead male warlock. "Can't you set a buffer to stop any feedback reaching the Rycappa reservoir?"

"Unless you want to explain the loss of two years' work, I suggest you not rush me. And stop pulling tubes out of my specimens."

Khoren dropped the tube across the warlock's face. "He's dead. He's not complaining."

"Stop it, both of you," Jamerion said. "Now's not the time for bickering. Syndria, please complete your task as quickly as possible. Khoren, come with me. We need to wipe the memory banks of the android workers."

"Why do we—"

"A precaution should they end up in the hands of someone less than sympathetic to our cause. Humor me, will you?"

Khoren frowned. "Whatever it takes to finish this before Bastion starts blowing the planet to bits."

"You're obsessed with the admiral." Jamerion walked Khoren out of the chamber.

Syndria headed to the next table and studied the cobweb network covering the warlock's brain. The filaments shivered as she ran a finger over them.

"The magic is life. A life is given that We may live. We die for the One, the Being, the God of Rycappa." Syndria's prayer was barely audible over the hum of the ANI spooling up. She patted the dead warlock on the cheek. "Thank you for your sacrifice, my dear. Not that you had anything to say about it." She checked her tile and smiled, satisfied that the extraction continued.

The sound of a raspy breath made her turn—the female warlock.

"Oh, die already." Syndria turned back to her work.

* * *

Bryanna sat up and rubbed her eyelids. She hadn't intended to fall asleep. What had awakened her?

Bastion's voice rumbled in from the outer room. "Come out here, my lady, or I will come in."

Bryanna slid to the side of the bed. "Give me a minute." She wavered as she stood, then smoothed her hair and the leisure gown she'd found in the closet earlier before leaving the bedroom.

Bastion motioned her to the sofa.

She approached but kept the length of the sofa between them. "Do you make a habit of entering a woman's quarters unannounced?"

"I enter a prisoner's quarters whenever I please. Take a seat."

"I prefer to stand."

"As you wish." Bastion held up a computer tile. "Do you recognize this?"

The tile triggered her memory; she had dropped it in the command cabin of the *Wolverine*. In the scramble to take out the sleeper drone, she'd forgotten about it.

Bastion placed the tile on the coffee table, then sat on the sofa. "I asked you a question."

She glared at him. "It's mine. What of it?"

"Unlock it."

She parked her hands on her hips. "Unlock it yourself."

He stretched his arm along the back of the sofa. "That's quite a security encryption you've got on that thing."

"It's a T'Laan original. Good luck getting past it. I'm certainly not going to do it for you, and he won't unlock it without my permission." She met his gaze for an uncomfortable moment.

"After I remove the core processor from the android's braincase, my men will have ample time to work on extracting every byte of information stored there. I have no need for an empty android body, of course, so I'll jettison it with the rest of the ship's refuse."

She balled her fists. "You wouldn't dare."

"I can arrange a test of your assumption if you'd like."

She searched his face, looked into the endless depths of his gray eyes. He gave no hint as to what he was feeling. *He's bluffing.*

Bastion abruptly stood and walked toward the door. "Very well. If you'll watch out your viewport, the next scheduled refuse jettison should be visible in about an hour. Perhaps you'll be able to wave goodbye to your friend before the matter-disruptor charge vaporized the scrap."

"No!" She grasped the tile, punched in the release command sequence, and held it out to him. "Here. Take it."

He took it and scanned the screen a moment, then sat again. "Now, let's discuss why you were in the Well."

* * *

Khoren followed Jamerion back into the ANI chamber as the clawed arm withdrew and the last of the gelatinous tentacles solidified into a clear cube. Syndria added it to her pouch and powered down her computer tile.

“That’s the last of them,” she said. “You can rig this place to blow whenever you’re ready.”

Khoren surveyed the five dead warlocks. He didn’t know which was worse—their emaciated bodies or their exposed, desiccated brains. A shiver ran up his spine, and he turned away. *It literally sucks the very soul out of them.*

“How long before we can augment the ANI hub at the CF1703 containment repository with more interface stations?” Jamerion asked Syndria.

“If I have enough viable specimens, it should take only a few hours. I’ve already used half of the last shipment I purchased from Perlow Thol.”

“We have enough to restock the ANI ports there, with a few extras leftover.”

“Then blow this place and clear out. Make sure they all burn.”

“Not a problem.” Jamerion grabbed Syndria, pulling her into a hug.

“What the fuck!” Syndria jerked back, her eyes wide and face flushed. She pushed against him. “Get off me, you son of a bitch!”

He released her and jammed his hands in his pockets as he stepped back. “Sorry. I don’t know what came over me.”

“Touch me again, and I’ll gut you like a fish.”

Jamerion stared at the floor. “Won’t happen again.”

Syndria entered a destination code into the electronic badge clipped to her belt. She grimaced as the light of the bi-phasic teleporter flashed over her. As she began to fade, she glared at Jamerion, raised a fist, and extended her middle finger.

Khoren laughed. “What the hell—”

“Mining charges are in the rear storage unit,” Jamerion said. “There should be enough to bring this place down. We only want to collapse it partially.”

“Since when do you hug Syndria?”

Jamerion smiled and pulled his hand from his pocket. “Since I needed to snatch a cube from her pouch.”

“Oh, shit. She’s not going to like it when she realizes one’s missing.”

“She’ll get over it. Besides, by the time she notices it’s gone, our little surprise for the admiral will have done its job.”

“You think that’s enough to draw Bastion down here?”

“Absolutely.” Jamerion threw the cube across the room. “The sensors on the *Maelstrom* will easily pick up that bit of bait.”

“What about the amenthadrake oil? Won’t it burn the cube?”

“Not this thing. Harder than Irondren steel and can’t be burned, even by a laser. I tried a couple of years ago.”

“We should have told Syndria what we’re doing.”

“She would never have agreed to this, and you know it. She won’t make a move that’s sanctioned by the Alpha-Transcendent.”

Khoren glanced around. “Did you hear that?”

“I didn’t hear anything.” Jamerion followed Khoren’s gaze.

“That female warlock on table number three.”

Khoren moved toward the table. “I think she may still be breathing.”

Jamerion shrugged. “So what? She’ll be dead soon enough. Come on. Let’s finish programming the androids.”

The warlock struggled to draw a breath. Her grayish-blue lips parted, the breath whistling out of her. Her chest heaved, her breasts trembled. Khoren turned away as heat built in his groin.

Forcing erotic images from his mind, he rejoined Jamerion. “The androids are done. I did a test query on them, and they’re ready. All we have to do is set the charges and spread the amenthadrake oil to fuel the fire.”

“You’re certain both androids will trigger on the name ‘Bastion’?”

“I tested them, I told you.”

“Did you secure them in the storage closet?”

Khoren frowned. “Fuck, no. I left them in the office.”

“I’ll go put them in the closet while you spread the oil. We have to make certain all these bodies burn.”

Jamerion hurried down the hallway while Khoren picked up the first of the cans of flammable oil. It would burn at a high temperature and leave no evidence of an accelerant behind. He thoroughly doused the ANI machine and each of the warlock bodies.

Jamerion returned as he finished up.

Khoren threw the last of the oil cans to the side. “All set.”

Jamerion flipped open the lid on a fire-fuse. A bluish flame flared, and he tossed it on top of the ANI.

With an ominous *whoosh*, the fire blazed. The amenthadrake oil streaking the sides lit up. The flames snaked through the vent slats and slithered to the floor. Smoke billowed to the ceiling of the chamber. The ANI core glowed red as it heated.

“You ready to get the hell out of here?” Khoren hovered his finger over his bi-phasic teleporter.

Jamerion grinned and inputted the destination code into his teleporter. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

Both men faded into the energy fields of their bi-phasic teleporters.

CHAPTER 5

Pulsing agony. Darkness. Vertigo. Flickering flashes of memory.

A male, tall and handsome—*what is his name?*

Strangers in her home. Sizzling, crackling sounds of NED-rifle fire. Screams—*My child is screaming!*

Lilith; my daughter's name is—

Echoes. Voices. The lingering alien touch—tainted, foul, evil.

The warlock drew a tortured breath through blistered lips. Smoke. Her right side, scorched. *Fire!*

Adrenaline reserves surged. The last of her strength drew on her bond to the Flow. Her feeble yellow aura flickered—a moment's relief from the building inferno.

Stones ground against stones. Thunder of earth in motion. The screech of buckled metal. The table beneath her vibrated. Her magic couldn't keep the flames at bay; they expanded, intensified, seared her flesh. Light from the fire glowed through her sealed eyelids.

The skin on her arms bubbled. Scorching air burst into the tubes invading her body and sucked the sweltering heat inside her. Her waning consciousness stabbed into the current of the Flow.

Noesha! Don't let me burn!

* * *

Bastion studied Bryanna as she paced, her thick silver hair brushing the top of her hips. She was slender, delicate—he could snap her neck with one hand. When she didn't tug at her belt, she toyed with the cuffs of her sleeves. Her violet eyes were bright with fear. She breathed heavily; the soft swell of her breasts rose and fell beneath the open collar at her neck.

"Staring at me won't get you what you want," she snapped.

Bastion cleared his throat. "The Well?"

"We went into the Well the same way you saw us come out. I made a bubble around our ship, and we punched through the perimeter grid. That's all."

"Why were you in the Well? What were you looking for?"

She threw her hands up. "It was a navigational error! How many times do I have to say it?"

"Why make a protective bubble to punch through the grid if it's a *navigational error*?" He studied her. *She's more agitated than I expected.*

"Go to hell." She gathered her hair into a ponytail over her shoulder and ran trembling fingers through the strands.

He stood to face her. "You and the android must have a base, a home, a hideout. Where is it?"

"We live in an abandoned supply outpost inside the perimeter of the Well. It's a barely-habitable dump. Satisfied? Now leave me alone."

"I want the coordinates."

"*Goddammit!* Leave me—*aahhhh!*" Her face twisted into a grimace as she hugged herself, rubbed her arms, and doubled over.

He reached for her. "What's wrong?"

"Please, get away from me."

Bastion grabbed her and pulled her close. "What is it?"

“Oh, God,” she groaned and struggled against him. “Make it stop!”

Bastion held his mouth next to her ear. “Tell me what you’re feeling.”

“*Noesha!* Don’t let me burn!” She stiffened, threw her head back, and screamed. She clawed at the inhibitor collar—her nails dug into her flesh. A surge of electricity sizzled through her collar and scorched her neck.

“Don’t call your magic!” He tightened his arms about her.

She gasped, eyes tearing. “I can’t stop it.”

Her silver aura burst out to encircle her, its crackling corona undulating with erratic tendrils of white light spinning into a cocoon. Convulsive, violent turbulence pulsed through it.

The collar vaporized.

He cupped a hand behind her head, held her close. “Concentrate. Focus on my voice and do *exactly* as I tell you.”

She thrashed and pounded her fists against his arms encircling her. “Burning. God! I’m burning!”

“It’s a telepathic connection to another warlock—an illusion. You must create a counter wave in the Flow. Do it now!”

She clung to him, her body shaking. “Dear God, let me die.”

“Do as I say!”

Her aura writhed as she pushed back against the force ripping through her.

“That’s it,” Bastion said. “Now pull your power around you, like a shield.”

The shimmering energy field coalesced around them, like a gossamer bubble, vibrating and spinning, pinpoint flashes of platinum permeating it.

After a moment, she muttered, “It’s over. She’s dead.”

A pulse of clean, silver energy erupted. Bastion held on to her as electrical streamers danced harmlessly over them. "Pull it back now."

She collapsed in his arms as the last of her aura faded. Bastion swept her up and carried her to the bedroom.

She drew shallow breaths, and her heart rate slowed. Her neck dripped blood from the injuries inflicted by the destroyed collar. He laid her on the bed, sat on the edge, and then used his wrist-comm to summon a medic.

The admiral slid a blanket over her and wiped the sweat-matted hair from her face.

"Dammit," he muttered.

* * *

Chancellor Lasko scowled. "He doesn't allow anyone near her. I don't even know her name." He embedded his clandestine communications in routine transmissions to the palace on Kallagor to thwart detection. The process frustrated him, but it was the only way to contact Kardal Omhara, the emperor's assistant, without Bastion or the emperor finding out.

Omhara's image on the vidscreen wavered. "You're certain about her aura?"

"I know what I saw—it's silver. Scared the hell out of me. What are you going to do about this?"

"That might explain why Bastion didn't kill her immediately. She's piqued his curiosity."

"Yes, yes, whatever. So, what will you do about her?"

"We'll keep this to ourselves—no need to get Ahlaric's balls in a twist over it. Let Bastion kill her. End of problem."

"You're not hearing me; he *isn't* killing her. He's got her locked in private quarters. Not the brig—*quarters*."

No one sees her; no one talks to her. He won't even allow anyone near her android."

Omhara's image disappeared in a barrage of static. "...worry...stay with Bastion...take care of..."

Lasko tried to adjust the signal clarity. "You're breaking up. Repeat."

"...attack on Myra...deal with her..."

He leaned back and sighed as the vidscreen went blank, then poured a glass of wine. He didn't care about Bastion's curiosity or the religious fanaticism of Omhara and his associates. He had other goals in mind—wealth, women, a star system of his own over which to rule. The title Lord High Governor Lasko had an excellent sound to it.

He smiled and sipped his wine.

* * *

The medic passed the diagnostic scanner over Bryanna. "There is evidence of trauma to her nervous system."

Bastion stood at the foot of the bed. "Can she heal herself?"

"The abrasions and burns to her neck are superficial. Her warlock ability for self-healing is intact. Compared to other warlocks, it seems accelerated. Time in a recovery unit won't be necessary. Tissue regeneration is happening along her neural pathways already."

"How long before she regains consciousness?"

"I can wake her now, but I recommend you let her sleep it off. She's exhausted. I can also load her up with a Tranquil Dark infuser implant since she has no current inhibitor mechanism in place."

"No."

"Sir, I would be remiss in my duties if I didn't remind you that all warlocks are required—"

"Dismissed."

“Aye, sir.” The medic gathered up his kit. “Shall I check back on her later?”

“No.”

Bastion waited until the medic left before sitting on the side of the bed. He lifted Bryanna’s arm across her chest. Her pale skin was cool. He watched her for a few minutes then left the bedroom.

He stretched out on the sofa with Bryanna’s tile and scrolled through the files in the main directory. Her personal log caught his attention.

* * *

The smell bothered Khoren the most. The warlocks’ bodies were literally decaying, yet the bastards clung to life as long as they could. With the tubes and such invading their orifices, they probably didn’t smell themselves. *Lucky them.*

In the center of the octagonal room, an Aetheric Neural Interface machine retracted its clawed arms. Tethered to the ANI, eight naked warlocks lay on tables arrayed like spokes around the device. Each had the dome of their skulls removed and a quivering network of alien tentacles and filaments burrowing around in their brains. Multiple tubes invaded their bodies.

The sole purpose of the ANI was to draw the aetheric energy from them. For that, their bodies had to continue functioning.

Containment Facility 1703 housed warlocks sentenced to life in prison. The locked-up and forgotten prisoners here were incapable, unwilling, or unworthy of rehabilitation. They ended up in Containment Facilities, or CFs, and forgotten. Multiple such facilities sprang up across the empire after Ahlaric took the throne.

It was the perfect place to harvest the Flow’s aetheric energy required by the House of Rael on

Rycappa. Since Jamerion and Khoren were members of the High Council, a few creative financial manipulations and a little forgery kept this prison facility isolated and off the empire's radar.

But there was no contingency plan for the events currently happening. Sparks from overloaded electrical panels arced toward the ceiling; smoke and ozone choked the air. Behind the glass partition, Syndria worked in the control room to shut down the ANI hub.

The warlock on the table beside Jamerion seized. Blood oozed from his open skull, dripping off the exposed edge of bone near the base of his neck. It pooled on the table beneath him, spreading slowly in a dark red circle. The odor of seared flesh mingled with the smoke and ozone.

"Looks like some kind of power surge." Khoren moved from table to table, jerking the tethers to pull the filaments out of the warlocks' brains. Blood mixed with milky cerebrospinal fluid pooled on the tables.

Syndria joined them. "ANI cycling to standby mode. Khoren, stop that."

He snatched the tentacles from the last warlock's brain. "I disconnected them for you."

"I didn't need them disconnected like that, you idiot."

"They're dead, or soon will be," Khoren said. "What's the difference?"

Syndria's face flushed. "I need to collect the data from the tether to verify ANI extraction, you fucking *moron*. I've told you a thousand times: hands off my specimens!"

Jamerion stepped between them. "Enough. Syndria, what happened?"

"Energy surge, like a tsunami in the current of the Flow."

"In which realm?"

“All of them.”

Khoren scoffed. “Bullshit. That’s impossible.”

Syndria glared at him. “Look around you, dumbass. *Something* happened.”

“How bad is the damage?” Jamerion asked.

“At best, we’ll need warlock replacements if we’re going to keep feeding the Rycappa reservoir from here.”

Syndria glanced at the ANI machine. “If there’s core damage, we may have to shut down completely.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Khoren threw up his hands. “We can’t shut down. The Rycappa reservoir *has* to be fed. We *better* keep feeding it. We’ll all—the Alpha will—we can’t ... we *won’t* last long if we don’t feed it.”

“What could cause a surge in all four realms?” Jamerion asked.

“I don’t know,” Syndria said. “But we need to figure it out before this happens again. Too many episodes like this and our ANI grid will overload and collapse.”

* * *

The emperor admired himself in the mirror as he smoothed the lace ruffles adorning the front of his shirt. He turned to each side, assessing his waist sash. Satisfied, he snapped his fingers at the servant behind him.

“My coat.” He straightened his earring and slipped his arms into the sleeves.

Omhara adjusted the emperor’s collar. “You look magnificent in this shade of emerald, Your Majesty. You’ll be the talk of the fashion district by midnight.”

Ahlaric chuckled and sat on his dressing stool. He adjusted his cuffs as Omhara put the finishing touches on his hair. “I’ll be surprised if it takes that long.”

Omhara smiled and patted the last of the emperor’s thinning hair into place. When Ahlaric nodded his

approval, Omhara hurried to the dressing table and opened a gold trinket box.

“Your Majesty, I’ve been thinking.” He spooned the black powder onto a small gold tray.

“About what?” Ahlaric dusted a fine coating of pale cosmetic shading over his nose and cheeks.

“Admiral Bastion.” He held the tray steady while the emperor took a pinch of the powder. “I hope Your Majesty’s trust in him is not ill-placed.”

Ahlaric rubbed the Tranquil Dark into his wrist. “Trust him? Hell, no, I don’t trust him. But I need him at the moment.”

Omhara filled the emperor’s vial with more of his black powder. “I take it you’ve received favorable reports from Chancellor Lasko?”

“Lasko says Bastion is preparing the attack on Myra, exactly as I ordered. All routine military stuff, and boring, like this conversation. Tonight is for fun. Ruin my good mood, and I’ll have you flogged.”

Omhara stoppered the vial and peered at the emperor in the mirror. “It’s just that Your Majesty said the admiral seemed reluctant to purge Myra. Is Your Majesty certain—”

The emperor glared at Omhara’s reflection. “Are you *questioning* me?”

“I was merely wondering—”

Ahlaric slammed his fist on the dressing table. “Why should you wonder about *anything* I do? My affairs are none of your concern.”

Omhara sank to his knees and bowed at the emperor’s feet. “Forgive, Majesty.”

Ahlaric stood. “Oh, stand up. Groveling is so unattractive.”

Omhara got to his feet, his eyes downcast. Ahlaric laid a staggering blow across Omhara’s cheek. “When I need a moronic servant to advise me on Imperial policy, I’ll

send for you. I am not in the mood for your idiotic ramblings about my empire tonight.” Ahlaric adjusted his jacket. “Now. I have a gala to attend, and I plan to enjoy myself to the fullest. How do I look?”

Omhara scrutinized the emperor. “You look splendid, Your Majesty.”

Ahlaric giggled. “I do, don’t I?” He pocketed his vial of Tranquil Dark and brushed past Omhara. “Don’t wait up. I shall be late.”

Omhara followed him out and closed the door behind him. As the emperor headed toward the throne room, Omhara hurried to his quarters and locked himself inside.

The music of the gala wafted through the palace, adding to Omhara's agitation. His position here served his purpose; if it didn’t, he’d gladly drop the emperor into the mouth of an erupting volcano.

Jamerion, Khoren, and Syndria were becoming major pains in the ass. Their complaints and bickering tried his finite patience. Jamerion fancied himself the leader. *What a joke.* That fool couldn’t find his own dick in the dark.

Throw Chancellor Lasko into the mix, and Omhara had about reached his limit. If they weren’t necessary to reach his goal, he’d happily slit their throats.

Syndria was an undisputed bitch, but she was also an engineering genius. Not only was she directly responsible for resurrecting the ancient technology behind the Aetheric Neural Interface, she was also the engineer behind the bi-phasic teleporters they all used. It was a dangerous technology, there was no doubt about that.

The quanta-ports used to a limited degree by the military and the technological force behind food dispensers functioned at the quantum level. Bi-phasics utilized the background radiation matrix that permeated the universe.

Syndria developed them as a result of her work with the ANI.

The bi-phasic teleporters skimmed the boundary between normal space and the extradimensional space occupied by the Flow. The background aetheric energy radiation matrix that held the multiverse together—the Flow—wasn't a compatible environment for human flesh; hence, the need for the recurring DNA reassembly-and-augmentation treatments.

Syndria was a necessary pain in the ass at the moment. Jamerion and Khoren were another story. Their positions on the High Council did provide advantages, such as funding and steering the prying eyes of the legislative Quorum away from their activities. There was that to consider.

There was also the Alpha-Transcendent. He ranked right below the emperor on Omhara's must-kill-one-day list. If the Alpha weren't the source of magic, he'd slit the demonic bastard's throat, too. The others were devout in their worship of the House of Rael—Syndria most of all. The religion and its dogma meant nothing to Omhara—a means to an end, nothing more. If feigning devotion to some ridiculous god-image got him what he wanted, he would play the Alpha's games, at least for a little while longer.

The others wanted to control the Empire, to divide the Imperial territories among themselves. *How's that for a laugh?*

Their goal was a dictatorial government, steeped in the religious tenets of their god of Rycappa. If that's what they wanted, he had no problem with that. He sought a bigger prize.

The Alpha-Transcendent dangled a coveted carrot in front of him—the magic of a warlock. But why stop there? No, ultimate control of the Flow—that's what Omhara wanted most.

A flash of green light from a bi-phasic teleporter interrupted his musings and signaled the arrival of his expected guest. “Alpha-Transcendent,” he said with a smile. “You’re looking well this evening.”

That was a lie; the man appeared half-dead. His face, neck, and hands were a mottled, pasty gray. Paper-thin skin rippled as something moved beneath it. His chocolate-colored robes hung in folds off his emaciated frame.

When’s the last time he had an R-and-A treatment? Maybe his DNA is crumbling from too much teleporter use. Omhara stifled a chuckle. *That would be interesting.*

The Alpha’s eyes, sunk deep in his bony face, glowed red in the shade of his cowl. “Why has there been a disruption in aetheric energy delivery to the reservoir at Rycappa?” His voice reverberated.

“The emperor has ordered Admiral Bastion to lead a purging attack on Myra. The facility there had to shut down ahead of schedule. My team is increasing the output from the CF1703 ANI hub to compensate.”

“Insufficient. We require more aetheric energy. Open another ANI collection station. Increase the input to the Rycappa reservoir.”

“We’re working on it. You should register an increase in input shortly. Opening another ANI station isn’t feasible at the moment. The logistics of such an undertaking could leave our entire operation open to unwanted scrutiny.”

The Alpha approached and grabbed his shirt. He ripped it open and pushed his bony, clammy palm against Omhara’s chest. *Things* squirmed beneath the Alpha’s skin.

Omhara’s body spasmed as a jolt of electricity raced through him. His mind exploded with imagery. A kaleidoscope of colors—the reds and oranges of the Elemental realm. The yellows and golds of the Phantos

domain. The swirling blues of the Astral realm and the myriad greens, the Corporeal aetheric stream.

His body seized. A burning pain stabbed the center of his chest.

“Elemental.” The Alpha said in a demonic, guttural whisper.

The kaleidoscope drained of all color except the reds. The light encircled Omhara, spinning in descending arcs to form a soft shroud. His mind settled, like waking from a deep, prolonged sleep. The Alpha withdrew his hand. A faint red aura remained around them both.

Omhara blinked back tears and swallowed the acid rising in his throat. A throbbing, itching pressure filled his chest. *What the hell?*

A red gemstone embedded in his sternum pulsed with each beat of his heart. Blood trickled down his chest and abdomen. “What have you done?”

“We give you what you desire.” The Alpha’s red aura faded.

Omhara’s remained. The Flow stung as it wafted through him.

“You are now bound to the Elemental Realm and capable of channeling its magic.” The Alpha stepped back. He seemed drained. His skin was ashen and dark with sporadic undulations beneath it. “Your command of the Flow will grow, in time, if you fulfill your part of our agreement. As our strength increases, so shall yours. If our reservoir is devoid of energy, so shall your body be devoid of life.”

Omhara gawked at the pulsing red gemstone. His head spun, and his vision blurred. *What’s that inside the stone?* Movement within it, like the things under the Alpha’s skin. *What the fuck’s he done to me?*

“Do not disappoint.” The Alpha activated his bi-phasic teleporter and vanished.

Omhara stood still, uncertain of his balance. Finally, he staggered to his bed and fell backward across it. The almost imperceptible touch of the Flow permeated his blood. The wound in his chest throbbed.

More energy, the Alpha said. Don't disappoint, he said.

A thought sparked as his mind spiraled toward blackness.

A warlock with a silver aura.

CHAPTER 6

Bryanna awoke with a start and grabbed her throat. Although the collar was gone, her neck remained stiff and sore. She shifted to her side and drew her legs up, hugged her pillow, and relaxed. The open blackout shield on the external port showed starlight streaming by—the *Maelstrom* was on the move.

Thankfully, the admiral wasn't hovering around. He frightened and confused her. With other people, both humans and warlocks, minimal manipulation of her magic allowed her to detect fleeting glimpses into their lives, like snippets of dreams that flashed across her mind.

Her magic also sometimes gave her insight into a person's thoughts and feelings—into their very soul. She got none of this from Bastion. The admiral was different; she sensed vague emotional generalities but nothing specific.

She did sense a power inside him—more than raw physical strength or military authority. He also harbored a secret, one he kept buried deep, shielded by his daunting will.

Bastion had stood with her in the heart of her aura and showed no fear. He remained unharmed, of course, as long as he maintained physical contact with her; that was the nature of the Flow. She could still feel his arms encircling her, holding her against his body. He told her

how to break the link from the other warlock. *I didn't know what to do—how did he?*

The gurgling of her empty stomach intruded on her thoughts. *I hope the food is at least half-way decent.*

She moved into the larger main room and froze. The admiral lay on the sofa, his eyes closed, one arm crooked behind his head and the other dangling toward the floor. Her computer tile lay on the coffee table next to his sword.

Not daring to move, she watched the steady rise and fall of his chest. Her gaze shifted to his face. His relaxed brow and slack jaw seemed strange—there was a serenity about him she'd not seen before. An impressive, desirable man—she would admit that, but a man with a reputation for killing warlocks as easily as most swatted flies.

Bastion correctly labeled her a rogue. T'Laan had made sure she avoided the attention of the empire as she grew. He kept her safe from the insanity of Emperor Ahlaric in the wake of Empress Elyahna's murder by secluding her inside Well space. After a few encounters with humans and other warlocks that were less than amicable, she'd had no objection to remaining isolated most of the time. That meant, however, she'd never had any formal training like other warlocks.

She knew her warlock's aura protected her from energy-based weapons like NED-pistols. The energy dissipated harmlessly into the aetheric streams. But a sharp sword could find the warlock at the center of a churning aura and strike her down. And Bastion's sword had done precisely that, more than once. Still, it fascinated her.

She crept toward the sword.

She stopped beside the table. The sword lay so close she could reach out and touch it. There were rumors he forced warlocks to place magic on the blade to make it deadlier. *Could that be true?*

She reached out.

"That's Irondren steel. You don't want to touch it."

She jerked her hand back. "I wasn't—"

Bastion hadn't moved, only opened his eyes.
"Irondren steel. Do you know what that is?"

She lowered her eyes and shook her head.

He swung his legs to the floor, picked up the sword, and slid it from its scabbard. The scrape of metal sent chills up her spine, and she stepped back.

He held the blade up and twisted it from side to side. Light reflected off the edges and blood groove. "It's a type of metal alloy produced in only one star system—the Irondren system."

"There aren't any habitable planets in that system."

"No, there aren't." He stood, the sword at his side.

She backed away when he stepped toward her.

"You should have learned about Irondren steel during your early training."

"I had a less-than-conventional childhood."

He displayed the sword again. "The metals are mined in the asteroid belt between the first and second planet in that system. The steel is hand-forged and the blade tempered in the blood of a warlock."

She cringed. "How gruesome."

"The blood is collected voluntarily. Payment for a supply of warlock blood is substantial. There's nothing gruesome involved."

"Why would a warlock voluntarily contribute blood to make a sword designed specifically to kill warlocks?"

"A man will do whatever he must to protect and provide for his family, be he warlock or human."

Her chest vibrated against her racing heart, and her clenched fists began to sweat. *What the hell?* Just being near him and her composure cracked.

He laid the sword flat across his palms and held it toward her. "Pass your hand over the blade, close to it but *don't* touch it. Tell me what you feel."

She passed her hand slowly over the length of the blade. "Heat." She looked up at him. "I feel heat."

He then slid his hand flat along the blade. "I don't. The Irondren steel reacts with the traces of aetheric energy present in a warlock's body, whether the aura is visible or not. It heats to a very high temperature in a millisecond, a heat that only a warlock can feel."

"It burns warlocks but not humans?"

"Right."

"Why would you use something like that?"

He sheathed the weapon and fastened the belt about his waist. "It's the only type of blade I use."

"How did you know what I should do, earlier—in the Flow?"

He went to the comm station. "I know a great deal about warlocks. I make it a point to know my enemy."

"You could have been hurt by the aetheric current—being a human, I mean."

"Bridge," he said into the comm station. He glanced back at her. "Why do you think I held you so tightly?"

A man's face appeared on the screen. "Rhola here, sir."

"Commander, I want a sweep of the *Wolverine*. Any female clothing found needs to be secured and cleaned. Then have it delivered to Deck 112, cabin JY42."

"Aye, sir. Right away."

"Bastion out." To her, he said, "You need to know there is an ion-fluxer shield encircling your quarters. That will dampen your connection to the Flow. Also, should your aura manifest, I've ordered the cabin flooded with di-trillium gas."

"*What?* You're going to gas me?"

"Only if you prove a threat to my crew or my ship."

She scowled. "So, gas will be the method of my execution."

His gaze never faltered; his face was unreadable. “If I execute you, my lady, it will be by sword, like any other execution I carry out. The gas is a precaution should you or your powers get out of control.”

“Your inhibitor collar didn’t work. Are you sure di-trillium will?”

He cocked an eyebrow. “We can test it if you’d like.”

She turned away from his penetrating scrutiny. Blood thundered in her ears, and a thick heaviness filled her gut. *Shit! He’s not kidding!*

He brushed past her, took her computer tile from the table, and then paused in the open doorway. “Remember I have your android, my lady. And make certain you eat something. You look pale. We’ll talk again later.”

She stared at the door as it closed and sealed, then hugged herself. She’d never felt so alone and isolated. “I think I’m going to die here.”

* * *

Syndria glanced around when the glow of a bi-phasic teleporter appeared. She frowned and turned back to the warlock on the metal table. His pale blue aura was barely perceptible.

“Jamerion!” she shouted. “Omhara is here.”

Omhara forced a smile. “Nice to see you again too.”

She continued working. Jamerion came out of the control room, Khoren following.

“What are you doing here?” Jamerion asked.

“You’re supposed to be keeping tabs on the emperor.”

Khoren chuckled. “Maybe the emperor is off chasing whores in Derella’s Rapture again and didn’t take his *domestic* with him.”

Omhara glared at Khoren before answering. “The Alpha-Transcendent paid me a visit, but if you aren’t interested, I can leave.”

“The Alpha?” Khoren’s face paled. “When? What did he want?”

Omhara leaned against the wall and wrapped his jacket close about him. His chest was still incredibly sore. “Two days ago. We had a lovely conversation. It seems he has an assignment for you and your cohorts.”

“I have enough to do,” Syndria said, “but if the Alpha commands it, I’ll make time.”

“What a good little Raelian you are,” Omhara said. “But according to the Alpha, you aren’t doing a very good job at the moment. He complained about a drop in the power input into the Rycappa reservoir.”

Syndria peered up at him. “What did he say?”

“He wants the input to the reservoir increased, which I told him was already on the agenda. He also wants another little matter taken care of. He’s located a specific warlock he wants introduced to the pleasures of the ANI.” *Not exactly accurate, but who’s keeping track of lies these days?*

“What warlock?” Khoren asked.

“The one keeping company with Admiral Devon Bastion.”

* * *

Bastion finished reviewing the last of the morning’s reports and glanced over the bridge. The *Maelstrom* would reach the Lumorta system in sixty hours. Weapons prep ran through the customary pre-battle diagnostics and calibrations. Fighter pod pilots went through pre-launch simulation drills. Medical staff rotations were adjusted in anticipation of incoming wounded. Shielding and defensive

systems underwent assessments and augmentations to counter the known Myran weapon capabilities.

He wasn't concerned about the *Maelstrom* taking significant damage from a Myran show of resistance. The battlecruiser's arsenal far outmatched the planetary defenses. Potential for casualties aboard his ship was negligible, but the Myran civilian population would, as usual, pay the price.

A purging attack would result in massive civilian casualties. Whether they deserved such a fate or not wasn't his decision to make. The legislative Quorum, the High Council of Advisors, and Emperor Ahlaric were responsible for governing the empire.

He bristled at the thought of elected Quorum leaders who refused to fulfil their duty to those they governed, who demonstrated little to no ability to control themselves. Corruption was rampant in most of the upper echelon of the empire's officials. It wasn't a situation Bastion approved of or personally sanctioned, but short of a military coup and open civil war, there wasn't much he could do to change things at the moment.

Complicating matters, he now had the rogue warlock on his hands. He had ample grounds upon which to execute her. But she was an anomaly. If he had learned anything from Glyndra, it was the need to treasure uniqueness, to protect it, and find a way to understand it.

D'Isaac's silver aura should not exist. Never in the history of the warlock race was there any record of a warlock with an aura that color. He'd also never seen a warlock disintegrate an inhibitor collar.

She was unique and a piece in a much larger puzzle.

He'd not questioned her in the last two days but checked on her via surveillance. She paced, stared out the meta-glass port, experimented with the food dispenser, and argued with the cleaning bot. He'd seen no sign of her magic, and a check with Commander Thomas in

engineering confirmed no aetheric energy surges registered against the ion-fluxer containment field.

On the other hand, the android was a busy captive, meticulously poking through almost every system aboard the *Maelstrom*. Bastion suspected it probably would know nearly everything about the ship's massive computer and various systems' inner workings before it finished its food dispenser exercise. It only found access to areas where the admiral allowed it, of course.

He looked up as his first officer came alongside him. Rhola said quietly, "Anything I can do, sir?"

"Watch my six."

"Always."

Bastion stood. "Tell Glyndra to report to my quarters. You have the bridge."

"Aye, sir."

* * *

The admiral entered his residence and went to his study. He sat behind his desk and pulled up security surveillance from the warlock's quarters. Bryanna sat on the sofa, sipping from a cup, as the cleaning bot went about its duties.

"No, leave that," she said when the bot picked up a wadded cloth from the coffee table.

The bot replaced the cloth. "State the purpose of the rag for clarification on proper storage."

"That *rag* is all I have to sleep in."

"Rag is a garment for sleeping. Classification noted."

Bastion cut the feed and called up the duty officer in the quartermaster bay.

"Corporal Stonehold here, sir."

"I want a complete set of apparel for a female, sized and delivered to Deck 112, cabin JY42. Include intimate

garments and necessary toiletries. Check the captured runner's inventory log for relevant sizing information."

"Aye, sir. Military or civilian attire?"

"Standard civilian. Make certain to include sleeping garments. All clothing should reflect a lady of mid to upper social standing. Make certain there are enough casual-style garments for a week with two changes per day."

"Aye, sir. I'm on it, Admiral."

"Bastion out." He closed the commlink as the entry signal sounded at his door, then went into the main room. "Come."

Glyndra entered with a broad smile lighting her face. She was favoring a limp in her right knee. Her gray hair, unruly as usual, was in a ponytail at the base of her neck.

"The knee again?" Bastion bent to wrap his arms around her waist as she embraced him.

"Hover Blaster game." She hugged him. "But well worth it. My Archives team beat the snot out of those brutes from Munitions. We're advancing in the intramural semi-finals. We play Pod Maintenance next week."

"Have you seen Doctor Johnson?" He motioned for her to join him in the study.

She laughed. "Considered it and dismissed the idea. I'm old, Devon. There's not much medical science can do about that."

He sat behind the desk, and she took a seat across from him. "You could at least investigate the possibility."

"My aches and pains are my right of passage into old age. And rightfully earned."

He held up a hand. "Only a suggestion."

"Good." She grinned. "You may be my commanding officer, but I'm still your mother."

He settled back in his chair. "Where are you on the data chip translation?"

“I should have a full report for you in the next day or two. I’ve about got it all translated, except that portion that’s encrypted. No luck with that so far.”

“I may be able to get you some help with the encryption. I’ll let you know.”

“I’ll take any help you offer. So, tell me about this warlock.”

Bastion gave her a quick rundown on everything concerning Bryanna, from the *Wolverine* punching through the Well defense grid to the errant link with the burning warlock.

He slid Bryanna’s computer tile across the desk. “Her personal log of the last ten years is on that. Go over it, then give me a full report.”

She picked up the tile. “How soon do you need it?”

“The sooner, the better. This girl’s a rogue. She’s guilty of multiple violations of Well quarantine, going back years. Hell, she’s been *living* inside Well space. That and her non-compliance with restraint edicts is sufficient grounds for execution.”

She met his gaze. “But you have no intention of doing that.”

“Protocol says I should have executed her in the holding bay when she attacked the guard. But my gut tells me she has a part to play in what’s happening.”

“What about her android? What are you going to do with it?”

“Right now, it’s snooping through the ship’s computer.”

She widened her eyes. “You’re allowing that?”

“It isn’t causing any problems—simply looking for information. We’re monitoring it closely and blocking it from anything I don’t want it to access. I want to see how good it is, and so far, it’s quite impressive. I may have a use for it before long.”

“Like decrypting an ancient code?”

“Possibly.”

CHAPTER 7

Omhara flashed a smug smile. “I have a man on Bastion’s ship who reports directly to me. That’s how I know about this warlock.”

“Who’s this man of yours?” Syndria sat with Jamerion and Khoren at a table in the control room. Omhara faced them.

“One you might be interested in, my dear. He’s a weasel of a man, very greedy and utterly depraved. Exactly your type.”

“You motherf—”

“Get on with it,” Jamerion said.

“I’m sure the Alpha appreciates your enthusiasm, Jamerion.” Omhara cleared his throat. “Bastion keeps this warlock under lock and key, allowing no one access to her. He has an ion-fluxer containment field around her quarters.”

“Quarters?” Khoren asked. “She’s not in the brig?”

“No. Apparently, the good admiral has his pet female warlock right down the corridor from his own quarters.”

Khoren frowned. “Why does he need a containment field if she’s in a collar or has an infuser implanted?”

“Rumor on the *Maelstrom* is that she burned an inhibitor collar right off her neck.”

“Bullshit,” Syndria said.

Jamerion shook his head. “No warlock can channel the Flow’s magic with an inhibitor collar on.”

“Believe what you want.” Omhara shrugged. “I’m merely passing on what I’ve heard. Factor in Bastion’s well-known aversion to Tranquil Dark, and you can bet he’ll not use an infuser on her.”

Syndria crossed her arms and sat back. “Why does the Alpha want this particular warlock hooked to the ANI?”

Omhara straightened his coat to keep it closed. “Syndria, you weren’t terribly adept at solving puzzles as a child, were you?”

“You son of a bitch. I—”

“Why do you hook *any* of the warlocks to the ANI? Go ahead, figure it out. We can wait.”

Jamerion pounded a fist on the table. “Enough of this game, Omhara. I’m warning you.”

“*Warning me?* You may be a member of the High Council, but *I’m* the one the Alpha visits. *I’m* the one with the emperor’s ear, the one who whispers to him when he’s in a drug-induced stupor. *I* pull the emperor’s puppet strings.”

He pointed to the warlocks on the ANI tables beyond the control room window. “With no more effort than it takes for you to jerk off over one of these *specimens*, I could have the emperor order Bastion’s fleet down on *your* homeworld instead of Myra. How would your precious God of Rycappa like a purging attack from a fleet of Imperial battlecruisers?”

Silence hung over the room like a fog.

Omhara leaned on the table. “Here’s the deal, my friends. The Alpha-Transcendent wants this warlock taken away from Admiral Bastion and hooked to the ANI. That means the Being you all worship wants this done. It isn’t optional.” *Not entirely true, but there’s no harm in one little white lie.*

"I'm not liking the sound of this," Khoren whispered.

"Why not have the emperor order Bastion to send her here to the CF1703 facility?" Jamerion said. "Lock her up like any criminal. We can pull her out of the prison population and hook her to the ANI hub then. That should be simple enough since *you* have the royal ear."

Omhara shrugged. "The emperor doesn't know about her. My man has withheld that information at my instruction. Our Transcendent friend doesn't want the emperor involved in any way. Believe me, that brainless royal worm would find some way to fuck it up."

"You still haven't explained why this girl is so important," Syndria said.

"Let me spell it out for you, shall I?" Omhara said. "The ANI is building up aetheric energy in the storage reservoir on Rycappa; a hell of a lot of it."

Jamerion rolled his eyes. "Yes, yes, we know. About this girl—"

Omhara barked each word. "We. Need. Power. We've been at this for a couple of years now, building up production over time as we added more ANI collection slots to this facility or the one on Myra. We have—"

"Enough," Jamerion said. "What's your point?"

"How about this?" Omhara smiled. "Bastion's warlock has a silver aura."

Khoren laughed. "No warlock has a silver aura."

Omhara's smile faded. "This warlock punched a hole through the Well perimeter security grid and disintegrated a NED-rifle in the hands of one of Bastion's security guards. Then she fried an active inhibitor collar right off her neck. That, my friends, is P-O-W-E-R."

Khoren stood. "You're lying. What are you up to with all this crap?"

"Sit down and shut up, Khoren," Syndria said. "I don't think he's lying."

“How the hell do you know?”

“We had to shut down the ANI, remember?

Because of a power surge in the aetheric realms. *All four of them*. You said that was impossible, but it *happened*. What if this warlock caused it? *Something* sure as hell made it happen.”

“And, my friends,” Omhara said as Khoren sat.

“This particular warlock is cozying up with Admiral Devon Bastion. That is not a good situation for any of us.”

“Bastion is keeping this warlock alive,” Jamerion said. “That tells us something about her holds his interest. Now the Alpha wants her. It doesn’t matter why. We have to come up with a plan to get our hands on her.”

“We don’t have much choice here,” Omhara said.

“We all have our reasons for what we do. Everything we’ve done and want to do hinges on that *thing* calling itself the Alpha-Transcendent acquiring what he wants. And the Alpha explicitly ordered this warlock removed from Bastion’s ship and drained by the ANI. So, that’s what we’ll do.” *How many lies is that? I’ve lost count.*

Khoren looked at the others. “How do we do this?”

“I’ve already set the wheels in motion,” Omhara said. “You three go to Myra’s capital— to Crescenda. Meet with a man named Leader Thurmond *ne* Osterman. He’ll arrange a location for you to take custody of the warlock.”

“How is this *ne* Osterman fellow going to pluck this warlock off Bastion’s ship?” Jamerion asked.

Omhara chuckled. “With magic.”

* * *

Bastion finished trimming his beard, then studied himself in the mirror. After the hot shower, the puckered scars across his chest stood out against the flushed tint of his skin. He traced a finger across one of the more extensive scars running from his right shoulder across to the bottom

of his ribs on his left side. That scar wasn't from a warlock's lash; that one came from his own father's sword.

He walked into his bedroom. After dressing in sleep pants, he moved to his study and activated his computer console.

He accessed the security feed from the warlock's quarters. She still slept. He switched to his comm console. "Security."

"Lieutenant DeOnara here, sir."

"Bring me the android from the brig."

* * *

T'Laan smiled as he bypassed the final lockout to the bridge support commands. Except for a few interruptions, he'd been at his probe via the food dispenser for approximately one hundred fourteen hours. He knew they'd detected him. The admiral set up a wide array of robust systems protections against him—some quite impressive.

T'Laan saw them as a challenge. The counter-probes that tried to slip past his internal defensive measures were formidable. For whatever reason, it appeared Admiral Bastion was content to play a game of cat and mouse with him as he wandered through the *Maelstrom's* computer system, from cleaning bot schedules to the most sensitive sensor arrays.

He'd been at the bridge support pathways for some time now, looking for a way into the command routines themselves. After a few minutes, he came across a course adjustment acknowledgment.

"Myra," he wondered aloud, "why is Bastion interested in Myra?"

He then found a weapons diagnostic program in progress and orders for flight control calibrations on some fighter pods. Crews were working around the clock, verifying weapons readiness and checking defense systems.

“He’s going to attack.”

The door to his cell slid open. He jerked away from the wall unit, severing the link between himself and the ship’s computer.

“I need to speak to the admiral,” he told the two guards who entered.

“This must be your lucky day. Admiral Bastion wants to see you.”

T’Laan fell in line between the guards. Somehow, he had to convince the admiral to let Bryanna off the ship before the attack on Myra began.

* * *

“Come!” The admiral’s voice sounded through the closed door. When the door slid open, the guard behind T’Laan prodded him with a soft shove. T’Laan followed the guards into the main room.

Bastion sat on a sofa, drinking from a water infusion bottle. He was shirtless, wearing a pair of standard issue black sleep pants. He had his feet propped on a small sofa table, and next to his feet lay his sheathed sword.

T’Laan’s visual analysis of the scars covering the admiral’s chest suggested they were of various ages and inflicted by more than one type of weapon.

The admiral pointed to a chair opposite the coffee table. “Sit. Guards, dismissed.”

T’Laan sat.

After the guards departed, Bastion focused on the android. “You’ve been busy. Breaking into a military ship’s computer is a crime.”

“I broke in only because you allowed it. What did you expect?”

“Fair enough. You’re a unique android. One of the first upgraded to autonomous standing and granted free-will citizenship protections.”

“That’s right.”

The admiral studied him for a moment. “You stand accused of Well quarantine violations and harboring a rogue warlock.”

“I won’t deny the charges. All I ask is that you hear me out first.”

“You offer no defense of your actions? No stories about navigation errors and glitches in your system?”

T’Laan shook his head. “No, sir. Guilty as charged and willing to accept whatever punishment you deem justified. Dismantle me, melt my components down and make a lamp out of me, if that’s what you want. But hear what I have to say first, and I’ll melt down as a happy android.”

Bastion crossed his arms. “I’m listening.”

“I know this ship is on its way to the Lumorta system, Myra its exact destination. You’re running diagnostics on weapons systems and verifying fighter pod status. The logical reason for that is pending military action. Correct?”

“Go on.”

“If that’s what you intend, I can’t stop you. That’s between the Lumortans and the Empire. I’m a product of the Triad. My initial programming included the system’s traditional position of neutrality in such matters. I chose to maintain that position when it comes to humans and warlocks after I achieved autonomy. However, I’m admittedly *not* neutral where Bryanna is concerned. You have to let her go. You can’t take her into battle with you.”

“The affairs of this vessel don’t concern her.”

“It will concern her if you attack that planet. You don’t know her, Admiral. You don’t know what she’s capable of or how things affect her. You risk doing irreparable harm to her, and possibly your ship and crew.”

“My ship and crew are my concern. Why do you assume that this warlock’s welfare matters to me?”

“Because you want something from her, or you would have killed her the moment you found out she’s a warlock. You may know a lot about warlocks, but that means nothing when it comes to Bryanna D’Isaac.”

Bastion swung his feet to the floor and leaned forward. His gray eyes leveled with T’Laan’s. “You’re right. I don’t know her. So, tell me. Give me a reason not to keep her on board during a battle. Convince me to let her go.”

* * *

The emperor’s face filled Chancellor Lasko’s comm vidscreen. Lasko smiled politely and nodded as the emperor recounted his exploits at the palace gala.

Ahlaric pushed back from the screen and reached aside. He pulled the stopper from his glass vial and plunged in a finger. “Overall, I have to say I was *quite* the spectacle last night. And by far the most charming gentleman there. The ladies in attendance noticed, too, let me tell you. I had my choice of them, of course, but settled for just a few, those more than willing to *demonstrate* their appreciation for their emperor—repeatedly—well past dawn.”

Lasko softly clapped his hands. “Oh, Your Majesty, I’m sure you are *still* the envy of all who were there. I would have loved to see it.”

Ahlaric laughed. “Don’t be silly. I would never have you in attendance at one of my exclusive palace galas.”

Lasko blushed but kept his smile. “Of course, Your Majesty. A mere jest on my part.”

“A good one, too.” Ahlaric rubbed the black powder into his wrist. “But enough of the pleasantries. Tell me what Admiral Bastion is up to.”

“We’re on course for the Lumorta system and should be arriving within a day and a half. The ship is

running diagnostics, calibrations, and simulations. Every department is abuzz. If he's planned anything other than a planetary purge, he's hiding it effectively."

The emperor's eyes glazed over, and his face flushed. His speech slurred. "The bastard damn well better carry out my orders."

"It seems he is. But I'll remain vigilant in my observations and immediately alert you should I suspect any deviations."

"I'll have to consider... a meritorious citation... you or something...remind me of... one day."

"Your Majesty is too kind."

The emperor slowly slumped forward. His face hit the screen and slid, a line of drool tracing down the screen.

Lasko switched off the link. "Motherfucker!" He grabbed the wine bottle from his desk and turned it up for a long draw, then wiped his hand across his mouth. "Give me a citation. Fuck your citation and *fuck you!*"

He downed the last of the wine and headed for his bedroom.

"Turn the fucking lights off." The main room went dark.

* * *

T'Laan had talked for almost an hour with little interruption from the admiral. "I'm not sure why, but she isn't bound to any single aetheric current. Bryanna doesn't understand it either. I formulated a theory about her ability, but it's only a theory."

"Tell me." Bastion laid stretched out on the sofa, hands clasped behind his head, eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"I think she draws from all known realms. Her ability to manifest in all of them leads me to this conclusion. She also draws from another realm, what most

humans have historically referred to as a 'spirit world.' I believe this is what makes the silver aura."

"Pass white light through a prism, it breaks up into all the colors of the rainbow," Bastion mumbled.

"Precisely. Take that principle and apply it to the realms of the Flow. All the colors of the Flow—the four different realms—pass through Bryanna. Within her, they combine into one color—silver. She's like a prism. All warlocks are born with the ability to channel magic from one particular realm. That's their bonded realm. Bryanna's bound to the silver realm, but she can draw from the others as if bonded to them, too."

"Who trained her? Her parents?"

"Her mother, Victoria D'Isaac, gave her some training, but she died when Bryanna was only five years old. Her control of the magic has been through trial and error. She has enormous energy at her command but little experience of how it works or why. The magnitude of it terrifies her."

"What about her father?"

"Victoria never talked about him. The one time I asked, she told me never to bring him up again."

"According to D'Isaac's log, she discovered how to open a gateway into the Flow about ten years ago. An accidental discovery?"

"Yes. She was a panicked teenager who just wanted to get away, to be somewhere else. The magic reacts to her thoughts and emotions. She told it to get her out of there. A gateway into the Flow not only fulfilled her command, it got her out of there damned quick. The gateway opened beneath her, and she fell through it into the spirit realm—that's what we call her bonded realm."

"And now she goes into the Flow regularly. Why?"

"To be alone. To get away from the stress of her life. To meditate on the ways of the universe, whatever she wants to do while she's in there. It's her realm, her domain."

When she goes in there, she comes out more relaxed and focused.”

“How did her mother die?”

“Mining accident on Eramoor. She was a geologist working for the Triad Merchant Mining Consortium. They were inspecting a newly opened tunnel along a tri-phosmentium vein when the tunnel collapsed. It buried her and her seven-man crew. Their bodies were never recovered.”

“No relatives were willing to take her?”

“As far as we know, Bryanna has no living relatives.”

“She considers *you* her family.”

“Victoria died unexpectedly, leaving one terrified, very confused little girl. Bryanna knew me, of course. I’d been with her mother since shortly after Bryanna was born. Victoria left some funds in an emergency account should something happen to her. I used that to take us to one of the outlying mining camps on Eramoor.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t want the Eramoor Child Protectorate to take Bryanna away from me. Victoria made certain my programming included specifics on the raising of a warlock child. She wanted me to act as Bryanna’s guardian if needed. Under Eramoor law, however, even a free-will autonomous android citizen can’t assume a biological child’s physical custody. So, I kept us off the grid until I could find a way off Eramoor.”

“You kept her isolated and secluded.”

“I needed Bryanna to learn to keep her aura under control before I could take her into public. I knew about a mining operation that was nothing but bots and a few androids at various stages of free-will acquisition. I took us there; no one would look for us there.”

“She’s an anomaly. Humans and warlocks would be curious about her and could pose a threat.”

“Exactly. My number one imperative then, and now, is to protect her, at all cost.”

“You're saying she's self-trained to a limited degree but untried?”

“That’s about it. She has a strong instinct for controlling magic. For example, she can extend it outward to make a shield. You saw her do that to punch the *Wolverine* through the defense grid.”

“And she can gate into the Flow.”

"Yes," T'Laan said. "She moves in and out of the Flow easily. It seems to come naturally to her."

"What about her degree of control in general?"

"Her instincts are strong but not infallible. She struggles to control the magic sometimes, especially when she’s extremely upset or panicked.”

“Has she taken you into the Flow?”

“No. She offered. She said I’d be safe as long as I was in physical contact with her. But I don’t consider the Flow a good place for an android.”

“She’s right. If you’re touching her, you’d be safe.”

“How do you know that?”

“I know a lot about warlocks.”

T’Laan hesitated. “Do you plan to add Bryanna to your pile of dead warlocks?”

“There are ample legal grounds for me to execute her, but I haven’t made a decision.”

“I can’t let you do that.”

“You can’t stop me.”

T’Laan frowned but decided against pursuing that particular subject.

Bastion continued. “Tell me what she’s looking for when she’s in the Flow. What’s calling to her?”

“She doesn’t know. She’s not even sure it’s a *what*; more likely, it’s a *who*. She says she can’t remember ever *not* feeling it calling to her.”

“How did you end up living in the Well?”

“Once I had enough Triad markers to purchase the *Wolverine*, Bryanna and I left the Triad. We drifted from place to place for a while, then found a derelict security outpost inside the Well several years ago. I restored portions of it to include life support for Bryanna, and we made that our home base. It offered the perfect solution to her problem.”

“What problem?” Bastion asked.

“Her human and warlock problem. The few times that others witnessed Bryanna’s aura, she was either feared, labeled a freak, threatened with execution, or targeted for exploitation. And we had to take precautions to avoid crossing your path, too, later on. No one came looking for us in the Well.”

“She says in her log that the call she hears is becoming stronger.”

“Not so much stronger as more urgent. She says it feels like it’s begging her to find it. She doesn’t know why or what she’s supposed to do with it when she *does* find it.”

“This is all very interesting, but nothing you’ve said tells me I should remove her from this vessel before I take the *Maelstrom* into battle.”

“There’s a great deal about Bryanna’s abilities, about her realm that we don’t know. She calls it the ‘spirit realm’ because she can feel a person’s death in the Flow. She’s learned over the years to block it out, to shield herself from it. She does so unconsciously now. But if she’s near when a lot of people die, like in an explosion, she hears their souls wrenched from their bodies. It’s like an overwhelming crush of emotion so intense her mind can’t process it.”

“You’ve witnessed this reaction in her?”

“We were following a transport barge carrying over ninety people when lightning struck it during a storm and it burst into flame. She fell catatonic for hours afterward.

Imagine the effect on her if you expose her to the death cries of *millions*. It will drive her mad or even kill her.”

“Releasing her is out of the question.”

T’Laan leaned forward. “Don’t you get it? Bryanna has barely touched the surface of the power she can command. She says it feels like something alive running through her all the time. If she panics, *anything* could happen. She could blow this ship to hell and probably not even realize she was doing it.”

Bastion signaled for the guards.

“Think about it, Admiral,” T’Laan said as the guards entered. “Are you willing to risk everyone on board?”

* * *

Darkness shrouded the prison colony on Darklit Island as the storm raged across the northern Bolon Sea—typical for this time of year. The towering waves crashed against the rocky shores and threw the power grid offline. Again.

Two male warlocks wearing inhibitor collars sat at a table with their wrists shackled to a metal ring welded to the table. A single battery-powered light globe lit the windowless room. Scars on their foreheads from branding irons designated them as ‘Dead’—those sentenced to life in Darklit.

They looked up in unison as the door opened. A man entered, his cloak closed tightly at his throat and the hem swishing the floor. A cowl pulled over his head cast his face in shadow. He took the seat across from the two warlocks as the door closed behind him.

He sat, motionless and silent.

At last, one of the warlocks said, “Well? You gonna say anything or sit there like a fucking dolt?”

The other warlock chuckled. “Maybe he only likes *looking* at men.”

“You are Ildunem,” the man said to the warlock on the right. “An Elemental warlock and one of the Dead because you raped and murdered eight pre-teen girls ten years ago.”

“So?” Ildunem smirked. “Oh, sorry. Was one of those little lovelies your baby bitch?”

“And you,” the man said to the other warlock. “Thrai. A Corporeal warlock, and also one of the Dead. Sentenced to Darklit after you kidnapped, butchered, and ate your former wife and her father.”

“The old man was a little tough.” Thrai laughed. “Overcooked him a wee bit.”

The man reached into his cloak and pulled out two papers. He passed one to each of the warlocks. “Read these; then we’ll talk.”

The warlocks dragged the papers across the table. They read, glancing up at the man several times before finishing.

“Is this a goddamn joke?” Ildunem asked.

“I assure you it's not.”

“Who the hell are you that you can make an offer like this?” Thrai asked.

“All that matters is that I speak with the full authority of the Queen’s Circle of Exalted Councilors. This is a one-time offer. Agree to it now, or it goes away.”

“This is suicide,” Thrai said. “You want us to kill ourselves.”

“And take Admiral Devon Bastion and his ship with you. Your death, as explained in the terms of the agreement, would be a temporary inconvenience.”

Ildunem scanned the paper again. “This says our bodies will be cloned beforehand and our consciousness stored in an end-of-life re-integration implant.”

“It will take approximately twelve hours to clone your new bodies. When life ceases in your current body, your consciousness —memories, education, emotions, your

very essence—will transfer to your cloned body. You'll feel like you're waking from a bad dream. Then you're free to go about your life. You'll be given a substantial payment and transport to any planet you wish. The one stipulation is that you never return to Myra."

"I've heard about people doing this re-integration thing," Thrai said. "Rich people, not people like us."

"Perform the service detailed in the agreement, and you have a new life and a new body in which to enjoy it."

Ildunem's mouth twitched. "You got a fingerprint signature brush?"

CHAPTER 8

Dawn lightened the sky in Myra's capital city of Crescenda. Thurmand *ne* Osterman, Leader of the Queen's Circle of Exalted Councilors, sat in the back of a dimly lit bar. He kept the hood of his cloak pulled forward to shield his identity from curious eyes. Fortunately, the bar was mostly empty.

Unrest swept the planet with news of the queen's death. Law prevented the heir from ascending to the throne until his mother's body lay in state for twenty days. Until then, the Circle of Exalted Councilors ruled.

With the loss of their beloved queen fresh in the hearts of the Myran people, *ne* Osterman wasn't about to let anyone know Admiral Bastion's ship was on the way to launch a purging attack on Myra's major cities. When Omhara told him of the emperor's purge order, *ne* Osterman knew he couldn't let that happen.

While Omhara prattled on about some warlock he wanted captured, *ne* Osterman formulated a plan to save his homeworld.

The door opened, and two men and a woman entered and approached his table.

"Leader *ne* Osterman, I presume," one of the men said as he sat.

"And you are?" *ne* Osterman looked from one to the other.

“Our names are unimportant.” He motioned for the others to sit. “All you need to know is we come on behalf of Omhara.”

ne Osterman leaned forward. “I want this done as quickly as possible. We’ve been tracking the *Maelstrom’s* approach. It entered our system less than an hour ago. It will be in orbit over our heads within four hours.”

“How long before you’ll have your hands on Bastion’s warlock?” the woman asked. “We’ll need to take custody of her immediately.”

“Once the *Maelstrom* is in orbit, Bastion will contact the Circle of Exalted Councilors to deliver the emperor’s message. The attack on his ship and capture of his warlock will come within a few hours of that.”

“Where’s the rendezvous point for us to collect the warlock?” the other man asked.

“Entaree, a village fourteen kilometers north of the lake on Crescenda’s eastern border. My men will meet you at the local constable’s office to turn over the warlock.”

“Very well.” The first man stood, as did the others. “We’ll be awaiting your call.”

ne Osterman watched them leave. *Idiots*. He had no intention of bringing any warlock off Bastion’s ship to his world. He would bring down both the admiral and the *Maelstrom* and let Omhara and his co-conspirators take the blame.

* * *

The outer door signal chimed as Bastion left his bedroom. “Come!”

Glyndra limped in, still favoring her right knee.

“Good morning.” She held up a computer tile. “Bryanna’s.”

“Leave it on the table.” He strapped on his sword belt. “What about my report?”

"I've already submitted it into your cache." She set the tile on the sofa table.

"Good." Bastion slid his dagger into his boot. "I'll look over it while I'm on the bridge."

"Will you be there most of the day?"

"Probably."

The glint in her eyes told him something was up. He asked, "What is it you want? I know that look."

"I want to visit Bryanna."

"She's dangerous."

"I'll be careful."

"I've talked to the android. He's given up all the background information he's going to. She won't trust you, especially when she finds out your name is Bastion."

"The android is a *he* now?"

"Mr. T'Laan is fully documented autonomous and holds free-will protections. He's a full citizen of the Empire."

"I see. Did you learn anything interesting?"

"D'Isaac's bonded to a previously unknown fifth realm in the Flow. They call it the 'spirit realm,' and it apparently permeates the other four realms. It may even hold them together."

"There's no historical reference to a fifth realm."

"I've stood in D'Isaac's aura. The energy there is unlike any other realm."

"I want to visit her. After reading her log, I've got a working theory. There may be a connection between her and something I've found on that ancient storage chip."

"What sort of connection?"

"Let me visit her, and I'll be better prepared to present my conclusions."

Bastion went to his comm station, signaled security, and cleared her for entrance. He then walked her into the corridor. "Remember, she can be dangerous."

Glyndra smiled. "So can I."

"And have that knee checked, Commander. That's an order." He watched her walk away before heading down the corridor in the opposite direction.

Admiral Bastion entered the medical bay and spotted the ship's Chief Medical Officer. He returned the med staff's salutes as he moved to the doorway of the doctor's office.

Doctor Johnson stood. "Good morning, Admiral."

Bastion closed the office door. "I have a job for you."

Johnson sat behind his desk after the admiral took a seat across from him. "What do you need me to do?"

"I need a warlock put into a stasis coma."

* * *

Bryanna walked from her bathroom with her wet hair wrapped in a towel. At her closet, she froze. Someone was humming a tune in the outer room. She crept to the door and peeked through. A gray-haired, older woman sat on her sofa with one leg propped on the coffee table. A med bot scanned her knee.

Bryanna ducked back. *What the hell is this?* She tossed the towel aside and hurriedly dressed, then marched back to the doorway and parked her hands on her hips. "Excuse me. What are you doing?"

A broad, warm smile lit the woman's face. "Bryanna, dear, please, come sit with me. We have so much to talk about."

Bryanna approached. She glanced at the med bot, then back at the woman. "You want to answer my question?"

"I hurt my knee playing Hover Blaster. I wasn't really concerned about it; aches and pains are a way of life at my age. But Devon insisted I have it evaluated."

“Devon? Admiral Bastion told you to come here to have a med bot look at your knee?”

“Of course not. That would be silly. I came to visit, but you were in the shower. I decided to use the time to have my knee checked.”

The med bot retracted its scanner arm. “Evaluation complete, Commander.”

“Hang on one second, Bryanna. Let me deal with this.” To the bot, “Verbal report, please.”

“You have inflammation in your anterior cruciate ligament, most likely caused by excessive strain and over-use. It is recommended you spend forty-five minutes in a bio-regeneration bath to restore the joint to optimal functioning. Shall I have a therapeutic unit delivered to this location or your quarters?”

“My quarters. I’ll call for it when I return there. Please file your report and recommendation to Admiral Bastion’s correspondence node. And you may go.”

After the bot left, Bryanna started again. “Who are you?”

“I’m Glyndra.” She went to the food dispenser and ordered Triad triple tea. “I’m the ship’s archivist. Would you like some tea?”

“No, thank you. Aren’t you a little old for the guard roster?”

Glyndra laughed. “I’m not a guard—no, no. I’m a trained archaeologist and historian but am much too old now to go digging through ancient ruins. So, now I’m the ship’s archivist.”

Bryanna sat on the sofa. “No offense, but aren’t you a little old for active military service?”

Glyndra returned to the sofa, teacup in hand. “There’s no mandatory retirement age in the military. As long as I meet the physical requirements, clear the medical eval, and my commanding officer certifies me fit for duty, I can remain on active status. Believe me, Devon knows he’d

never hear the end of it if he sent me off to some retirement moon resort.”

“Do you always take such liberties with the admiral’s name?”

Glyndra took a sip of her tea. “I address him with all respect due his rank when that’s the proper thing to do. But we’re only talking here; there’s no need for such formalities. The admiral is my son.”

Bryanna got to her feet and backed away. “You have *got* to be shitting me. He sent his *mother* to interrogate me?”

“I’m not here to interrogate you, child. I thought you might be lonely and may enjoy talking to a friendly face. Devon agreed and cleared me to visit. Nothing more sinister than that.”

“Nothing personal, Commander Bastion, but I don’t think I’d *ever* be so lonely that I wanted to talk to a *Bastion* about anything.”

“Point made. I can understand your feeling that way toward Devon. But I’m not him.”

“Why would you want to visit me?”

“Why wouldn’t I? Everyone on board is talking about the warlock with the silver aura. Being the insatiably curious woman that I am, I couldn’t wait to meet you.”

"Couldn't wait to see the freak, you mean."

"If that's why I was here, I would have said so. Devon isn't likely to release you right away. Would it kill you to make a friend while you're here?"

Bryanna stood silent. She wasn’t sensing anything deceitful from this woman, and Glyndra appeared sincere in offering her friendship. “Look, Commander—”

"How about I tell you about myself? And call me Glyndra. You sure you don't want some tea?"

CHAPTER 9

The *Maelstrom* decelerated on its approach to Myra.

“Establish standard tactical orbit,” Bastion said. “Let me know when the support ships are in position.”

“Estimated time to orbit one minute,” the helmsman reported.

The admiral glanced around the bridge. “Station reports.”

“All stations signal clear and standing by,” the tactical officer said. “All systems online and functioning at optimal readiness. Fighter pods on pre-launch alert. Medical stands ready to receive wounded. Support ships will be in standard formation in high orbit in three minutes.”

Bastion moved to his command chair. “Notify Captain Montison to maintain radio silence until further notice. That goes for all her support vessels.”

“Aye, sir,” comms said.

The Myran defenses stood little chance against the power of the battlecruiser, but Bastion didn’t intend to give the planetary attack forces any opportunity to land a blow.

“I want continual sensor sweeps toward the Well. If our plasma bolts attract anything, I want to know it’s coming.”

“Aye, Admiral.”

“Orbit established and stabilized. External shields at maximum. All stations await your orders.”

Bastion sat forward, elbows on his knees, fingers steepled. "Hail the Queen's Circle of Exalted Councilors."

* * *

"And, so," Glyndra said, "that's why I'm still banned from the Ilkas tribe on the Barrier Moon of Elrak HT73."

Bryanna stood at the food dispenser for another cup of Triad triple tea. Though suspicious at first, she'd decided there was nothing nefarious in Glyndra's visit. She'd quickly become caught up in Glyndra's stories and had laughed so much her sides hurt.

"I honestly can't say that I blame them." She carried her tea back to the sofa. "I mean, imagine finding out you've been performing your most sacred tribal ritual wrong for a thousand years. Consider how they felt, learning they'd been permanently and painfully removing all body hair at puberty because someone mistranslated their First Shaman's writings."

Glyndra shrugged. "I gave an accurate translation, but it wasn't what the shamans wanted to hear."

"Your life has been quite an adventure."

"It hasn't been boring, that's for sure. But that's enough about me. Why don't you tell me something about yourself?"

Bryanna swallowed a long drink of her tea. "Not much to tell. I've never done anything noteworthy."

"I can't believe that. As far as we know, you're the only warlock in recorded history to manifest a silver aura."

"That's nothing special, and neither am I. I don't understand Admiral Bastion's interest in me."

"Devon *always* has a reason for the things he does. You need to be patient and trust him."

"That's not going to happen. Come on, Glyndra. You're asking me to trust a man who's killed more warlocks than I've met in my entire life. He's made me a

prisoner here, separated me from my only friend, and threatened to *gas* me if I so much as consider using my magic. Trust him? Not likely.”

Glyndra sighed. “Devon’s methods are harsh, I give you that, but he has his reasons. Try to see it from his point of view. You took out a sleeper drone, then attacked a guard in the holding bay. An inhibitor collar is useless against you. In his position, wouldn’t you take every precaution to assure the safety of over three thousand crewmen on this ship?”

“Of course, I would, but—”

“Did you know the emperor ordered him to kill any warlocks he found? He’s defied a direct order by keeping you alive. Why would he do that? Why would he risk the emperor’s wrath over someone he doesn’t know—a warlock, no less—if he was uncertain about how important you are?”

Bryanna downed the last of her tea, then stood. “I don’t know.”

“He does it, he *is* doing it, because he knows there are events in play that are bigger than he is, bigger than you are, even bigger than the emperor.”

Bryanna scoffed and moved to the meta-glass port. “How could he know something like that?”

“Devon knows far more about a lot of things than most people think.”

“He’s a monster. Every warlock knows that. How can I possibly trust him?”

* * *

“Incoming communications, sir,” comms reported.

“Transfer to my station,” Bastion said.

A man’s voice came over the comm. “Imperial battle cruiser *Maelstrom*, this is Leader Thurmond *ne* Osterman of the Queen’s Circle of Exalted

Councilors. What is the meaning of your presence here? We've monitored your activities in our system since your arrival and don't understand your posturing."

"Leader *ne* Osterman, this is Admiral Devon J. Bastion, commander of the *Maelstrom*. His Majesty, Emperor Ahlaric, Ruler of the Known Galaxy, has decreed all Lumorta criminally lax in performing its sworn duties to the Empire, in upholding and enforcing His Majesty's laws, and in providing His Majesty's coffers with your agreed-upon annual tribute. Repeated attempts to remedy this unacceptable situation through diplomatic channels have failed, as have legal actions through the Imperial courts. His Majesty's attempts to settle this dispute peacefully have proven futile. Compliance with Imperial law—civil law, including tax laws, and criminal law—is required of all member systems in the empire, as you know. Therefore, His Majesty has declared the Lumorta system guilty of treasonous acts against the Crown. In accordance with His Majesty's orders, Myra will be brought to heel through purging. A list of targets is being transmitted to you now. You have eighteen hours to evacuate your people."

Silent seconds ticked by before *ne* Osterman responded. "There is obviously some sort of misunderstanding at work here. I will relay your concerns to our most benevolent queen and return to you with her response in one solar day."

"Not even a warlock can speak with the dead, Leader. The countdown is running. I suggest you spend your time evacuating your people. Bastion out."

He signaled the comms officer to terminate the link and walked to the vidscreen. "Any sign of defensive systems coming online?"

"No, sir."

"I want continuous monitoring of planet-wide defense and communication systems."

Commander Rhola came up beside him and leaned close. “Begging the admiral’s pardon, but an eighteen-hour evacuation window wasn’t included in the emperor’s orders.”

“It wasn’t prohibited, either.”

Rhola smiled. “Excellent point, sir.”

* * *

T’Laan lay on the bed in his cell. He’d placed himself in stand-by mode ten hours earlier for some much-needed internal recalibration, but he’d kept his sensory awareness active. He heard the door sliding open and someone entering. As he brought himself back online and sat up, his proximity scanners confirmed his visitor’s identity.

“Admiral.” He swung his feet to the floor and stood. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

The door slid closed as Bastion took a seat on the bed. He sat forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped in front of him.

“Is it Bryanna?” T’Laan sat beside him. “Has something happened?”

“My lady is fine. She’s been talking, laughing, and drinking Triad triple tea for several hours with my ship’s archivist.”

T’Laan smiled. “Good. I’m glad she’s making a friend. And she *loves* triple tea. She can never get enough of it.”

“I’m going to place her in a stasis coma during the active operations against Myra.”

T’Laan shook his head. “Oh, hell. She’s *not* going to like that.”

“It’s what’s best for the safety of all concerned, including her.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I want you there when she’s placed in the coma, and you’ll remain until she can be revived. She’ll feel less threatened if she knows you’ll be watching over her.”

“There’s an easier way, you know. Let her go.”

“Not an option. The decision is made. Cooperative or not, she *will* be placed in a stasis coma. All I need to know is whether or not I can trust you to follow my instructions while I’m on the bridge.”

“Bryanna could consider my cooperating with you a betrayal.”

“She could. But I suspect you can convince her that isn’t the case.”

“And what happens if I don’t follow your instructions?”

Bastion stood and moved to the door. “I flood her stasis unit with di-trillium gas and melt you down for parts.”

T’Laan slowly nodded. “At least we understand each other.”

“Guards will escort you to her quarters when it’s time.”

T’Laan stood as the door slid open and Bastion left. “I guess I’ll wait here until then.”

As the door closed, T’Laan frowned and slowly sat back down. “This shit just got serious.”

* * *

Omhara gazed at the night sky and drew a deep breath of cool air. He stood alone in the meadow, far from the lights of any city or town. Kallagor’s four moons were in their half-moon phases and aligned north to south.

Only a few wispy clouds overhead reflected the moons’ light. A breeze stirred autumn’s earthy scent in the surrounding forest—one of his favorite smells.

He looked at his naked chest. The embedded gemstone glowed blood-red. The *something* inside undulated and squirmed like a worm on a hook. A network of veins extended outward from the stone and disappeared under his ski. It no longer hurt as it had when the Alpha-Transcendent first implanted it.

The jewel vibrated and pulsed in sync with his heartbeat, and the Flow's current moved through him like a lazy, meandering river. At first, the sensation centered on the gem but then spread throughout his body.

This was what warlocks experienced from birth—the ever-present caress of an aetheric stream. It was a natural sensation they learned to master as they matured. Omhara didn't have that advantage.

It was what he coveted most—the power of a warlock. He'd yearned for it since the first time the Alpha had directed the Flow's current through his body. The raw magic's touch had lost its sting, replaced by a warm familiarity he wanted with him always.

A red halo expanded outward to spin slowly around him—shifting shades of reds and oranges floating like plumes of colored, translucent clouds in a spiraling cocoon.

Smiling, he focused on a small torund tree at the edge of the forest. He formed an image in his mind—the torund tree ablaze—then watched, mesmerized, as fingers of fire sprang to life in his pulsing corona.

Like snakes moving to strike, three fingers of red and orange flames writhed and slithered through the air toward the tree. The current coursing through his veins increased. The fire transitioned to yellow with white-hot tendrils in the center.

He laughed as his flames encircled the trunk, spreading to leaves and branches. They popped and crackled as the blaze consumed them. He drew the energy back into his aura and slowly quelled the red glow surrounding him. As fire engulfed the torund tree and

spread to another beside it, his laughter echoed across the meadow.

Omhara returned to his auto-conveyance, took his seat, closed the clear meta-glass hatch, and gave instructions to take him back to the palace. He pulled his robe about his shoulders, closing it to cover the gemstone, and watched the fire spread.

Once the auto-con left the meadow, he settled into the seat for the ride back to Mithara, the intoxicating touch of the magic oozing through his veins.

* * *

As Glyndra watched Bryanna stare out the viewport, her heart went out to the girl. There was no way to put herself in Bryanna's place because her own life experiences were so different. Among the jaded populous of modern imperial society, some might see Bryanna as cunning and manipulative. But given the naïve persona she projected, others might judge her vulnerable and try to take advantage.

"Do you know who you remind me of?" she asked.

Bryanna shrugged. "No. Who?"

"Devon, as a child."

Bryanna snickered. "You're kidding."

"No, I'm serious." Glyndra chuckled. "When Devon first came to me, the prospect of trusting anyone terrified him. You could tell him the day was sunny and beautiful, and he wouldn't believe it until he saw it for himself."

Bryanna came back to the sofa. "What do you mean, he came to you?"

"Devon is my adopted son. He and I found each other when he was ten. He'd been orphaned and needed someone. I always wanted a child but never found the time.

So, we formed our own little family. Sort of like you and T'Laan."

Bryanna relaxed into the cushions. "I suppose that could be considered common ground. Does he remember his biological parents?"

"All too well, I'm afraid."

"What does that mean?"

Glyndra waved off her question. "That's a subject for another day and probably one best covered by Devon himself."

Bryanna scoffed. "Yeah, right."

Glyndra decided it best to change the subject.

"When you were growing up, did T'Laan tell you any of the legends about ancient warlocks?"

"Not really. I wasn't a big fan of bedtime stories."

Glyndra stood and went to the food dispenser. "Oh, you must hear the story of the *noesha uth'johan gler'yka*."

"The what?"

"Bromethian filterworm wine, clear, chilled, two,"

Glyndra ordered. When the glasses appeared, she handed one to Bryanna before retaking her seat. "*Noesha uth'johan gler'yka*. That's an ancient pre-cataclysm warlock dialect. It means 'the prime conjoining.' The legend goes like this: in the before-time—meaning the time before recorded history—humans and warlocks lived on a world where vast, roiling seas separated their homelands. Neither knew about the other until a phantos warlock walked the Flow."

"Walked the Flow?" Bryanna asked. "What does that mean?"

"That means to open a portal, enter the Flow, and travel through it to another place."

"Ah," Bryanna said.

"Legend says this phantos warlock discovered how to do this, and he used it to travel to the other side of the world. He stepped from the portal into a village of humans. This man with a shimmering yellow aura showed up out of

thin air. He tried to talk to them, but their languages were different."

"What was he thinking? Just popping in out of nowhere? Probably terrified them!"

"Exactly. The religious leader among the humans declared the warlock a demon come to destroy them all. Things turned violent rather quickly. The warlock was just as terrified—he wasn't expecting to find people who looked like him but had no magic. He tried to escape, but he couldn't open a portal quickly enough. The humans overwhelmed and killed him. So, now the humans knew there were others on their planet—people who looked like them but were different.

"Because the phantos warlock didn't return, the others didn't know what had happened to him. They believed he'd gotten lost, and their rulers forbade any others from walking the Flow."

"But the humans knew about the warlocks."

"Yes, and they obsessed over it. They knew the warlock didn't come from their land, so they decided he must have come from across the sea. They thought if *one* came, more would surely follow. They had to find a way to protect themselves. Their fear became the catalyst for the humans' thirst for tools, machines, and eventually, technology. Something the warlocks had no interest in or need for."

"Warlocks used magic to do everything."

"Fast forward many centuries. Humans developed rapidly toward industrialization. They learned to sail the seas. And they never forgot about the warlocks. They passed stories down in oral histories. Myths sprang up around the stories that time embellished. But they never forgot the fundamental premise that started it all—there were people somewhere out there who once came to destroy them and would come back one day to try again.

“Time passed until, eventually, the humans amassed an armada to traverse the sea and conquer the warlocks. Our two sister races both became intent on annihilating the other. Warlocks had their connection to the Flow. Humans had their technology. The resulting bloodbath went on for almost a century. Until the *noesha* appeared.”

“*Noesha*?”

“*Noesha* means ‘prime’ in the ancient tongue. This *noesha* was a warlock who advocated for peace with the humans. She grew so strong—”

“The *noesha* was a woman?”

“Yes. More powerful than any of the others.”

“To what realm was she bound?”

“No one knows. But she found a way to end the war, to save both races from extinction. She met with the king of the humans and made her proposal to end the war. The king agreed, seeing her plan as the only way to avoid the continued slaughter, on both sides.”

“A truce?”

“More than that,” Glyndra said. “The *noesha uth’johan gler’yka*—the prime conjoining.”

CHAPTER 10

Muted beeps, dings, and chimes intermingled with the voices of the crew. The sounds of the bridge floated around the admiral, but he barely registered the din as he went through Bryanna's logs. The *Maelstrom* would begin its purging attack on Myra in approximately sixteen hours, and he still had to tell the warlock about the assault and the stasis coma awaiting her.

"Admiral, incoming communication from the planet."

Bastion didn't look up. "Put it on bridge audio."

"Transferring to audio."

"Admiral Bastion here."

"Admiral, we must talk." Leader *ne* Osterman's frantic plea filled the bridge.

"I'm listening."

"We simply cannot evacuate our major cities in the minuscule amount of time you've allotted us. I *implore* you to give us more time. There are women and children in our cities. You *must* delay your attack."

Bastion stood, signaled to comms to mute the outgoing audio, then walked to the tactical station. He handed the tile to Commander Rhola. "Transfer this entire log to my personal files. What does the situation on the ground look like?"

"Chaos, sir," Rhola reported. "They began evacuations in an orderly manner, but that lasted about an

hour before panic set in. Most of the military ground forces are standing down or have deserted. It's pandemonium."

The leader's voice came over the comm, more anxious now. "Admiral Bastion, are you hearing me? We must have more time!"

Bastion moved back to his command chair. The leader's voice once again filled the bridge. "Damn you, Bastion! Answer me! We will not allow you to do this. Do you hear me? This will *not* happen!"

The admiral signaled comms to open the link. "Leader *ne* Osterman, this is Admiral Bastion. Request for delay of purging operations denied."

"Admiral, please be reasonable. We simply cannot comply with your evacuation order in the time you've given us. I am *begging* you; show us mercy, sir!"

"I did not *order* you to evacuate your cities, Leader *ne* Osterman. I merely suggested it. I recommend you spend less time begging and more time evacuating your population. Purging operations will begin in approximately fifteen hours, fifty minutes. Bastion out."

He signaled the comm officer to cut the link as he stood. He went to the tactical station and looked over the current sensor data. "Still no planetary defenses coming online?"

"None," Commander Rhola said. "According to their military chatter, the official position at the moment is to maintain a non-threatening posture. There's been an increase in activity at military bases, and there's a rush of civilians into the planet's major spaceports. There've been no launches, though, civilian or military."

"Notify Leader *ne* Osterman that any ships leaving the planet without express authorization from me will be shot down, no exceptions. Are we on schedule to begin purging operations?"

"Yes, sir. Operations set to commence in fifteen hours, forty-eight minutes. All systems ready."

“Very good. You have the bridge, Mr. Rhola.”
Bastion headed for the lift.

* * *

“The *noesha uth’johan gler’yka* legend is one of the most cherished in warlock culture,” Glyndra said. “I’m surprised you don’t know it.”

“As I said, I wasn’t much for bedtime stories,”
Bryanna said. “But I’m all ears if you want to tell me about it.”

“I love telling this story.” Glyndra smiled and settled into her chair. “The *noesha* and the human king stood naked on a floor of polished copper. The room was octagonal, with clear skylights overhead. They faced each other in the center of the room and embraced. Volunteers surrounded them—eight humans and eight warlocks, two warlocks from each of the four aetheric realms.

“The *noesha* engulfed the king in her aura as the warlocks surrounding them called up their magic, one by one. The humans stood behind them, back to back. The *noesha* drew from each warlock to create a tether between them. When her power reached a ferocious level, when the warlocks were all near the point of losing control, the humans did their part.

“Each human held a sword. Each plunged the sword into their abdomens, piercing themselves through to impale the warlocks behind them on the same sword. The—”

Bryanna gasped. “They killed themselves? Did the warlocks know they were going to be killed, too?”

“Yes. They all volunteered to give their lives.”
Glyndra paused a moment before continuing. “As the humans and warlocks died, the *noesha* drew the essence of the warlocks, their souls and the souls of the humans, into herself. With this aetheric magic captured, she gazed into

the eyes of the human king. He kissed her as she collapsed her aura.

“Those who were there to witness the event ran from the room, screaming about lightning filling the chamber, explosions and flames, and a roar like the sound of a dragon, so loud their ears bled. It was four days before anyone could go back into the chamber to see what happened to the *noesha* and the king.”

When Glyndra paused, Bryanna asked, “What did they find?”

“The bodies were gone. The only thing remaining was a massive, perfectly formed, and completely clear double-terminated crystal. It floated above the copper floor and spun slowly on its axis. It cast rainbows around the room as it rotated under the skylights.

“From that point on, humans and warlocks were able to understand their different languages and to interbreed. Warlocks could feel other warlocks in the Flow and learned how to balance their use of aetheric energy to avoid interfering with their fellow warlocks’ ability to channel the Flow.”

“Now, tell me how much of that child’s fantasy you really believe.”

“Until recently, not much. Now, I’m not so sure.”

* * *

Ildunem and Thrai studied their clones submerged in the maturation gel. Inserted into the living bodies were numerous tubes and wires. Both clones neared completion of the final developmental cycle.

“We’re ready to initialize your end-of-life re-integration implants,” the doctor said. “If you gentlemen will come with me.”

Thrai nudged Ildunem. The shackles and chains on his wrists and encircling his waist rattled. “You hear that?

We're *gentlemen* now." He grinned at the guards behind them.

Ildunem walked beside Thrai as they followed the doctor down the hallway. "We'll be dead gentlemen before long if this re-integration shit don't work."

"It'll work. I told you, I heard about this stuff. It's what rich bastards do so they don't ever die."

They followed the doctor into a room with two reclining med chairs. He indicated for them to sit. After the two guards shackled them into the chairs, the doctor waved them out.

"Now, gentlemen," he said. "Here's how this works. I'll place you in a semi-comatose state. This will allow the download of, in a word, *you*, to your individual end-of-life-integration implants. That will take about an hour. I'll then implant a re-integration trigger into your brains.

"At the time of death—meaning when all brain function ceases—the re-integration trigger will signal the end-of-life implant in your respective clones. You'll be downloaded to your new bodies and then revived. You'll spend a few hours getting oriented to your new selves; then you'll go to a spaceport, where you'll receive your payment. You'll take the first transport off-planet, and you will *never* return to Myra."

"Sounds easy enough," Ildunem said. "Get on with it."

"Yeah," Thrai chuckled as the doctor picked up a laser scalpel. "Bring it on. I'm feeling hungry."

* * *

Bastion walked to the closed doors of Bryanna's quarters and returned the salutes of the guards. "Any problems?"

"No, sir. Commander Glyndra is still visiting."

Bastion sounded the door chime then stepped in as soon as the door slid open. Glyndra and Bryanna got to their feet as he approached.

“Commander Bastion, you’ve concluded your visit, have you not?” Bastion asked.

Glyndra glanced at Bryanna. “Based on that hint, I’d say I have.”

Bryanna spoke up. “I’d like her to stay, please.”

“You’re dismissed, Commander,” the admiral said.

Glyndra patted Bryanna’s shoulder. “I’ll check back on you later if you’d like.”

“Yes, please do. I look forward to it.”

Glyndra whispered as she passed the admiral. “You be nice.”

Bastion stood silent, his gaze fixed on Bryanna until the door slid shut. He then took a seat at the end of the sofa.

“Why are you here, Admiral?” Bryanna asked.

“Sit down, my lady. We must talk.”

“Say what you have to say, then leave me alone.”

“I don’t have a great deal of time. Sit.”

“Well, don’t let me keep you.” She turned toward the bedroom.

He jumped to his feet, grabbed her arm, spun her around, and shoved her onto the sofa. He towered over her, his shadow engulfing her.

She sat up and smoothed her clothes, then glared at him. “I told Glyndra you were a monster. You just proved my point.”

“You may think me any manner of creature you wish. But like it or not, we must talk.” He sat close beside her. A vein in her neck pulsed, and she breathed in shallow pants.

He took her hands and held them tight as she tried to pull away. “In approximately fourteen hours, I’m taking the *Maelstrom* into battle. The emperor has ordered an assault on Myra.”

“Dear God. Why?”

“I gave the Myran leader time to evacuate his people, but their efforts have been minimally effective. There will be massive casualties.” He held fast when she tried to jerk her hands free. “Mr. T’Laan told me this battle could have an adverse effect on you.”

“You spoke with T’Laan? Where is he? Is he all right?”

“He’s fine, for now. He broke into my ship’s computer. This charge will be added to the others he faces for violating Well space quarantine and harboring a rogue warlock. The emperor has given me the authority to adjudicate those charges as I see fit.”

She shook her head. “You can’t blame him. He only did what I told him to do. He’s an android. He was only following my orders.”

“Mr. T’Laan’s certification of full autonomy is well documented. He has free will in thought and deed, and is subject to the laws of the empire, as any other citizen.”

Tears welled in her eyes. “Please don’t harm him.”

“He’s been judged guilty as charged. All that remains is punishment.”

“What are you going to do to him?”

“That’s up to you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I offer you an arrangement. One I believe will ultimately benefit us both. I’ll free Mr. T’Laan after the matter in the Lumorta system is finished and return the *Wolverine* to him. He’ll be allowed to go on his way, all charges dropped.”

Suspicion furrowed her brow. “In exchange for what?”

“You’ll agree to cooperate with me at every turn, do whatever I ask of you without question, and conduct yourself in a manner I see fit. You’ll remain onboard

the *Maelstrom* for whatever length of time I choose. You'll give me your word on it."

She stared at him. "You'll free T'Laan if I agree to enslave myself to you? That's what you're offering me?"

"You are no one's slave, my lady, and you never will be. When in private, you may conduct yourself in any way that pleases you. However, in front of my crew, or any civilians we may encounter, you'll present yourself as my willing companion. You'll agree to any limitations I place on your use of magic. You'll follow my instructions without question or hesitation, and you'll answer truthfully to any questions I pose to you. In return, I'll spare the android and set him free."

Her eyes narrowed, teeth clenched. "Or I could kill you, take my friend and leave."

"The android would be terminated before you left this room."

She stared at her hands, her body trembling. Anger etched its way across her face when she focused back on him. "Why are you doing this to me? Glyndra said you have reasons for what you do. Tell me, please. I don't understand any of this. What do you *want* from me?"

"Agree to my terms, and I'll answer all your questions in time."

"This has nothing to do with the emperor or his warlock vendetta. This is about me. It's personal to you."

Her jaw clenched, her chin quivered, lips pursed. It was a look he'd seen in many warlocks who faced him—her panic was escalating.

Her voice shook. "You want me to place myself completely in your hands—body and soul. You want something from me, Admiral. I know that. And you're determined to have it, aren't you?"

"Yes."

She tried again to pull her hands away. “Nothing else matters to you, does it? As long as you get what you want. How long would I have to remain with you?”

He held her securely. “What I want is irrelevant. You’ll remain here for as long as necessary. Nothing you do will change that. The only thing left to resolve is the fate of your friend. That’s up to you. I need your answer.”

“I will not kill for you.”

“I won’t ask you to.”

She blushed and turned her face away. “I will not willingly give myself to you.”

He reached up to cup her chin and turned her to face him. “You misunderstand, my lady. You will always be safe in my presence. I pledge to you that I will defend you—body, soul, and *virtue*—against any who would do you harm. You have my word of honor as an officer of the Imperial military.”

When he released her, she drew a shuddering breath and clenched her hands into fists. She met his gaze, and her voice quivered. “How do I know you’ll actually free T’Laan?”

“I’ll allow you to accompany me to the hanger bay to see him off. You have my word.”

“And how do you know *I’ll* keep my word to *you*?”

“I could have the android’s programming adjusted to include a self-destruct imperative in the event you breach the terms of our agreement. But I would prefer a simpler arrangement to ensure compliance on both our parts.”

“What sort of arrangement?”

He leaned close to her ear. “Trust, my lady.”

Her shoulders sagged, and she spoke through dry lips. “Damn you, Devon Bastion. Since you leave me no choice, you have my word.”

“You always have a choice.”

She glared at him, a solitary tear sliding down her cheek. “I’ll play your game in front of your men, Admiral.

But know that it's only a mirage. If you were on fire, I would not *piss* on you to put out the flames. I want to be certain you understand that."

"Understood."

"Now, with or without your permission, I'm going into the other room for a moment. Don't even consider following me."

Bastion watched as she ran into the bedroom. The closed door couldn't silence her cursing and screaming.

He sat back on the sofa and smiled.

CHAPTER 11

Bryanna sat on the side of the bed, her anger spent. She leaned forward, elbows on her knees, palms to her forehead. Never in her life had she felt so alone.

Admiral Devon Bastion had irrevocably changed her world. She agreed to place herself under his control because she didn't see a viable alternative. Bastion told her that she always had a choice, but she felt trapped.

If she tried anything with her magic, Bastion would have T'Laan destroyed. If she used her magic against the admiral himself, he'd have her head with his blade, as he'd done with every other warlock who'd crossed him. She could threaten the *Maelstrom*, but he'd just call her bluff. She couldn't harm the thousands of people on this ship—her nature wouldn't allow such actions, and she suspected Bastion knew that.

Most saw T'Laan as nothing more than a mere android, but to her, he was as much a person as any biological man or woman, human or warlock. In her eyes and heart, he was the father she'd never known. Abandoning him or taking any action that could place him in danger was out of the question.

She wiped the tears from her face when she heard Bastion at the door.

"I'm coming in, my lady."

She moved to the external viewport and stared out at the planet below. She didn't want to look into his eyes.

“Time is short,” he said as he approached, his faint reflection showing in the meta-glass. She stiffened as he lay his hands on her shoulders. “There are still a few things you need to know.”

She drew a deep breath. “I don’t know that I can take much more.”

He turned her to face him and her eyes locked with his. *I will never be free of this man.*

“It won’t always be this way.”

Is that regret I hear in his voice?

“For now, this is best for all concerned. That means my crew, my ship, my empire, and my universe. And it’s best for you, whether you can see it or not. You *must* trust me.”

She choked back a sob as a traitorous tear slid down her cheek. She squared her shoulders and glared up at him. “I truly hate you.”

“I know.” He encircled her in his arms and pulled her close, easily overpowering her attempts to push him away. She felt his enormous strength—physical, mental, and emotional—that Glyndra mentioned. She sensed a conflict smoldering deep within him but couldn’t identify it.

Her gaze traveled over his arms around her, pressing her against his body. His subtle scent sent shivers through her abdomen. It engulfed her, drew her breath away. She inhaled hard, drinking his aroma—earthy, leather, steel, power. An unexpected rush of warmth sparked to life deep inside her and spread with torturous leisure. Her heartbeat accelerated, and her breath caught in her throat. Blood rushed to her face, and she suddenly put her hands to his chest and pushed against him. Surprisingly, he relaxed his hold.

She quickly turned back to the viewport, praying he didn’t see the blush burning her face. He returned his hands to her shoulders.

She drew a deep breath then slowly let it out. "Tell me. Get this over with."

His voice was devoid of emotion. "Tell me how a purging operation against Myra will impact you."

"I don't know. T'Laan always avoided conflict. A bar fight or two, or a disagreement over the terms of a trade deal. Please don't do this; don't destroy Myra."

"How many aetheric streams do you feel in the Flow?"

"What difference does that make?"

"How many?"

"Five." She stared at his reflection. He was looking past her into the darkness of space. "The military is supposed to protect the people of the empire, not murder them on the whim of a sadistic emperor."

"Five? You're certain?"

"Yes. Five distinct energy currents. Each feels different yet alike at the same time. I don't know how else to describe it. Please don't murder the people of Myra. I'm *begging* you."

"Remember our agreement, my lady. *Honor* it, and there will be no difficulties between us. Do you understand?"

"I understand our agreement but not this action against Myra. The people here have done nothing to justify this. There are women and children down there, Admiral. You can't just kill them."

"My orders are clear, sanctioned by the High Council, and ordered by Emperor Ahlaric. The purging operation doesn't concern you, but for your safety and the security of my crew and ship, you'll be placed in a stasis coma."

She stiffened, blood pounding in her ears, knees trembling. She didn't think she could be any more terrified, but she was wrong. "You can't do that. I'll do whatever you want, but don't do that to me."

“I can, and I will. For the safety of all.”

She turned back to face him. His unwavering gaze, the set of his jaw, his squared shoulders—his determination was daunting. “One day, Admiral, there will be a reckoning.”

He shrugged one shoulder. “Probably, but that day hasn’t come yet. You’ll be in a stasis coma, but you won’t be left alone. There will be a med bot to monitor your physical condition. It’ll bring you out of stasis if there is the slightest problem. Glyndra will also be here to watch over you.”

Having Glyndra nearby would be reassuring, most certainly. *Why does he care how I feel?*

“Mr. T’Laan will also be here with you.”

Allowing T’Laan to be with her was more than she expected, beyond what she’d hoped. *Why is he showing such kindness to me? Should I trust this man?*

No amount of shielding would prevent her from hearing the cries of those dying on Myra. Nothing would block her from feeling their souls ripping from their bodies. *If I were conscious, that is.*

Placing her in a stasis coma would prevent her from enduring that singular horror.

Not hearing the carnage would not stop the slaughter. *How can I trust a man who can murder an entire world?*

“I must go, my lady.”

She sensed a shift in his mood, like a dark fog settled around him. Any sign of the tenderness she sensed earlier—*did I really feel it?*—disappeared. She had to try once more. “Please don’t do this. They’re women and children. How can you murder *children*?”

“My orders are not open to discussion.”

“To hell with your orders! You said I have to trust you. How can I do that if you murder innocents? I’ll see

you as a monster with the blood of millions on your hands if you do this.”

He stiffened; his jaw clenched and the muscles on his neck rigid. He stepped back, and his left hand slid to the hilt of his sword as he walked away. “Think of me in whatever manner makes you happy. The military missions of this ship don’t concern you. The med bot will be in later to begin the stasis coma induction.”

She followed after him. “Of course, it concerns me. It should concern *anyone*, human or warlock, who has a heart and a soul! You’re going to murder innocents who have nothing to do with any of this. *Children*, Admiral! You’re going to slaughter people who’ve done *nothing* other than defy some insane edicts from the mind of a drug-addled *fool*.”

He reached up to the control panel beside the door.

She grabbed his arm as he stepped into the threshold. “Please, Admiral, don’t be the monster people say you are.”

He removed her hand, then reached again to the control panel. The door slid shut in front of her.

She pounded her fists on it. “Devon, *please*! Don’t do this!”

Her pleadings echoed unanswered.

* * *

“He’s doing *what* to the warlock?” Omhara’s face filled the comm screen in Chancellor Lasko’s study. The regular static in the piggybacked link crackled intermittently.

“Putting her in a stasis coma,” Lasko repeated. “She’ll be dead for all practical purposes during his little Myra operation.”

“Why? If he wants her incapacitated, why not simply *decapitate* her?”

Lasko leaned back in his chair. “Scuttlebutt is all over the place. I’ve heard rumors, from ‘she’s a mental case’ to ‘she’s got the power of a god.’ Others say she’s rejected romantic advances from the admiral, and he’s punishing her. I don’t put much stock in that one; there’s no way Bastion would lust after a warlock.”

Omhara cleared his throat. “How much time before he launches the first plasma bolts?”

“Six hours.”

“We must act before the first assault wave launches. When I contact you with an exact time, get to the warlock, and distract the guards.”

“Distract the guards?” Lasko sat forward. “How the hell am I supposed to do that? Bastion’s guards don’t distract—”

“You’ll figure out a way to get it done. Do *not* disappoint us.”

Lasko froze. There was a fierceness in Omhara’s eyes, an intensity Lasko had never seen before. “Are you threat—”

Omhara cut the connection. Lasko stared at the blank screen. *What have I gotten myself into?*

* * *

Glyndra watched the admiral pace. The tension in his shoulders, coupled with the smoldering agitation in his eyes, worried her, but not excessively. She saw this reaction in him whenever his orders went contrary to his assessment of whatever situation he faced. But Devon was a soldier, above all else. He would do his duty—he wasn’t a traitor. *Not yet.*

“Mr. T’Laan will be there with you,” he said. “I don’t anticipate any difficulties from him, but keep an eye on him.”

Glyndra sat in her favorite chair, feet propped on a stack of books. Her quarters were constantly in a state of organized chaos. Books, ancient manuscripts, scrolls, and a jumble of artifacts from all over the galaxy adorned the floors with innumerable boxes holding what she collectively called her “little treasures.”

“Is this stasis coma necessary?” she asked.

“It’s the best solution available.”

Glyndra sighed and swung her legs down from their perch. “The poor thing. She must be frightened.”

“She’s terrified. But she’s also dangerous. That’s why I’m worried about you being there.”

“You’ve told Bryanna I’ll be there. She’ll think you’re up to something if you change your mind, and she’s suspicious enough of you.”

“I know, but you *must* be careful.”

Glyndra smiled. “I may be old, but this bird still has a few tricks up her sleeve. I’ll try to settle her down before the med bot arrives.”

“It’s two hours until we launch on Myra. I’ve got to get her in stasis and get back to the bridge. I expect delivery of the portable med unit within the hour. The guard detail will bring Mr. T’Laan from the brig at the same time.”

Glyndra clasped her hands. “Oh, good! I’ve wanted to meet him. After going through Bryanna’s logs, I can see why he’s so important to her.”

Bastion took a seat on her sofa. “Tell me what you’ve learned from that chip.”

“You know the warlock bedtime story of the *noesha uth’johan gler’yka*?”

“It’s a children’s fantasy tale. What of it?”

“I still haven’t been able to break the encryption on that one section of the chip, but I have finished translating the rest of it. It talks about an archaeological find in a place called the *Laer’Maethor ah Th’tar*. ”

“Wellspring of Life and Souls.”

She nodded. “It doesn’t name the planet, but I’m assuming this was on the original homeworld. The dig uncovered an ancient religious complex with an almost maze-like interior. In the central chamber, they found this Wellspring of Life and Souls. It was a crystal, incredibly pure, free-floating, and slowly rotating over a copper floor.”

“The *noesha uth’johan gler’yka*.”

“The prime conjoining. Exactly as described in the children’s tale. Many ancient legends and stories passed from generation to generation have a basis in fact. I think the *noesha* tale may be one of them. It may have a pre-Cataclysm origin.”

“Even if it does, what significance does it have to the present day?”

“The chip holds information of a technical nature—advanced mechanics and theorems that I don’t understand. Commander Thomas and a team from astrophysics are working on that. Attached to the technical information was an addendum from a field station. This team of scientists was conducting experiments of some sort on the floating crystal. They used a machine they called an aetheric enhancer. It amplified a warlock’s bond with the Flow, allowing them to channel more aetheric energy and focus it with laser-like precision.”

Bastion frowned. “These scientists used their machine on the Wellspring crystal?”

“Triggering the Cataclysm—that’s my theory.”

* * *

Leader *ne* Osterman circled the two warlocks, looking them over head to toe. They stood still, eyes glazed, faces pale. The two guards held their swords at the ready.

ne Osterman approached the table in the corner of the small office and picked up a NED-pistol. He stepped up to Ildunem and extended the weapon. "Take it."

Ildunem hesitated a moment, then took it. He studied it. "NED-pistol. Been wanting one of these."

"What will you do with that weapon?"

Ildunem shrugged. "Kill Admiral Devon Bastion."

ne Osterman smiled. "Excellent."

He turned to the other warlock. Thräi wore a spuncloth vest, bands of plasma conversion strands woven into it. These highly explosive, illegal munitions were extremely volatile, their destructive potential hard to predict and contain. Authorizations for the use of these strands stipulated their use on fully automated mining asteroids only.

The detonator hung around Thräi's neck.

ne Osterman pointed at the detonator. "Do you understand what you're to do with this?"

Thräi looked at the solid yellow light on the placard. "I key in the numbers 6-3-0 on the back of this card, then push the yellow button."

"Right. When do you do this?"

Thräi glanced at Ildunem, then met *ne* Osterman's gaze. "When I see Admiral Devon Bastion's face."

ne Osterman clapped his hands and laughed.

"Perfect, gentlemen. I know you're still feeling a little mental fog from the end-of-life implants, but that will pass. Do you think you can start the process of locating the admiral now?"

Both warlocks nodded.

ne Osterman stepped aside and pointed to a vidscreen on the wall behind him. "Look here, my friends. This is a recording from a few years ago. The man speaking at the podium is Admiral Bastion. Memorize his face, his voice, then use your magic to locate him through the Flow.

Once you find him, gate to his location and fulfill your mission.”

Both warlocks studied the vidscreen. *ne* Osterman smiled as Ildunem’s red aura seeped out to engulf him. Moments later, Thrai’s green aura oozed out.

ne Osterman and the guards stepped back, giving the warlocks room as their auras softly vibrated.

* * *

Bryanna paced her quarters as she’d been doing for the past hour. She’d gone over and over it and couldn’t think of any other way to test the admiral’s word.

He’d said he rigged her quarters to flood with di-trillium gas if she used her magic. He then forced her to give her word she’d stay on the *Maelstrom* and cooperate with him.

Why would he need such an agreement if he intended to gas her? *He wants something from me. So, which does he want more—gas me, or force me to do whatever he wants?*

“Come on, Bryanna,” she mumbled. “Make a damn decision.”

She’d know he was bluffing about the gas if she pulled energy from the Flow and nothing happened. She would then be free to use her magic to find T’Laan, take the *Wolverine*, and get them out of here. It wouldn’t matter that she would be breaking her word to the admiral because he’d forced it from her under false pretenses. She could look at herself in the mirror with a clear conscience.

If, however, he *wasn’t* lying, and she did set off his gas trap, she’d be dead before her first breath reached the bottom of her lungs. She could hold her breath and probably open a portal into the Flow before the gas got to her. By the time she found T’Laan, though, the admiral

would have already destroyed his core processor—the android equivalent to his soul.

Was it a chance worth taking? Would she rather stay here, under the admiral's thumb, or take a chance that she and T'Laan could escape?

Glyndra said he defied a direct order from the emperor by keeping her alive. Would he really kill her after taking such a risk? He told her she always had a choice. Was that true?

She paused and drew a deep breath. "There's only one way to find out."

Gently, she touched the current of the spirit realm wafting through her. As soft as a butterfly kiss, the silver light of her aura flickered around her.

* * *

"How?" Bastion said. "Tell me."

"They tried this on the Wellspring crystal," Glyndra said, "thinking it could be a doorway to another dimension. They planned to confirm the existence of another layer of the multiverse, then shut it down before it could do any harm. You have to remember—this all happened over five thousand years ago. The existence of a multidimensional, multi-layered universe was still a theory."

"Why would they think this massive crystal could be a doorway?"

"Warlocks told them the Flow felt incredibly strong near the crystal. The record quotes one scientist as saying it felt as though the Flow itself originated within the stone. She described it as 'flowing out like a river bursting from a fountainhead.'"

Bastion frowned. "That could mean anything."

"Yes, it's rather cryptic, but what happened with their machine isn't. Their experiment cracked the crystal and broke off a shard."

“You think cracking this crystal precipitated the Cataclysm?”

“I think cracking this crystal tore a breach in the barrier between our dimension of the multiverse and one or more other dimensions. I think that’s what caused the Well, and what’s keeping it in flux today.”

“An open dimensional rift?”

“That’s my working theory. I think it all goes back to the *noesha* tale.”

“*Noesha*. The warlock that made the telepathic link with D’Isaac called out to *noesha*.”

“It’s a legend many warlocks know.”

“Why would she cry out to a children’s fantasy figure when she’s *burning alive*?”

Glyndra thought for a moment. “That doesn’t make much sense.”

“Unless the burning warlock thought *noesha* was a living warlock who could help her.”

“I suppose that’s—”

Bastion’s wrist comm sounded an emergency signal. He activated it. “Bastion.”

“Detecting aetheric energy in the warlock’s quarters, Admiral,” Commander Thomas said. “Di-trillium gas ready to deploy.”

“Negative.” Bastion ran for the door, Glyndra hurrying behind him. “Hold, pending my order. Keep this comm open.” He drew his sword as he raced toward the lift. The crewmen in the corridor flattened against the walls to clear the way.

When he reached the ring and deck where the warlock was housed, he yelled to the guards to open the door as he approached Bryanna’s quarters. It slid open as he arrived at the threshold. “Stay here. No one enters.”

He stepped into Bryanna’s quarters. A buzzing alarm filled the great room. Bryanna stood in the center,

eyes wide, face pale. Shaking, she looked ready to collapse. He saw no sign of her aura.

“What did you do?” he demanded as he approached.

“I...I thought...I’m...”

He leveled his blade toward her chest. “Do not move. Not a muscle.” Into his wrist comm, he said, “Stand down di-trillium gas, Commander Thomas. Kill the alarm.” He slammed his sword into its sheath, planted his hands on his hips, and glared at her.

She looked at her feet.

“Admiral!” Glyndra called from the doorway.

“Permission to enter.”

“Permission denied.” He stepped toward Bryanna.

She took a step back.

“Do not move!” He grabbed her forearm, pulling her back towards him, then pushed his face down within inches of hers. “Not. A. Muscle.”

She trembled so violently her teeth clattered. Bastion straightened. *Good. I want you so terrified of me you won’t try a stunt like this again.*

“Admiral, please,” Glyndra pleaded from the door.

He stepped back, glaring at Bryanna. “Permission to enter, Commander. Close the door behind you.”

Glyndra hurried into the room. “What happened?”

“My lady was about to explain,” Bastion said.

“Let’s hear it.”

She looked up at him, then at Glyndra. Tears formed in her eyes.

“No!” Bastion shouted. “Do *not* shed a single tear. Not this time.”

“Devon—” Glyndra touched his arm.

“Do you need to leave, Commander?”

“No, Admiral.”

He scowled at Bryanna. “Explain yourself. *Now.*”

“I...I’m sorry.” She glanced at him, then quickly looked away. “I had to know. I wasn’t sure if you were

honest with me, and I didn't know if I could trust you. You could have lied to me about anything—or about everything. I needed to be sure.”

“And now?”

“I was wrong. I should not have doubted you.”

He stepped up to her, grabbed her upper arms, and lifted her off her feet. “Do you understand you almost got yourself killed? Do you understand *now* that I mean what I say? Do you understand that testing me is a *very* bad idea?”

“Yes.” She squirmed in his grasp. “I won't do it again.”

“You better not. I'll blow *you* out an airlock instead of your android.”

“I understand. Please, Devon, you're hurting me.”

He set her down and pointed to the sofa. “Sit.”

She hurried to do as he said.

“Commander, talk to her.” He brushed past Glyndra and left.

* * *

Thrai's green aura throbbed. “I've found his ship.”
ne Osterman and the guards stood against the room's back wall, keeping clear of the warlocks' auras.
“Find Bastion, then gate to his location.”

“I have the *Maelstrom* now, too,” Ildunem said. His red aura swirled like a cocoon. “I'll start at the stern, and you start at the bow.”

* * *

Glyndra handed the cup of Triple Tea to Bryanna then sat beside her. “You're getting yourself much too worked up over this. A stasis coma is not going to hurt you.”

“Easy for you to say.” Bryanna took a long drink of her tea. “You’re not the one being forced into it.”

“Was risking your life going to change anything? Did you think it would change Devon’s mind?”

“I didn’t know what else to do. I need this *not* to happen.”

“Let’s look at this logically. Try to put your emotions aside for a moment.”

“I don’t see—”

“Work with me here.”

Bryanna set her tea aside and slid back into the sofa cushions. “Okay. I’ll try.”

“Good. Now, we know the *Maelstrom* is going to attack Myra. This is nothing you or I have any control over.”

“I *begged* the admiral not to do this, but he wouldn’t listen to me.”

“When it comes to his job and his duty, *no one* makes those decisions but Devon. You can’t concern yourself with things beyond your control.”

“You’re right. I know.”

“So, why would Devon consider it dangerous for you to be conscious during his operation against Myra?”

“Because of what I am, because I haven’t been trained like other warlocks. Because T’Laan told him about some problems I had before when a lot of people died. He doesn’t trust me to control my magic when people are dying.”

“What happens if you’re in proximity of someone who dies?”

“I feel them, like a shadow. They linger a moment before they’re swept away in the Flow. Some scream—horrible, gut-wrenching screams—as they fade into the silver light. I don’t know how else to describe it.”

“That’s what happens when one person dies,” Glyndra continued. “How is it different when there’re mass casualties?”

“It’s paralyzing...terrifying...like a chorus...a cacophony of screams burning through me. It’s all telegraphed in an instant along the current of the spirit realm. I hear and feel them. It’s more than I can bear.”

“Can you shield yourself from it?”

Bryanna shook her head. “Not completely. It’s overwhelming.”

“When it happens, how would you describe your reaction?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes, the magic rises so fast and strong, it’s hard to control. When that happens, it scares me, and that just makes it worse.”

“Can you understand why Devon may see that as a problem?”

Bryanna covered her face.

“Bryanna?” Glyndra prodded. “Why would that concern Devon?”

Bryanna dropped her hands and exhaled. “Because it makes me a threat to his ship and everyone on board.”

Glyndra patted her hand.

Bryanna’s shoulders drooped. “I’m an idiot.”

Glyndra laughed lightly. “No, you’re not. You’re a normal warlock who’s feeling natural fears.”

“I think—”

The door slid open and a med bot entered, pushing a portable med unit. Behind the bot, a guard walked in with T’Laan at his side.

Bryanna jumped to her feet and ran to the android, throwing her arms around his neck. He wrapped her in his arms and swung her around.

“Hey, kid, it’s okay,” he whispered. “I’m here. I’ve got you.”

“I’ve missed you. I was so scared for you.”

“I’m fine. Not so much as a scratch.”

Bryanna leaned back to look into his face. “Don’t lie to me. If the admiral hurt you, tell me right now.”

T’Laan set her on her feet and moved his hands to rest on her shoulders. “On my honor, I swear no one has hurt me. The admiral has done nothing other than have a few conversations with me. Simply talked. Nothing more.”

She hugged him one more time before taking his hand. “Come meet my friend.”

T’Laan bowed to the older woman seated on the sofa.

“T’Laan, I would like you to meet Glyndra,” Bryanna said. “Commander Glyndra Bastion, ship’s archivist.”

“Bastion? Any relation to the admiral?”

Glyndra watched, fascinated, as T’Laan’s electroplasma network lit up like fireflies dancing up and down his arms. She extended her hand. “I’m proud to call myself his mother. And equally proud to finally meet you. Bryanna has told me a lot about you.”

Movement near the door drew Bryanna’s attention, and she looked to see the admiral enter. She stepped up to him. “I have to ask—are you going to punish T’Laan for what I did earlier?”

“No.”

“I had to ask to know for sure.” She looked to the med unit. “Before you stick me in that thing.”

“Is there going to be a problem inducing the stasis coma?” Bastion asked her.

“No. No problem.”

“Good. Med bot, recognize Admiral Bastion, Devon J. Prepare to induce stasis coma.”

CHAPTER 12

Rain drizzled across the city of G'Layla. Rycappa's environment varied from scorching desert to glaciers and permafrost. G'Layla lay near the planet's equator and thus enjoyed a more consistent climate than other regions. Days of slow, persistent rainfall were typical.

Raindrops peppered the meta-glass roof covering the Alpha-Transcendent's quarters on the top floor of the House of Rael Temple. He paced his spartan flat, furnished only with a bed, a nightstand with a glow-globe, a chest of drawers, and a single, straight-backed chair.

The presence of the One inside him was restless, the slithering symbiotes penetrating his muscles and internal organs especially active. The Alpha endured the relentless pain of these parasites without complaint. He accepted it as the price his mortal flesh paid for the divine privilege of housing the God of Rycappa.

Unusual activity in the Flow agitated the Being. This could mean only one thing: warlocks were drawing energy from the aetheric streams. Somewhere, they were using the Flow's magic to a far greater degree than usual.

The god didn't tolerate any warlock draining energy from the streams it desired. Months of careful manipulations by the One's minions established the emperor's decree requiring inhibitor collars and Tranquil Dark infusers in warlocks. It had taken almost a year of

propaganda campaigns to shift public opinion in favor of the legislation.

Once prohibitions were in place to control warlocks' access to the Flow, the aetheric buildup in the reservoir beneath the temple had increased substantially. With Syndria, Khoren, and Jamerion working to keep the supply of warlock specimens available for draining through the ANI machines, the Being could move forward with its plan to morph into a physical being.

When it completed its metamorphosis, the God of Rycappa would be the galaxy's first and only Divine Eminence.

The transition of the One would not go unnoticed, however. There would be consequences of the Being's transformation. It was the nature of magic that warlocks shared the aetheric currents of their bonded realms. Philosophers and those claiming false religious doctrine continued their ages-old debate on the Flow's metaphysical attributes and meaning. Whether it had a meaning to it or not, the Alpha didn't really know. Nor did he care.

Warlocks felt it when one of their own bonded realm, or many in conjunction, drew increasing amounts of energy to themselves. If one warlock got too greedy, the others of the same domain felt the effects and suffered the consequences. Many philosophical scholars considered this the work of some grand Creator who used this to maintain the balance between warlocks and the aetheric streams.

The Alpha considered that nonsense, but the explanation placated many curious minds, so he let it be.

By the gracious blessing of the One, the gemstone over his heart gave him the ability to channel the Flow in the Being's name and for the Being's glory. For that blessing, he endured the creatures burrowing beneath his skin. And for that blessing he would soon give up his life.

He closed his eyes and continued to pace, the pain of the One's agitation sending spasms through his body.

Blood oozed from his eyes and slid down his cheeks like teardrops.

“We will die so We may live.” The Alpha-Transcendent repeated his mantra as he paced. Above him, the rain persisted.

* * *

Ildunem’s aura flared as a passage into the Flow formed in front of him. “I’ve found Bastion. Opening gateway to his location.”

“I’ll follow you.” Thrai’s gateway formed.

Ildunem eyed *ne* Osterman. “Are our clone bodies ready?”

“Certified one hundred percent by three physicians. They have their end-of-life implants and are ready to receive your consciousness.”

Ildunem and Thrai stepped through their portals into the Flow.

When the doorways closed and faded, one of the guards asked, “Begging my lord’s pardon, but is it true? They’ll have new bodies and be free men, loose to do what they want?”

ne Osterman laughed. “Don’t be an idiot, man. Of course not! Those clone bodies are for sale to research institutions. They’ll fetch a nice price, too. No, the universe will be rid of those two in a matter of hours. Notify the prison population overseer of two open cells at Darklit.”

* * *

Bryanna flinched at the bot’s robotic reply. “Recognize Admiral Bastion, Devon J. Preparing for induction of stasis coma. State name of patient for medical record.”

She met Bastion’s gaze and saw nothing in his eyes but her own reflection.

“Bryanna D’Isaac,” he said.

A violent churning in two of the aetheric realms grabbed Bryanna’s attention. She looked around, then back at Bastion. His face hardened as he drew his sword. *He feels it, too.*

“T’Laan! Get them out of here. Now!” Bastion grabbed Bryanna and pushed her toward T’Laan as the alarm filled the cabin. Bastion barked into his wrist comm. “Stand down di-trillium.”

Bryanna staggered back. Two portals into the Flow formed—one the fiery red of the elemental realm, the other the vibrant emerald green of the corporeal.

“Warlocks!” Bryanna shouted as two men stepped through the portals into her quarters.

Their whirling auras engulfed them. She felt the Elemental gathering his power, preparing to strike. The Corporeal hesitated, his green aura building, but the magic lacked focus.

Admiral Bastion faced the intruders, sword at the ready.

“Let’s go, kid!” T’Laan grasped Bryanna’s arm and pulled her across the room. Glyndra hurried with them toward the doorway as the two guards rushed in.

“Get the hell off my ship,” Bastion ordered. He crouched, facing the intruders—a predator prepared to pounce.

The guards ushered Glyndra into the corridor as a ship-wide alert sounded. T’Laan pulled Bryanna toward the door, but she resisted. “Wait, T’Laan. Something’s wrong.”

“I know,” T’Laan said. The roar of fire building in the red warlock’s aura filled the room. “There are two insane warlocks in your quarters!” T’Laan wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her to the doorway. She grabbed the door jamb, struggling to keep Bastion in her sight.

“Help him!” she yelled at the guards. They stood to the side of the doorway, their NED rifles pointed at the floor. “Don’t just stand there!”

“NED rifles are no good against a warlock,” one guard said. “We *can*’t help him.”

Bryanna focused on Bastion. She sensed an enormous rush of adrenaline flood the admiral’s body as his mind fixed on the warlocks.

Bastion fainted forward, then sidestepped right, sweeping his sword in an arc. Fire flashed as the admiral sliced his sword through the warlock’s aura. Black scorch marks seared into the ceiling and floor.

With a cry, Bastion lunged forward and brought his sword around. He rolled, propelling his body directly into the erupting tornado of flame. Fire exploded when it met his blade. His Irondren steel sword glowed orange-white.

The admiral rolled to the side, coming instantly to his feet. He lunged, and in one smooth swipe, he cut a gash through the whirling red aura.

With another thrust, Bastion broke through the last of the intruder’s defenses to penetrate his aura.

“No!” Bryanna cried as the admiral disappeared into the roiling flames.

The Corporeal’s aura flashed with angry bolts. He fed energy into the other, green funnels of smoky light leeching into the spinning mass of flame. He fumbled feverishly with something hanging from his neck—a small placard with a flashing yellow light. Bryanna looked into his face, at the tortured grimace, the vacant, soulless eyes.

Something was wrong with these two. She reached out with her mind to touch the man’s thoughts, her consciousness easily sliding through his aura. His mind reeled—his thoughts tortured and chaotic. An image of the placard from his neck kept flashing to the forefront of his thoughts. It terrified him.

In the millisecond it took Bryanna to touch the warlock's mind, she understood with absolute clarity what he was trying to do with his trembling hands.

"Goddammit! Let me go, T'Laan!" She pulled on the door jamb with all her strength. "He's got a bomb!"

"Clear out!" the guard shouted. "Seal this cabin!"

"You can't help him, kid," T'Laan said.

Bryanna whirled on him, her aura flashing. "The *fuck* I can't!"

T'Laan staggered back, holding up his arms against the brilliant silver light. "Be careful!"

Bryanna leaped into the room. As the guards moved everyone away in the corridor, Bryanna rushed the intruders.

Her aura blazed with brilliant silver light. She moved toward the corporeal warlock, her magic building. Flares of blue-white lightning crackled amid fingers of gossamer silver which spun like a growing tornado. Silver plasma strands streaked through the smoke, merging with the pitchforks of electricity flashing around her.

She sensed movement to her right. Bastion leaped from the elemental's aura. He landed in a half-crouch, both hands on his sword, his attention riveted on the corporeal.

Behind Bastion, the elemental warlock's aura dissolved as the body crumpled to the floor. A gaping wound laid open his chest, exposing his ribs. His severed head lay a few feet away.

"He has a bomb!" Bryanna cried.

The admiral rushed forward, sword held high. He brought the blade down through the churning aura. Green lightning and flame exploded to engulf him.

Bryanna felt the impact against her aura. Bastion's painful cry telegraphed through the current of the spirit realm.

She opened herself to the churning current of the Flow. Her aura flared with violent waves of crackling

silver-white energy, filling the cabin. She cried out as her magic collided with the corporeal warlock's aura.

A deafening roar vibrated the walls as Bryanna's aura swallowed and collapsed the corporeal warlock's.

She stumbled forward, the shock wave from the warlock's aura warping the metal of the floor. She glimpsed the admiral's sword near her feet. Looking up, she saw Bastion wrestling with the warlock, attempting to gain control of the placard.

The lights on it flashed: 06...05...

Bryanna threw a bolt of silver light between the two men, knocking them away from each other. She ran to Bastion and threw herself against his chest, wrapped her arms around his neck, and clamped her legs around his waist. Her aura pulsed, engulfing the admiral and the corporeal warlock.

Bastion embraced her, turning his back to the corporeal as Bryanna opened a portal beneath their feet. All three plummeted into the aetheric current of the spirit realm.

CHAPTER 13

Bryanna held on to Bastion as they tumbled into the raw current of the Flow. Her portal slammed shut behind them. The corporeal warlock loomed over Bastion's shoulder. The countdown continued: 04...03...

"Go!" She extended her arm toward the warlock. A force, like a wave of silver light, crashed into him, throwing him backward.

...02...01...00

She pulled Bastion against her body and wrapped her aura around them. He hugged her close, his head bent to her ear, as the flash of the plasma explosion burned over them.

"Hold on." He whispered as the shock wave smashed into them.

She clung to him with all her strength. The force ripped through her body as if turning it inside-out. She screamed against Bastion's chest. The passing of the wave seemed to take a lifetime.

The Flow shifted. Connections between the realms loosened; they separated like unraveling threads.

A monstrous roar filled her ears, and her head pounded with each heartbeat. She tried to open her eyes, but the silver light pushed into her brain like slivers of glass. She put her lips next to Bastion's ear.

"It's coming apart," she whispered. "The Flow is separating."

When she fell limp against him, he scooped her up in his arms. “Take us back to the *Maelstrom*. Open a portal to the ship.”

A familiar sound stabbed into her consciousness—a sound she’d heard in the Flow for years. She cried out and clutched at Bastion.

A throbbing ache filled her head. Her mind floated as if in a dream. A distinctive voice—an unearthly, ghostly call reverberated inside her. Whispers echoed in her mind. Words resonated through her consciousness—a haunted, tortured voice that spread the chill of antiquity throughout her body.

Bastion’s voice broke through her fogged brain. “The portal, Bryanna. Open a portal to the *Maelstrom*. Now.”

She roused for a moment, then slumped against him as a shimmering gateway opened into her quarters on the *Maelstrom*. As Bastion leaped through, her aura faded.

She drew a soft breath. “Centralis. Take me to Centralis.”

* * *

The stillness of the night hung heavily over the CF1703 facility. The captive warlocks slept, induced into slumber by measured doses of Tranquil Dark mixed with sedatives administered through their implanted infusers. The drug cocktail was standard for all warlock prisoners to ensure the nights passed without incident. Guard details were at a minimum because of it, which reduced operational costs, and it also limited the number of people who knew what went on inside the prison’s walls.

Activity continued through the wee hours in the four chambers housing the Aetheric-Neural Interface hubs. With the Alpha-Transcendent demanding more energy for

the Temple Proper in G'Layla, Syndria worked her crews around the clock.

She'd introduced three new warlocks to the ANI the previous morning. They were adjusting to the machine's torturous actions, but the perfectionist in Syndria needed to make sure everything functioned smoothly with her new specimens.

She sat at the north ANI chamber's central computer console and frowned when Khoren walked through the doorway. "What are you doing here?"

He took a seat beside her and rubbed his eyes. "I can't sleep. Remind me never to mix Azerion spice dumplings with Cronach yellow wine again."

Syndria smiled. "I think I tried to warn you before you started gorging on it like it was your last meal."

He waved a hand at her. "Don't talk so loud, please."

"So, why come here to bother me?"

"Haven't you heard?" He stood to look through the glass into the ANI chamber. The naked warlocks lay on a circle of tables around the ANI. "A man's eyes are the window to his soul. My soul needs some soothing, and there's nothing more soothing than naked women."

"You're a perverted son-of-a-bitch, Khoren."

"I know, and you love—"

An explosion engulfed the ANI chamber. Syndria ducked beneath the console as glass from the control booth imploded in a wave of red-orange flame. Her breath came in short, fearful pants as she wiped away drops of blood from the many small cuts the flying glass sliced across her face.

Khoren fell to the floor; his nose and eyelids were gone, and his body engulfed in flames. She screamed, gagging against the vomit rising in her throat as the smell of burned flesh assailed her. Fighting fear and panic, she pulled herself up to peer over the console. The meta-glass

dividing wall had shattered, the shards all over her ANI console. Most of the console seemed to be still intact, however.

The ANI machine had exploded—nothing remained of it. All the warlocks were burning; the last blue aura faded from one of the males.

She ducked as another explosion rocked the control room. The southern ANI chamber had exploded. Crouching, she hurriedly pulled up the current ANI status data.

Each of the four aetheric streams experienced a simultaneous disturbance. A massive surge like none she'd ever seen in the Flow maxed out all the readings—it held the signature of a plasma conversion explosion.

An enormous shock wave spread across the aetheric realms. Her aetheric monitors were off the charts.

She reached for her bi-phasic teleporter. *Dammit!* She'd left it on the nightstand in her quarters two decks up. Even if she could get to it, she had no time. She closed her eyes and leaned against the counter to brace herself for what was coming: the western and eastern ANI chambers were over the main power restraint couplings for the facility's utility network. The power grid would be next.

The shock wave from the grid explosion liquified Syndria's body instantly.

* * *

Bastion stood by the viewport in his quarters, Bryanna in his arms, his impatience growing with the crowd buzzing around as he waited for the arrival of a new portable med unit and monitoring bot.

"Myra. Will you still attack?" Bryanna's voice was weak and hoarse.

"Yes. Those warlocks were from Myra. And my orders haven't changed."

"You don't know they were from Myra."

“They bore the brand of the Dead, criminals sentenced to life in prison under Myran law.

Leader *ne* Osterman sent them; I’m sure of that.”

“There was something wrong with them. You have to find out what. Promise me.”

The med unit and bot arrived at last, with Doctor Johnson in tow. “I’ll look into it.”

Doctor Johnson had his med scanner in hand.

“Admiral. Are you hurt, sir?”

“Look to her first.”

Johnson ran his scanner over Bryanna. “You’re still placing her in a stasis coma?”

“Yes.”

“Good. She’s basically one huge contusion. She needs rest until her warlock healing does its job.”

“Get the med unit ready. She’ll remain here.”

Bryanna stiffened; he hugged her until the spasm passed. She touched his face. “I don’t really hate you.”

“I know.” He surveyed the room and found Glyndra. T’Laan stood at her side. Bastion met Glyndra’s gaze, then motioned for her and T’Laan to join him.

“Get out!” Bastion’s voice boomed above the din. “Medical staff remains. The rest of you, out! Now!”

Glyndra pointed to the blisters forming on his hands and arms. “You’re injured.”

“It’ll heal. I want you here to monitor D’Isaac while she’s in the stasis coma. Alert me on the bridge if there are any problems.”

“Of course.”

“And I need you to find something for me.”

“Find what?”

“Centralis. A place called Centralis. Everything you can dig up about it.”

“Centralis. Got it.”

He said to T’Laan, “You are to remain here for as long as she is in stasis. There’ll be guards posted outside,

but you'll be her first line of defense. I've ordered you a sword—an Ironthren blade—that you'll keep on you at all times. Understood?"

"Yes, Admiral. Thank you for letting me be here."

"You're here to assure nothing happens while I deal with the bastards who did this."

T'Laan's electroplasma network came alive. "You think the Myrans attacked the ship?"

"No. I think their attack was targeting my lady or me, if not both."

Doctor Johnson approached. "Med unit ready, Admiral."

Bryanna stirred in his arms as he carried her to the med unit. "You'll be in stasis for at least a couple of days." He paused while the med bot placed electrodes on her temples and at her wrists. It then injected the induction sedation into her jugular vein.

"Don't leave me," she mumbled.

He lay her inside the tubular portable med unit. He smoothed the hair from her face and leaned close as Doctor Johnson began the induction process. "I will never be far away, my lady."

She looked at him, her eyes already clouding, and reached a shaking hand up to caress his face. "My lord."

He took her hand and lay it across her chest as she slipped into the coma. He stepped back as the meta-glass lid closed over her. Within seconds, the soft hum of the med unit synced with her slow, steady breathing.

Doctor Johnson checked the controls at the head of the unit. "Everything looks good. She should be fine in a couple of days."

"Monitor her closely from Medical. I want to know if there is any change in her condition. Dismissed, doctor."

"Very good, sir."

Bastion walked toward his bedroom, pulling off the remains of his shirt as he went. "The bedroom is yours, Glyndra. I'll be on the bridge for some time."

"You need rest, too, Devon."

"I'll rest later." He went to the closet and pulled out another shirt. As he returned to the outer room, the door chime sounded.

"I've got it, sir." T'Laan hurried to the door as it slid open.

A guard held out the admiral's sword. "The admiral's sword and the Irondren blade requisitioned."

T'Laan took the weapons and thanked the guard. He met the admiral coming across the room. "I guess this extra one is mine."

Bastion took his sword and returned it to its sheath, while T'Laan strapped the other blade to his waist.

Bastion nodded toward T'Laan's weapon. "Do not let me catch you without that sword at your side while you're guarding her."

"Not a problem, Admiral."

Bastion paused in the doorway. "If anything happens to Glyndra or my lady on your watch, Mr. T'Laan, I'll blow you out an airlock."

CHAPTER 14

Something as simple as rain showers would not subdue the Rycappan capital city of G'Layla. Even when the occasional gale-force winds drove the rain hard enough to crack windows, the city continued to vibrate with life. The citizens of G'Layla enjoyed their reputations as perpetual revelers.

However, some locations in the city shunned the glitz and glamor of a population that never seemed to sleep.

The Inner Sanctum in the Temple Proper of the House of Rael stood silent and dark. Dry, frigid air filled the vaulted room and surrounded the altar to the One God of Rycappa. Vicar Edock knelt naked before the sacred platform, his discarded vestments folded neatly on the floor beside him.

He closed his eyes and clasped his hands in supplication. He'd maintained his position for hours. His breath billowed out in a cloud, and he shivered continuously from the chill. The biting cold gnawed at his bones. He struggled to focus his mind, to hold on—the One was testing his flesh and faith, taking the measure of his resolve and commitment.

Something brushed against his back. *It's just the cold, that's all.*

The frailty of the flesh threatened to break his concentration on his devotions. *That can't happen. I'm a*

vicar of the House of Rael. My devotions cannot waver in the presence of the One.

A whisper near his ear—a sound that should not be there. He'd performed this ritual numerous times, and a mind-numbing silence always surrounded him like a cocoon. *Why is there now a sound?*

A moan seemed to ooze from the walls of the Sanctum. He dared not open his eyes. *If I look, the One will reject my devotions. Could this be some new test?*

The moaning morphed into a coarse, guttural rumbling as its volume increased and reverberated through the room. It was a soulless exhalation, an inhuman sigh that washed over him. It bore the scent of death.

The One is testing me. Perhaps I'm considered as a future Alpha-Transcendent?

He mustered the last of his remaining strength to hold his pose and his meditative concentration when he felt the touch of the One. Coils—like a gigantic snake—encircled him in a spiral of slimy, ice-cold fingers that pinned his arms to his chest and locked his tired legs in their grasp.

A growl floated over the vicar. His eyes flew wide when the frigid tentacles constricted. Pinpoints of light danced across his vision as the pressure increased.

A voice in his mind mumbled incoherently in a language he didn't understand. He struggled to free himself. Mottled greenish-gray tentacles slithered around his body and tightened with each breath. He looked to the altar, seeking the One as a source of salvation.

An amorphous, gelatinous mound behind the altar undulated, quivered, and finally morphed into a translucent, out-of-phase mass of wraith-like shadows. It shifted constantly, never completely coalescing. *Is that a body? Something alive?*

Flashes of light—red, blue, yellow, green, and silver—like jagged bolts of lightning crackled across its surface.

Vicar Edock wanted to scream, but his mind seized as the thing tightened its grip and lifted him into the air. The *pop* of his breaking ribs echoed through the chamber. Blood oozed from his nose and mouth as the tentacles dragged him across the altar. The coils of the One began dissolving his body before it extended its mass to engulf him completely.

Tentacles wriggled over the altar and onto the floor of the Inner Sanctum, absorbing every drop of the vicar's blood. A satiated vibration coursed through the One God of Rycappa as the vicar's body dissolved inside the phase-shifting mass.

* * *

“Attend the deck!” Rhola’s call met Bastion as he stepped from the lift.

“Report, Commander Rhola.” Bastion joined Rhola at the tactical station. “How much damage did the warlocks do to my ship?”

“Wall and floor structures in cabin JY42 and those adjacent to it are buckled and will have to be replaced. All the affected cabins have been evacuated, and reassignments made. Cabins are sealed, pending repairs.”

Bastion focused on the forward vidscreen. “Anything from Myra?”

“No communications from the planet. The evacuations are ongoing.”

“What’s our time to projected launch?”

“One hour, three minutes.”

Bastion took his command chair and swiveled to face the comm station. “Inform the citizens of Myra that purging operations will begin in one hour. Planet-wide

broadcast on all civilian comm channels. And give me a one-hour countdown inset into the forward screen.”

“Aye, sir. Sending now.”

“Run down readiness status, all stations.”

* * *

Leader *ne* Osterman watched the loading bot bring their luggage up the boarding ramp. Time to get underway. He turned to his mate. “Where are the children? It’s time to board.”

She hooked his arm in hers. “They went aboard with my mother a few minutes ago. I told you, but you were preoccupied with your thoughts.”

He patted her hand. “I apologize. I’ve been so—”

“No need to apologize.”

He led her up the ramp to the boat. “I know I’ve been neglectful. But I’m looking forward to this little outing. A few days at sea will do us all good.”

He saw her to their cabin and checked on his seven-year-old twin sons. This would be their first voyage on the open ocean. He smiled, remembering their excitement when he told them about the trip.

It was all part of his contingency plan, of course. If the warlocks he sent to the *Maelstrom* failed, the purging attack would happen. He and his family would be drifting in the open ocean aboard this leisure boat when it occurred. Bastion’s targets were specific cities. The middle of the sea seemed a perfect place to ride out the attack.

If his warlocks accomplished their mission, there would be no attack. He would spend a few days relaxing with his family, then return to life as usual.

With that thought in mind, he headed for the dining hall and its fully stocked bar.

* * *

The last seconds of the countdown ticked away.

00:23...00:22... 00:21...00:20...

"It's time. Authorize attack plan Myra-3," Bastion said. "Lock on pre-selected targets. Get weapon locks on any fighters that power up. I want to know the instant they lift off. And go to Stage One alert."

"Assault pods report ready, sir," Rhola said as the Stage One alert echoed throughout the ship. "Awaiting your orders."

"Launch the first wave of fighter pods. They are to fly low, out of the range of ground fire, but close enough for ground sensors to detect them. Fire on my command only."

...00:10...00:09...00:08...

"Targets locked and verified," tactical reported. "Pre-selected targets only. Initial pod wave launching now. Secondary waves on stand-by."

Launch indicators lit up all over the bridge. The first wave of fighter pods streaked toward the planet.

"Incoming communications," the comm officer reported.

"No response." Bastion stood. "Any defensive systems coming online?"

"L-class fighters powering up at the palace launching bay," tactical reported. "Planet-wide alarm systems activating."

...00:02...00:01...00:00...

"Fire plasma conversion bolts on pre-selected targets, full batteries, and on those L-fighters," Bastion ordered. "Instruct pods to begin their runs and initiate squadron rotation. Weapons free. Fire when ready."

A shudder vibrated through the ship. Bastion followed the first plasma-conversion bolt's path as it burned its way through the planet's atmosphere. Massive, fiery explosions on the planet's surface lit up the

viewscreen. The targets were located in a single sector of the northern hemisphere. The *Maelstrom*'s plan of attack would take it around the globe, concentrating fire in a sector-by-sector grid pattern until the ship made a complete circumnavigation of Myra's northern lands. It would then shift its focus to the southern hemisphere.

"Seven incoming L-fighters over the southern pole," tactical reported. "Pods locking on and moving to intercept."

"Can you locate their launch origin?" Rhola asked.

"They trace to a pad on the western tip of the southern continent. They have shields up, but they're weak. They're experiencing power fluctuations in their main defensive systems."

"Lock on that location and fire," Bastion ordered. The *Maelstrom* vibrated as the plasma bolts sped away. The small but lethal pod fighters darted through the planet's atmosphere, intercepting most of the barrage of missiles aimed at the battlecruiser.

The *Maelstrom*'s one-person fighter pods quickly dominated the air-to-air battle. Like an elongated seed husk with pointed ends, their aerodynamic design was an ideal shape for atmospheric combat. They easily outmaneuvered the opposing Myran defenses.

The pod pilots, lying prone in their well-shielded ships with interactive helmets synced to their nervous systems, reacted within microseconds of the speed of thought. They attacked en masse, like a swarm of angry wasps, wiping out their opponents, leaving a trail of burning and crashing enemy craft.

"Pod loss count," Bastion said.

"Loss count stands at three, sir," Rhola replied. "Two of the pilots made it back. They're in Medical."

Bastion stood at the forward screen, arms crossed, as another plasma round launched toward the surface, methodically obliterating the cities targeted for purging and

the military strongholds that mustered any hint of a counter-attack posture. Fires raged across Myra's landscape, giant plumes drifting with the prevailing winds. Secondary explosions rocked the countryside as weapons storage facilities burned.

"Military targets taking heavy damage on all continents," Rhola reported.

Explosions continued to rock the planet's surface under the *Maelstrom's* bombardment. The cumbersome Myran L-fighters were no match for the lethal Imperial pod fighters.

By targeting military facilities, as well as the chosen cities, there would be many casualties. Those living in the shadows of the military targets would die within hours from exposure to the Imperial weaponry's raw energy.

Bastion watched, knowing the end of this day would mark the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Myrans. Nothing on Myra would remain untouched.

Rhola came up beside him and handed him a data tile. "You wanted to know when this report came in. You were right about the warlocks who attacked the ship."

Bastion quickly skimmed over the report from the military's Barrister unit. Myran law was as he suspected—no one but a member of the Queen's Circle of Exalted Councilors could get one of the Dead off Darklit island. A member like Leader Thurmond *ne* Osterman.

The warlocks who attacked his ship came from Myra.

If their goal was to take out the *Maelstrom*, they would have done better to detonate their bomb in the engineering section or the munition's depot. But they came to a guest cabin. A cabin occupied by a warlock unlike any other in the known universe. A cabin where he just happened to be.

Either they were way off their mark, or those warlocks specifically intended to target

the *Maelstrom*'s commander and Bryanna D'Isaac. No one other than the crew of the *Maelstrom* knew D'Isaac was on board. It wasn't surprising that someone would target him for assassination, but why her? She'd been off the Empire's radar for years. Why would she draw the attention of someone powerful enough to coordinate an assassination attempt aboard the *Maelstrom*?

Something was wrong.

Bryanna's voice echoed in his memory. "*Don't be the monster people say you are...*"

He looked at the blistering burns on his arms, then back at the planet. Bryanna's scream as the bomb exploded in her spirit realm still burned through him.

Rhola's voice broke into his thoughts. "Admiral? Orders?"

"Begin attack plan Bastion-4."

"Begging the admiral's pardon," Rhola said. "Plan Bastion-4 concentrates on military targets only. That'll spare about half of the civilian targets selected for purging."

"Attack plan Bastion-4, Mr. Rhola," Bastion repeated.

"Aye, sir."

* * *

Glyndra looked up from her data tile as the Stage One alert sounded in the hallway outside. She cast a glance at Bryanna in the med unit. The med bot continuously monitored the unit's systems.

T'Laan stood beside the unit dutifully guarding Bryanna.

"You don't have to stand there staring at her," Glyndra said. "You can see her perfectly well from over here." She patted the sofa seat.

T'Laan smiled. "I guess I do look rather stupid, like some sort of voyeur."

"You look like a friend who's concerned. And that's not a bad thing."

He took the seat beside her. "So, tell me, Commander. Are things always this, uh, lively on this ship?"

"Oh, this is nothing! Hang around a while and you'll see."

T'Laan looked back at Bryanna. "I don't know if we'll be staying or not. I don't know what the next two minutes, much less the next two months, holds for me and the kid."

"Why do you call Bryanna 'the kid'?"

"That's what she is to me. She'll always be 'the kid.' I've been with her since she was born, and I raised her after her mother was killed."

"It's your term of endearment for her. I understand."

"I'm an android; I'm not supposed to have family or attachments. But I swear, that kid is everything to me."

"I have a son, remember? I understand completely. We're going to be here for some time. How about you help me solve a mystery?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"Centralis. I need to find out what it is, where it is, and why the admiral ordered me to find it."

"Never heard of it. Do you know anything about it?"

Glyndra stood. "Nothing. Come on. I'll set you up with access to the ship's archive database. You can start there."

T'Laan followed her into the admiral's study. She set up a link to the archive information database then gave T'Laan the seat behind the desk.

“You work here while I finish up with the records I’ve pulled to my data tile. I’ll check back on you in a while.”

T’Laan settled behind the admiral’s desk. “Will do, Commander.”

Glyndra returned to the outer room and retook her seat on the sofa. She picked up her data tile and quickly became engrossed in the records displayed there. The rhythmic hum of the med unit and the quietness that permeated the admiral’s quarters after the Stage One alert klaxon fell silent worked in conjunction to lull her to sleep after about an hour.

When she awoke, she jerked up, berating herself for dozing off. A quick check of the time on her data tile told her she’d napped for over two hours. She brushed back her unruly hair and looked through the doorway into the admiral’s study. T’Laan remained seated at the desk, his attention on the computer screen.

She got stiffly to her feet and went to the med unit to see Bryanna. “Report patient’s condition,” she said to the med bot.

“Patient D’Isaac, Bryanna, is stable in stasis coma,” the bot replied. “All body functions within normal parameters.”

Glyndra stared through the meta-glass at Bryanna. Her silver hair framed her face and spread out like a blanket over her shoulders. Her ivory skin had paled, her lips drained of color.

As her gaze fell on Bryanna’s hand—the one she’d used to caress Devon’s face—she wondered what Bryanna had said to the admiral before she faded into the coma. And what had been Devon’s reply?

It had been a moment in view of others that should have transpired in private. Glyndra didn’t know what was happening between this unusual warlock and her son, but motherly instinct told her something was brewing.

Like any mother, she wanted her son to be happy, to find love, and have a family. As a member of the *Maelstrom*'s crew, she questioned whether her commanding officer needed a romantic entanglement at this point.

She shook her head. *Who do you think you're kidding, old girl? There's only one thing I need to know: what will you do when you learn the truth about my son?*

She turned to the study and stopped in the doorway. "I've had enough for tonight. I'm going to bed."

T'Laan met her gaze. "Do I have permission to access visual and audio files?"

"Sure. Anything in the archives database is fair game. Have you found something?"

He looked back at the computer screen. "I'm not sure...maybe."

Glyndra turned from the study. "Good night, T'Laan. I'll see you in the morning."

* * *

Glyndra awoke the following morning to the shudder of a plasma bolt launching. The attack on Myra was still raging, it seemed. She sat up, swung her feet to the floor, and picked up her data tile from the bedside table. It was nearly 0900 hours. She'd slept for almost ten hours.

"Lazy old girl," she mumbled as she stood and headed to the shower. After a quick shower, she got dressed and went into the outer room to check on Bryanna. The med bot was in the same position she left it the night before.

"How's the patient this morning?" she asked.

"Patient's status is unchanged. All life signs are functioning within normal parameters."

"Good." Glyndra went to the food dispenser and ordered a cup of hot Triple Tea. Glancing at Bryanna over

the top of the cup, she said, "I'll have a second cup in your honor."

When she entered the study, she wasn't surprised to see T'Laan still at work behind the admiral's desk. "Good morning, T'Laan. Any luck?"

"Good morning, Commander," he said without looking up. "I may have something."

Glyndra set her cup on the desk then moved behind the desk to look over T'Laan's shoulder at the computer screen. "What have you found?"

"I've been scouring through planetary civilian broadcast records, from the most recent to the most antiquated. I've systematically gone through the empire's solar systems in the order in which humans and warlocks originally colonized them at the time of the Well formation."

"My goodness!" Glyndra laughed. "And I thought *I* had been working hard at it."

"Well, there are certain perks to being an android."

"I'm beginning to see that."

T'Laan pulled up an old voice recording of an ancient civilian informational broadcast. "This is from Prestidious Minor, the fourth planet in the Mrundar system. An equal population of humans and warlocks originally colonized it toward the end of the diaspora. This was broadcast over that planet's civilian networks three thousand eight hundred ninety-four years ago. It's in the native Prestidian language."

Glyndra frowned. "I'm pretty rusty on that one, I'm afraid. I haven't deciphered anything in ancient Prestidian for a couple of decades."

"Let me play it for you; then I'll interpret if needed."

Scratchy and distorted, some spots faded out almost completely. Glyndra could only pick out a few words.

When the recording finished, T’Laan asked, “Did you hear it?”

“I heard something,” Glyndra said, “but I’m not sure what. It sounded like ‘*cha-EM-dree lagala-YOUD-thes*,’ but I can’t be sure.”

“The phrase is ‘*kem-TRAP-gla-ULI-us*,’ which most closely translates to *relating to the center*.”

“Relating to the center,” Glyndra mused. After a moment, she gasped. “Oh, my goodness, T’Laan! That’s it! ‘*Kemtrap’glaeulius*,’ relating to the center. ‘*Alys sen danklah tral*,’ indigenous warlock for ‘*of the core or center*.’ *Centralis* would be the pre-Cataclysm human language variation.”

“That’s the conclusion I came to.”

“Center or core of what?”

“I didn’t know, so I began a search through the ancient records, scrolls, texts, audio, and visual records of all material originating on or referring to Prestidious Minor or the Mrundar system.”

“That’s an enormous amount of material. Did you get through it all?”

T’Laan shook his head. “Not yet. The search is still running.”

Glyndra indicated for him to move aside. “I can help with that a bit.” She inputted her access code, then added authorization for T’Laan to access administrative-level functions in the archives database. “That should let you speed things up somewhat.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m going to run to my quarters for a clean change of clothes and grab some breakfast. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

T’Laan remained focused on his work. “Okay. I’ll be here.”

She left the study and glanced at Bryanna once more before heading for the door. She wished T’Laan

success but he'd be trying to find a tiny pin in a sea of nails.

CHAPTER 15

Plasma bolts pounded Myra's military facilities and obliterated the late Queen's palace complex. The attack systematically targeted military bases, some urban areas suffered collateral damage, and infrastructure took multiple hits around the planet. The emperor ordered Myra blasted back to the Stone Age, but the admiral had not obliged. Myran society would be rebuilding for generations, but the culture wasn't devastated beyond its ability to restore itself.

The purge of Myra lasted thirty-seven hours. By restricting the *Maelstrom*'s attacks to military targets, the assault concluded ahead of schedule.

It wasn't mercy that stayed Bastion's hand.

Something was wrong. Myra's actions had been insubordinate, illegal, and bordered on treasonous, but the High Council had never sanctioned a purge attack with such rapidity before. He'd received the customary verification of his orders, complete with High Council authorization and seal. He'd personally requested and received confirmation of Quorum vetting of the purge orders. Everything seemed as it should be before undertaking military action of this magnitude.

But a sense of unease persisted, and his instincts prodded him to re-evaluate the situation. In reviewing the events leading up to his meeting with the emperor at Endara VI and his receipt of orders for the purging attack, he found there had been no public hearings on Myra's

crimes. There had been diplomatic efforts to resolve the situation but they'd failed.

The law required the emperor to inform the legislative Quorum of his intentions to launch a purge attack against a member system or planet. This apparently wasn't done. A majority of the High Council of Advisors had to agree to the military action, and although he'd received confirmation that this requirement was met, that apparently wasn't accurate.

Something was wrong.

He'd remained on the bridge for the entirety of the attack, mulling over everything leading up to the emperor's attack order.

The admiral signaled the support fleet to move in. The imposition of military rule over the Myran population would begin immediately. Landing teams would arrive in eight hours and start setting up Imperial occupation.

Special squads would round up all the warlocks and fit them with inhibitor collars or Tranquil Dark infusers. The royal family survivors, including the heir to the throne, awaited transport to the Delmaran mining colonies.

Bastion left the bridge and made his way to the medical bay. When he entered, he found Doctor Johnson on duty. "As diligent as ever, I see, doctor."

"Simply doing my job, Admiral."

Bastion looked around the medical ward at the injured men and women lying in recovery units. "Casualty report update."

"We lost three fighter pod pilots. Fourteen injured."

"Prognosis for the injured?"

"Most will recover fully. I'll let you know if the count goes up."

"Very well."

Chancellor Lasko waited outside the medical bay.

“Ah, Admiral Bastion.” Lasko smiled. “A word, please. How goes your investigation of the female warlock?”

Bastion turned down the hall. “Why do you ask?”

The chancellor followed. “Merely curious as to your findings.”

“Inconclusive.” Bastion headed for the lift.

The chancellor stopped at the threshold, preventing the door from closing. “Do you know when you’ll be finished with her? I’m concerned about my report to the emperor with all the chaos of the battle and the warlock attack on the ship. I don’t want it to get lost in the shuffle.”

“My schedule is none of your concern. Do you mind?” The admiral pushed Lasko back, and the lift door closed.

The admiral completed his rounds of the combat sectors of the ship. Personnel shift rotations had begun by the time Bastion made it back to Deck 112. The hallway began filling with first-shift crew on their way to their assigned stations and third-shift personnel heading for their quarters.

“Any problems?” Bastion asked the guards at his quarters as he approached.

“No, sir,” the corporal replied. “All quiet.”

The door slid open and Bastion entered. The med bot remained where Bastion had left it—at the head of the portable med unit and actively monitoring its patient inside the tube.

T’Laan sat on the sofa, a data tile in hand. The Irondren sword Bastion gave him lay on the table in front of him.

Glyndra stood across the room, surrounded by the unmistakable aroma of Triad triple tea. “Devon, good morning!” She greeted him with a warm smile. “Would you like some tea?”

“No, thank you.” He went to the med unit and looked in at Bryanna. As expected, she showed no sign of change. “The stasis coma seems to have worked.”

Glyndra took a seat on the sofa. “Will you bring her out now?”

Bastion crossed to the viewport to look at the planet far below. “Not yet. The situation on Myra is still volatile. A temporary government under military supervision is shaping up, but there’s still some work to do. My lady needs to remain incapacitated through the transition process.”

“That makes sense. Better to be safe.”

“Do you want me to remain, sir?” T’Laan asked.

“Yes, Mr. T’Laan. You don’t leave until I tell you.”

“Aye, sir.”

Bastion paused in the doorway to his bedroom. “Any luck finding Centralis?”

Glyndra smiled. “Oh, yes. T’Laan has been an absolute *genius* in tracking down this mystery.”

“I’ll expect a thorough report after I’ve had a few hours of sleep.” Bastion stepped into his bedroom and let the door slide shut behind him.

* * *

Jamerion’s eyes were wild, his face flushed, and he sweated profusely. Omhara glared at him, trying to make some sense out of the high councilman’s incoherent ranting.

“Take a breath, and keep your voice down.” The two men stood holed up in an alcove in the palace’s little-used southern wing. Still, Omhara wanted to be certain no one overheard his conversation with the over-excited councilman.

“Tell me again,” Omhara said. “Where are Syndria and Khoren?”

“Dead!” Jamerion almost choked on the word.
“They’re *fucking* dead! That’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

“Wait a minute. They were working at the CF1703 facility. That’s a maximum-security facility. How can they be dead?”

Jamerion threw his arms in the air. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. The entire prison blew up. They’re dead: prisoners, guards, Syndria, Khoren. All dead!”

“Lower your voice.” Omhara glanced up and down the hallway—still empty. “Pull your shit together, Councilman.”

Jamerion drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. “It blew before Bastion’s purge attack on Myra, about the time *ne* Osterman’s people went after the warlock.”

“That means Bastion still has his warlock.”

“With her working for him, he’s sure to find what we left on Myra.”

Omhara grabbed Jamerion’s shoulders and shoved him backward. His head thudded against the wall. “You left something on Myra?”

“Khoren and I...we left a little something...a tiny surprise...something for the admiral.”

“*What?*” Omhara slammed him against the wall again.

Jamerion winced and rubbed the back of his head. “We wired the ANI chamber on Myra to blow and burn the evidence with amenthadrake oil. We set two androids in a closet where they’ll probably survive. They’re programmed to identify the admiral when he comes snooping through the chamber, get close to him, then self-destruct.”

Omhara backhanded Jamerion. “Are you out of your *goddamned* mind? What if Bastion doesn’t show? Anyone could retrieve information from those androids. You *fucking* idiot! You were supposed to destroy all of it, *everything* in that ANI chamber.”

Jamerion rubbed his face. “He’ll come. We left bait. The *Maelstrom*’s sensors will pick it up.”

“What bait?”

“One of the crystal cubes that interfaces the warlocks to the ANI. The *Maelstrom*’s sensors will pick up the aetheric signature. Bastion won’t be able to resist checking out something giving off aetheric energy.”

Omhara stepped back to lean against the opposite wall. “Your stupidity is mind-boggling.”

“Now just a damn minute. I don’t have to listen to—”

“Yes, you do. What has the High Council been told about the purging attack on Myra?”

“Bastion went rogue, took out all the significant military installations. The palace is destroyed, and the spaceport is a pile of rubble. But he went against the emperor’s orders and spared most of the major cities.”

“Does the emperor know Bastion violated his directive?”

“Not yet. The Council asked that the reports be amassed for a one-time briefing with His Majesty. We’ll be lucky to hold the emperor’s attention through *one* briefing.”

* * *

T’Laan turned off the screen on the study’s computer and walked into the main room. Bastion had gone into his bedroom six hours ago.

“Well, that was certainly interesting.” T’Laan sat in a chair opposite the sofa.

Glyndra looked up from the old book in her lap. “You’ve gotten through all of the archive material already?”

“I had to do a lot of translating. That’s what took so long. Sorry.”

“I wasn’t complaining! It would have taken me *forever*.”

“Patience is not one of Bryanna’s strong points. She’s used to my computational speed on most things, but she still gets impatient when I take too long.”

Glyndra nodded toward the closed bedroom door. “Sounds like someone else I know. He can be maddeningly patient at times, and then be equally impatient at others.”

“I’m hoping he’ll bring her out soon.”

“I do, too. Putting her under wasn’t a decision he made lightly.”

“He’s going to want his report on Centralis when he wakes. Will you do the honors, or shall I?”

Glyndra thought for a moment. “You did most of the heavy work, so you should make the report. I’ll jump in if I think I have anything to add.”

T’Laan looked toward the bedroom door. “I think it may be report time shortly. The admiral’s awake and moving about.”

“How do you know that?”

T’Laan pointed to his ear. “Another of those android perks.”

“Ah!” Glyndra said as the admiral’s bedroom door slid open.

T’Laan got to his feet as the admiral approached. Barefoot and shirtless, Bastion wore only a pair of loose linen pants. He carried his sword in its scabbard with its belt. The scars crisscrossing his chest told of multiple violent attacks. They were a tangled array but T’Laan had no trouble tracing their paths.

Based on the scar tissue’s apparent age and assuming no interference with healing, he estimated the admiral’s age at approximately nine years old at the time.

Bastion waved T’Laan to sit and went to the food dispenser. “First meal number five for Admiral Bastion.

Increase cold Nimbarian protein-carb water infusion to seven hundred fifty milliliters.”

T’Laan glanced at Glyndra. She held a finger to her lips and shook her head almost imperceptibly.

Tray in hand, Bastion sat in a straight-back chair at the meal table. After taking a long drink, he set the glass down and dug into his meal. “Take Glyndra’s advice, Mr. T’Laan. Unless absolutely necessary, don’t speak to me until I’ve had a least one good drink of Nimbarian water infusion.”

“Yes, sir. Important safety tip duly noted.”

“Shouldn’t you get more sleep, Devon?” Glyndra asked. “You were on the bridge for well over a ship’s day, and you fought those warlocks before that. I think you need more rest.”

Bastion took another swallow and replied around a mouthful of food. “You’re hovering, Commander.”

“Sorry, Admiral.” She laughed. “I guess I am. Old habits and all that.”

After downing the last of the infusion water, Bastion stood. He placed his sword on the coffee table and settled back on the sofa.

Arms crossed, he focused on T’Laan. “Now. Tell me about Centralis.”

* * *

Leader *ne* Osterman lay on the remnant of a wooden bench, dangling his legs in the sea’s warm salt water. After being thrown overboard, he’d tread water for what felt like hours before he found the debris.

The sun, directly overhead, shone white-hot in a cloudless sky. *Just my luck. A bright, beautiful sunny day. Where’s a good cloud cover when I need it?*

The *Maelstrom*’s initial assault began far to the north, the fiery onslaught nothing more menacing than faint

streaks of light in the sky. Those on the ship with *ne* Osterman reacted like it was a damned party. Some even made wagers on which cities would take the first incoming strikes.

He insisted his wife and sons remain in their cabin. He didn't want the boys frightened by plasma bolts streaking across the sky.

The assault then shifted south, and the party atmosphere fizzled. He'd brought his family with him on the ship, confident they would be safe. And they should have been, this far out at sea. No visible landmasses marred the smooth horizon. His plan should have been foolproof—he'd considered every contingency.

Except for the one that actually happened. But how could anyone anticipate such a freak event?

A conversion bolt burned its way across the sky, crossing almost directly overhead but far up in the atmosphere. There was no risk to those riding out the assault. No risk, that is, until the L-fighter came crashing down.

The whole scene played over and over in *ne* Osterman's mind. The disabled L-fighter trailed smoke and fire and began to break up. It crossed directly in front of the incoming missile. When the L-fighter and the plasma bolt collided, the massive explosion splintered the projectile's core, raining down debris everywhere.

A split-second later, the bow of his ship exploded and he found himself in the water. He'd searched for his family, called out for his boys, screamed for his wife. The only reply was silence. He looked for other survivors but found none.

He clutched the sides of the wobbling bench when a wave rolled under it. He closed his eyes, willing the ocean to settle down. Since the *Maelstrom* ended its attack, the ocean's surface had been deadly quiet, almost like it feared

the slightest movement would attract the admiral's attention.

The occasional Imperial fighter pod streaked by far overhead, but other than that, *ne* Osterman believed himself alone in this eternal ocean.

“Damn your fucking soul to the depths of the Well, Devon Bastion,” *ne* Osterman whispered through dry lips.

As another wave rolled under his precarious perch, something brushed against his foot. He jerked his legs up onto the board.

He lay still; his breathing came in ragged gulps, and cold sweat chilled his skin. A soft splash came from his left—he turned his head enough that he could see the water’s surface.

Twin dorsal fins raced through the water straight for him. He knew a gaping maw filled with razor-sharp teeth waited centimeters below the surface. The jaws held enough force to shatter a man’s bones.

ne Osterman closed his eyes and held his breath as the thing rammed his board, throwing him back into the water. As the shark clamped down on his chest, *ne* Osterman screamed. With his last thought he wondered if anyone would record his death with the other statistics the government kept on yearly myr’kithra shark attacks.

* * *

T’Laan sat forward in his chair. “We got the break we needed when we found the old voice recording from Prestidious Minor.”

“That’s in the Mrundar system,” Bastion said. “Not much there, if I recall correctly.”

“There’s only one habitable planet in the system,” T’Laan said. “It was hit by an extinction-level asteroid bombardment a couple hundred years ago. It devastated the

whole planet and altered its rotational velocity. It's mostly a desolate wasteland now. But four thousand years ago, it held a thriving human and warlock colony. And it was in one of the old civilian broadcasts that we picked up on the word *kemtra 'glaeulius*. That's the native Prestidian language and best translates to *relating to the center*."

"Once T'Laan pointed this out," Glyndra said, "I thought of *alys sen danklah tral*."

"*Of the core or center* in warlock," Bastion translated.

"In the pre-Cataclysm language, the most common variation of that warlock phrase would be *centralis*."

T'Laan picked up Glyndra's tile and scrolled through files. "I went through every record in the ship's archives for any reference to these phrases. I ran across a couple million of them—not unexpected—and needed to narrow down my parameters. So, I limited the search to the first five hundred years following the diaspora. That yielded a manageable number of references. Not knowing precisely what I sought, I took the liberty of...well...taking a few liberties."

Bastion cocked an eyebrow. "Exactly what liberties did you take?"

"First, I assumed your interest in Centralis has something to do with Bryanna. I also assumed you had taken the information about her that you got from me and corroborated it by going through her log."

T'Laan paused, but the admiral remained silent. "That was your logical course of action, of course. You needed to verify what I'd told you, so I'm assuming you went through Bryanna's log."

"I know Bryanna won't like it," Glyndra said, "but I have to admit I went through her logs as well. Like Devon, I believed it to be necessary."

T'Laan held up a hand. "Hey, I'm not judging here. In your position, I would have done the same thing."

“Continue, Mr. T’Laan.” Bastion leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

“Aye, sir,” T’Laan said. “I assumed this interest in Centralis connected to the...unknown...that Bryanna hears when she’s in the Flow. You obviously want something from her, something no other warlock can give you. That means it has to be connected to her bonded spirit realm. That, by process of elimination, has to be connected to what she’s hearing. Working off that assumption, I filtered my search to include only references with a direct connection to warlocks.”

"That still left an awful lot of material to go through," Glyndra said. "You know how massive my archives are. I suggested he further filter by millennia, starting before the Cataclysm and working his way forward."

"Glyndra's suggestion cut hours off my search," T'Laan said. "I finally came across a letter written by a warlock mother to her daughter. They got separated in the final wave of refugees escaping from a star system deep inside Well space. This letter was discovered aboard the remains of a derelict ship adrift in open space between the Rillisara Nebula and the Broynthen system. A deep space salvage team found the vessel over two thousand five hundred years ago.

“The digitized copy of the actual letter is available in the ship’s archives. The mother hoped she, her daughter, and her mate would one day be able to *egraadtha eyn raya nubu’cholan hyd’alys sen danklah tral.*”

“Dance in the garden of the First Being of the Center Core,” Bastion translated without opening his eyes.

“This was the first specific reference I found to a physical location for Centralis,” T’Laan said. “So, I did some digging. The ship sustained damage in a micro-meteor swarm. A hull breach exposed the refugees to open space. All aboard perished.

“I couldn’t find anything on the ship’s point of origin until I came across some digital imagery taken by the salvage crew. In one of the images, there was an entry-port taxation stamp very similar to the seal that the original Merchant’s Guild of the Triad used when they formed their consortium in the century following the diaspora.”

Glyndra chuckled. “Here’s where those liberties come into play.”

“Yes. Here’s where I took one of those...uh, liberties. I contacted an old acquaintance from the Merchant’s Guild on Eramoor. A nice old human who retired about twenty years ago.”

Bastion raised his head. “You made an unauthorized communication from my ship?”

“From your desk, to be precise. Your comm officer assumed you requested the connection.”

“And why would he assume that?”

T’Laan’s voice became a perfect imitation of the admiral. “Because I sort of led him in that direction.”

Bastion sighed. “We’ll discuss that particular liberty later. For now, continue.”

“Yes, sir. I transmitted a copy of the tax seal to my friend and asked if he could identify it. He verified it as one of the original seals of the pre-Cataclysm Merchant’s Guilds. I asked him if he knew which one but he didn’t. So, I again took a bit of a liberty and got in touch with the Office of Imperial Taxation and Revenue in Mithara City on Kallagor.”

“Who were you this time?”

“Chancellor Lasko.”

Bastion shrugged. “I see no problem there.”

“If any records are showing which solar system that tax seal originated from before the diaspora, I should find them in those archives.”

“And did you find the information you were looking for?”

“I did better than that. I found a star map.”

Bastion sat up. “A star map?”

T’Laan handed Bastion the data tile. “That’s a digital image of an ancient, pre-Cataclysm, pre-diaspora map of solar systems in and near the heart of the Well. A unique taxation seal distinguishes each system.”

Bastion studied the star map. “Which system corresponds to the seal from the derelict ship?”

“The only system with one planet orbiting a solitary sun—a planet the indigenous population of humans and warlocks called *Danklah Tral*.”

“The center,” Glyndra said.

Bastion stood and moved to the med unit. He looked down at the warlock held in stasis. “Centralis.”

CHAPTER 16

Omhara sensed something had changed. It began right before Bastion started the purging of Myra. A barely perceptible tickle deep in his chest. Now, two days later, it clawed at his consciousness. He stood against the wall in the emperor's quarters, waiting while the witless ass argued with his tailors about the proper drape of a vest over his fat gut.

Omhara absently rubbed the damn stone the Alpha-Transcendent had jabbed into his flesh. He didn't regret the doing; he couldn't manipulate the Flow's elemental magic without it. And that was worth a thousand times the discomfort he now suffered.

He'd managed to escape from the emperor for a few hours over the past two days. With practice, he'd gained a degree of control over his new-found magic. The forest east of the city sported several newly burned areas, but coming up with a plausible explanation for that was easy enough.

Not that anyone of significance gave a shit.

“—you agree with me, Omhara?”

Omhara pretended to study the vests the tailor held up. “They're both fine works, Your Majesty.”

Emperor Ahlaric frowned. “I can see *that*, you idiot. Which one should I wear to the High Council meeting?”

I don't fucking care! Omhara fashioned a smile. “I favor the leather one, Your Majesty. It exudes masculinity

and authority. None would fail to perceive the message you'd broadcast by wearing it."

The emperor scrutinized it anew. "Exactly what message would they perceive?"

"The obvious one, Your Majesty. That *you* are the ultimate power in this Empire, and not to be underestimated."

Ahlaric gasped and grabbed the vest. He held it to his chest and admired himself in the full-length mirror. "I think I hear it speaking to me, now that I look closely at it."

"It is fairly screaming dominance, Your Majesty."

The emperor tossed the vest back at the tailor. "Have that ready for me to wear tonight. And the stitching had better be immaculate. Now both of you get out of my sight." The emperor sprawled on his divan and rubbed Tranquil Dark into his wrist.

The tailor gathered his supplies and scurried out of the room.

Omhara hurried to his quarters. He locked the door behind him before falling backward across his bed.

He pulled open the front of his shirt and rubbed his hand over the embedded gemstone. The change he sensed emanated from the Flow.

He didn't know what it meant. Something about the Flow was different, and it frightened him. But the thought of losing his newly-acquired connection to the magic terrified him more. "I'll be ass-fucked all night before I give it up."

* * *

Admiral Bastion stood on the bridge, his hands on his hips and his brow wrinkled. Commander Rhola stood beside him as they studied the star chart displayed on the forward screen.

“That’s the sum of what we know,” Rhola said. “The highlighted star systems are the ones inside the Well that are stable. The rest is an extrapolation of available data. Can’t vouch for accuracy.”

“Isolate sector 38KR7 and magnify,” Bastion said. The screen display shifted. He pointed to the image. “There, that Graezzon quasi-matter nebula.”

Rhola shook his head. “I see what you’re saying, and that *could* be the same nebula as the one on the other map. But it just as easily could *not* be it. The ancient outpost you’re talking about isn’t on there.”

Bastion studied the chart. “My gut tells me that’s it, that’s the same nebula as on the Centralis map.” Over his shoulder, he said, “Put up the digitized image designated Centralis.”

When the map came into focus, he said, “Overlay with Well space grid.”

The grid appeared. “Now overlay the previous star chart.”

“The grids don’t match,” Rhola said. “We’re looking at different regions of Well space.”

“But what if we line them up? Display these two side by side, end to end to make a continuous map from left to right. Line up Sector 38KR7 on the star chart to Sector 62AE13 on the Centralis map.”

The two images moved across the screen, going out of focus then settling into the new positioning.

“I’ll be damned,” Rhola mumbled.

Bastion placed a finger on the icon for a plasma-ion nebula on the edge of the star chart. Near it was another icon for a nebula with an outpost on its perimeter.

“Converge the images until these two icons are superimposed.”

The star systems on both maps merged. Each matched: the same number of suns, same number of planets, same asteroid belts at the exact coordinates.

Bastion pointed to the outpost beside the nebula. “We need to make this our anchor point.” He moved to the center of the screen and placed a hand on the star system with the solitary planet orbiting a single sun. “From there, we go here. To Centralis.”

Bastion motioned for Rhola to follow him to the tactical station. The admiral took the controls, transferring the image from the screen to the console and pointed. “We enter the Well here, at perimeter station 9-Omega-832. From there to the plasma-ion nebula is mostly charted. There will be some variations—that’s the nature of the Well—but we have the known stable systems to use as a guide.”

Rhola placed his finger on an area deep inside Well space. “This is where we lost those two science ships thirty years ago. We should probably avoid that area.”

“Agreed. I don’t want any encounters inside the Well. The goal will be to reach Centralis ASAP, then get out as quickly.”

“It’s damned risky, but you know that. I’ll start a team on the logistics, necessary preparations, ETA times, etc.”

“I leave it in your hands, Commander Rhola. I’ll be heading to the planet’s surface shortly. Contact Captain Montison and have her meet my shuttle at the northern command center. You have the bridge.”

“Aye, sir, I have the bridge.” Rhola saluted as Bastion entered the lift.

* * *

Glyndra’s laughter greeted Bastion as he entered his quarters. T’Laan was in the center of the room, perfectly balanced on the dome of his head, his arms outstretched parallel to the floor, and his feet crossed at the ankles.

“Oh, hi, Admiral Bastion,” he said with a smile.
“To say that you’ve caught me in an embarrassing situation would be a gross understatement.”

Glyndra cackled anew. “Stop, T’Laan! You’re going to be the death of me.”

Bastion went to the med unit and looked in at Bryanna. “Take a seat, Mr. T’Laan.”

T’Laan hurried to right himself and sat in one of the chairs beside the coffee table. Glyndra sat in the chair to his right, her laughter fading.

“Would you allow me to explain my little demonstration?” T’Laan asked.

“No. I’ve decided you’re free to go.
The *Wolverine* is fueled and flight checked. You may go wherever you wish; I won’t pursue you.”

T’Laan glanced at Glyndra then focused back on Bastion. “What about Bryanna?”

“She stays with me. She was given a choice, and that’s what she decided.”

“Wait a minute. No offense, Admiral, but I don’t believe you.”

“What you believe is irrelevant. I have no reason to detain you any longer. You are, therefore, free to leave and do whatever you want.”

“I’m free to go, to do anything I want?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’d like to join your crew.”

Bastion cocked an eyebrow. “You want to join my crew?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Why not? Think about it, Admiral. Where would I go? My business partner will be here with you. I don’t know anyone else I could trust. Besides, sounds like this is where the action will be, and I’ve got nothing better to do.”

“And staying here will keep you close to D’Isaac. She is no longer your concern. She’s my responsibility now.”

T’Laan stood. “Begging your pardon, sir, but she will always be my concern, whether I’m with her or not. I know Bryanna, and I think you need me. She’s something you consider vital to the safety and security of this ship, this crew, the Empire, and possibly the universe itself. That makes her an essential commodity. And you’re looking at the best thirty-hour-a-day guard you’ll ever find. I also happen to be the only one here that Bryanna trusts unconditionally.”

Bastion stepped forward. “What happens between her and me is between the two of us. I will tolerate no interference.”

“Understood. Look, Admiral, I’ve been protecting her for a long time. I must have done a good job because she’s still alive. I raised her after her mother died. Let me stay and protect her. She’s all that matters to me. I want to be wherever she is.”

Bastion scrutinized T’Laan then pointed at the sword on the coffee table. “Does your program for that go beyond basic skills mastery?”

“I’m programmed in advance swordsmanship, everything the training modules have to offer. The times I’ve had to use a sword, I did all right.”

“I’ll show you a few things you won’t find in the training programs.” Bastion extended his hand. T’Laan shook it firmly.

“Understand me, android,” Bastion said. “I require absolute obedience from my crew. Disobey my orders, and punishment will be absolute. I offer you, once more, the choice of leaving. If you stay, you agree to my terms.”

T’Laan didn’t hesitate. “I’ll stay, and I accept your terms. I won’t cause you problems or interfere between you and Bryanna. I give you my word.”

Bastion nodded. "You're listed in the crew manifest as a civilian consultant, attached to me indefinitely. Your assigned quarters are on this ring, cabin WQ704. Since you don't require sleep, I'm having a ship's system interface console installed in place of the bed. You'll receive sub-command level clearance. Now, come with me."

Bastion led the way into his study and motioned for T'Laan to sit.

"Uh...one point of curiosity, sir." T'Laan sat behind the desk. "You said I'm listed in the crew manifest already, and you've assigned me quarters. May I ask exactly when you had me listed as your civilian consultant?"

"Yesterday." Bastion punched his command access code into the terminal. "I've seen how good you are at digging through my ship's systems. I want you to find something."

"Yesterday," T'Laan said. "Okay...well, I didn't see that coming. Impressive, sir." He flexed his fingers over the console. "What am I looking for?"

"There's a man aboard named Chancellor Lasko. I think he's been sending and receiving unauthorized communications. I want to know how, when, and to whom he's been speaking."

"That shouldn't be too hard. How soon do you need it?"

"Now." Bastion walked back into the main room. He motioned for Glyndra to follow him. "I need you to coordinate with Commander Rhola to find any information you can about an ancient outpost on the edge of a plasma-ion nebula. Rhola will give you the details."

"Of course." She followed him into the corridor. "What about Bryanna? Are you going to wake her soon?"

"Tonight," he said. "I'm going to the planet's surface for a few hours but will revive her upon my return."

"Oh, good. I miss spending time with her," Glyndra said as they neared the lift. "On another note, let me ask

you this: why did you do that with T'Laan? Your personal civilian consultant? What do you want from him?"

"You heard him." Bastion stepped aside to allow her on the lift. "He's the best thirty-hour-a-day guard available, and my lady trusts him. If he aligns with me, she'll be more inclined to follow. Also, he's shown extraordinary resourcefulness."

When Glyndra's gaze met his, concern tinged her blue eyes. "This is a dangerous game, Devon. A very dangerous game."

"Such is life."

CHAPTER 17

Jamerion slumped in his chair, arms crossed, hood shrouding his face. He gave only curt replies to questions posed by the other High Council members.

Eleven councilmen and women sat around the famed Crystal Table—the emperor’s High Council of Advisors' traditional palace meeting place. Usually, there would be twelve. Khoren’s empty seat stared at Jamerion.

Decisions on Imperial governance happened here. Each star system elected a Quorum member to represent the system’s best interests. These representatives of almost one hundred systems then elected the twelve members who sat on the High Council. Once the Quorum agreed on a proposed law, policy, or mandate, the High Council would review it and, if approved, present it to the emperor. If he accepted, it became law.

To be a voting member and take a seat at the Crystal Table was an honor afforded to very few. At one time, Jamerion considered himself a lucky man. Now, the longer he listened to his fellow councilmen relay the current happenings in their home star systems, the more he believed Khoren’s fate awaited them all.

“Oh, come on, Catherine.” Ferrin, the Andelyon councilman, jumped to his feet. “There are a lot of rogue warlocks out there, and you know it. We all do.”

Catherine spoke softly from behind her white lace veil, the traditional public dress for females of her people in

the Minnal system. “Do not raise your voice to me. I will not be disrespected so.”

Ferrin threw up his hands and sat down.

“Apologies, Councilwoman. I forget your *delicate sensibilities*. The fact remains, something is happening with the warlocks, and we can’t simply ignore it.”

Catherine cleared her throat. “My *delicate sensibilities* are telling me we risk more harm than good if we overreact. There have been whispers of something agitating the warlocks, but that’s all it is—whispers and rumors. Since when do we jump head-long into a pond without knowing what’s beneath the water’s surface?”

“Catherine has a point.” Lisfina system’s councilman De’Nedathyn rarely spoke in council meetings, but when he did, the others listened. “We lack any scientific evidence that warlocks are experiencing a dysfunction with their magic. Our information is anecdotal, at best. Unfortunately, we have no idea of its nature—benign, dangerous, catastrophic even. It would be premature at this point to raise alarms, but it would be prudent to investigate the matter.”

“Nthae agrees with Councilman De’Nedathyn.” Urlazinza StoneMason, the Nthae councilman, stood. “The matter demands investigation. Nthae proposes for consideration an Empire-wide sweep of all systems to identify and detain all warlocks not currently in compliance with His Majesty’s proclamation for inhibitor collars or embedded infusers.”

Ferrin jumped to his feet. “Now, *that’s* a proposal I can fully support. I call for a vote on Nthae’s motion.”

“Nthae made no motion, Councilman Ferrin. Nthae merely suggested for consideration a possible course of action as a way to foster debate.” StoneMason sat down, avoiding Ferrin’s furious glare.

“More debate? That’s great! Just what we need.”

“Enough!” Xanbella, Lineage Cave-Dragon, ruling clan in the AstraSuma system, pounded her staff on the floor as she got to her feet. “As President of this High Council of Advisors, and as a result of this conduct unbecoming your station, I suspend the open discussion of this matter. Quibbling among ourselves and insulting each other certainly will not solve anything.”

She paused to glance pointedly at each member. Jamerion met her gaze only briefly, nodding slightly. *Anything to shut these fuckers up! I just want to go home.*

“I propose the High Council suggest His Majesty to instruct Admiral Bastion to select and dispatch a task force to investigate these rumors of possible malfunction in the Flow,” Xanbella said. “Those in favor, please raise your hand.”

Jamerion looked around the table, reluctantly voting for the measure as it became clear the others were in favor.

Xanbella nodded. “Very well. Motion is adopted and will be presented to the emperor forthwith. I declare this meeting of the High Council adjourned. All of you—go have a drink and relax.”

Jamerion fled the Council chambers. Admiral Bastion investigating the disruptions to the Flow terrified him. Such an investigation could lead directly to him. As he hurried down the hallway, he was already planning his retreat to Rycappa.

* * *

The admiral sat in his command chair going through the eighth of twenty reports the *Maelstrom* had received in the last ten hours. Warlocks across the galaxy reported the Flow was “falling apart.” Inhibitor collars and Tranquil Dark infusers didn’t prevent them from feeling the Flow in their blood. The devices only blocked their ability to

channel the aetheric energy—a torture akin to having their souls ripped from their bodies.

Every star system reported arresting or hospitalizing warlocks in growing numbers. Many exhibited psychotic symptoms—hallucinations, extreme anxiety, paranoia, hyper-agitation, even catatonia. All spoke of a common source of their distress—there was a change in the Flow.

Commander Rhola walked up beside the admiral. “Comms caught a civilian informational band in the Imperial communication network talking about rogue warlocks attacking humans. There have been fatalities.”

Bastion set his tile aside. “Dammit.”

“Any orders?”

Bastion frowned. “Send out a command authority broadcast. All military personnel and assets cycle to Stage Two alert. Standard protocols.”

“Aye, sir.”

Bastion stood and tucked his data tile under his arm. “I’ll be meeting Captain Montison on the planet’s surface in about an hour. Have my shuttle ready to depart on schedule for that meeting.” He gave one last look around the bridge then went to the lift. “You have the bridge, Commander Rhola.”

“Aye, sir, I have the bridge.”

Bastion spent the next half hour making rounds on the injured still remaining in the medical bay. He got an update on each man’s current condition and spoke to them individually. He then made a round through the pod maintenance sector to get an update on the repairs to damaged pod fighters and launch capability should the fighters be needed on short notice.

Satisfied that the *Maelstrom* was rapidly recovering from the limited damage it received from the warlock attack and the operations against Myra, he made his way to the shuttle bay. He entered the bay as Commander Rhola’s

call came through regarding the readiness of his shuttle for launch.

“I’m in the shuttle bay now,” he said into his wrist comm. “I shouldn’t be gone more than a couple of hours. Bastion out.”

After he entered the shuttle and settled into his seat, he gave the launch order. Within minutes, he was watching Myra’s landscape growing closer through his viewport. The shuttle pulled in low over the scorched countryside. The area had taken far less damage from the *Maelstrom*’s attack than other military sites. The staging facility quickly folded under the initial assault.

Located in the heart of the planet’s northernmost continent, the remains of the military base was now the Imperial Northern Command Center. Three landing pads were intact, and a few buildings remained habitable. Rapidly erected military portable housing units were up and running, with banners designating operations, medical, and other support units.

Captain Montison, along with several guards, waited on the tarmac. Bastion spotted her easily—her stocky frame and deep auburn hair were distinctive. She exuded authority and military precision in every task she undertook. Her combat prowess was not one of her defining skill sets, but she was a master at managing post-battle logistics.

Bastion stood as the pilot opened the exit door. His two security guards stepped out ahead of him. To the pilot, he said, “Remain here. This won’t take long.” He headed down the ramp.

“Admiral Bastion.” Captain Montison saluted then stepped forward with her hand extended. “So good to see you again, sir.”

“Likewise, Captain.” Bastion grasped her hand and shook it firmly. She smiled up at him. Montison was one of

those rare soldiers in whom Bastion had absolute trust.
“How’s Lucinda and the family? Still only the twin girls?”

Montison fell in step beside Bastion as he moved toward the Command Center headquarters building.

“Lucinda is fine, sir. And yes, still only the twin girls.”

Bastion nodded. “Lucinda is an exemplary mother. Please, give my best to her and the girls.”

Montison stepped forward to open the door for him.

“I will, Admiral. They’ll be pleased to hear it.”

The captain directed him to her office. The former occupants—the Myran military personnel—had tried to destroy as much as possible before abandoning the facility. Piles of wrecked equipment sat to the side, awaiting crews to haul it away.

“Your report, Captain.” Bastion settled into a chair in the small office. She took a seat behind the desk.

“We’ve been working around the clock to get this command center functional,” Montison reported. “Most communications and security equipment are beyond repair or reclamation, but a significant amount of it was outdated by Imperial standards anyway. We have a global communication network set up and online. Everything is being routed through the comm center aboard the *Maverick*. I have the *Ragnaar* and the *Solstice* positioned in orbit at relay points so we can reach around the globe.”

“Excellent. Is the local population falling in line?”

“Yes, sir. Most are in shock and overwhelmed, which makes them easily pliable. We engaged in a few skirmishes for the first several hours, but the Myrans gave up fairly quickly. Local government organization is increasing, and that’s doing a lot to assuage fears of permanent occupation. We have the royals in isolation, awaiting transfer to the Delmaran mining colony.”

“Hold off on that transfer for now.”

“Sir?”

“Keep them isolated. Let people know they’re working on getting an interim governing system in place. Especially the heir—give him a choice of working with us to implement a working government under military supervision, or taking his chances in the Delmaran mines.”

“Aye, sir.”

“What about warlocks? Have you run across many?”

“Some. More rogues than I was expecting.”

“Have any of them mentioned a shifting or change in the Flow?”

She leaned forward. “Yes, they’ve been saying something’s wrong, that the Flow feels different. We’ve had a few cases of mental breaks. They act like they’re stunned or something.”

“What are you doing with them?”

“We’re detaining them at military posts. We’ve given the rogues a choice of an inhibitor collar or a Tranquil Dark infuser.”

“Make a planet-wide broadcast on the civilian informational bands. Let the warlocks know the Empire is aware of the shift in the Flow. Inform them it’s imperative that they stay out of the Flow. I don’t expect compliance, but they can’t claim they weren’t warned.”

Montison paused. “Permission to speak freely, sir?”

“Granted.”

She paused again. “Is Emperor Ahlaric...does he...is he aware of any of this?”

“Not yet. Is that a problem, Captain?”

“No, sir. Your orders are good enough for me.”

Bastion stood. “Thank you, Captain. I’ll be back in touch. For now, simply house the warlocks and bring in as many as you can. If they don’t comply, dispatch them per standing orders. Let me know if you need more support teams, and I’ll order the ships to rendezvous here.”

She got to her feet. “I think we’re good for now.”

“I’d like to meet with your officers and go over your plans.”

She walked to the door. “Certainly. If you’ll follow me.”

* * *

When the admiral returned to the *Maelstrom* three hours later, he went directly to the medical bay, where Doctor Johnson waited in his office. He’d sent a message that he needed to speak with Bastion as soon as the admiral returned to the ship.

“You need to see this.” Johnson pulled a small box from his desk drawer and pushed it across the table to the admiral. “I completed the autopsy on the warlock’s body. I found that embedded in his brain.”

Bastion opened the box. An oblong cylinder ten millimeters long and two millimeters in circumference lay inside. Two hair-thin filaments protruded from each end. “What is this?”

Johnson sat back in his chair. “It looks like an end-of-life consciousness re-integration transmission implant. They’re rare but do pop up on the black market now and then.”

“That’s an expensive bit of technology for one of the Dead.” Bastion closed the lid and slid the box back to the doctor. “What’s that doing in the brain of a warlock sentenced to life in a Myran prison?”

“That’s what it *looks* like, but that’s not what it is. I had Commander Thomas’s engineering crew examine it. It was designed to electrocute the brain approximately thirty hours after implantation.”

“An assassination switch?”

“Precisely. If you hadn’t killed that warlock, he would have died anyway within eight hours.”

Bastion scowled. "Whoever sent them to attack this ship must have promised them an end-of-life transfer. They were expecting to survive through re-integration. There must have been cloned bodies waiting for them on the planet."

"Someone went to a lot of expense to get on board the *Maelstrom* and blow it up."

"Could these implants have impaired the judgement of those two?"

"It's possible. The implant was in the frontal lobe. That's the control center for reasoning, self-control, and decision-making. It gave off a weak electrical impulse every fifteen seconds. This could have impaired their reasoning and judgment."

"Good work, doctor," Bastion said. "On another point, I want to bring the warlock out of her stasis coma."

"I've kept a check on her via telemetry. Between the med unit and her natural ability to heal, she's fully recovered. She's in excellent health, perfect for her age. Reviving her shouldn't be a problem. She will, of course, suffer the normal effects of stasis recovery."

"That's what concerns me. She's potentially dangerous. I can't risk her coming out of stasis and reacting impulsively. I have to be able to control her as she wakes."

"She'll need to come out of the coma slowly, then. I can authorize the med bot to bring her out in stages over several hours. She'll be in a dreamlike state for a while. Her normal inhibitions and emotional defenses will be impaired, and she'll be vulnerable to suggestions during the process. She'll have to be handled carefully. Anything said to her must be gauged to prevent untoward psychological or emotional effects later."

"Understood." Bastion stood and turned for the door. "Instruct the bot to prepare the revival process."

CHAPTER 18

Bastion entered his quarters to find T'Laan standing beside the med unit with his hand pressed to the meta-glass. "Is there a problem, Mr. T'Laan?"

T'Laan kept his gaze on Bryanna. "I was just wondering about a few things."

Bastion went to the sofa table and set down the small box he carried. "Wondering about what?"

"About her level of awareness. Being in a coma completely shut down Bryanna's conscious mind, but what about her subconscious? Is she feeling the Flow? Is she aware of the world around her through her connection to the magic?"

Bastion came to stand beside him and looked in on Bryanna. "My understanding is that a warlock is unaware of the Flow in coma. If she were aware, the events on Myra would have telegraphed to her via her Spirit realm. There's no indication that occurred."

T'Laan nodded. "That makes sense."

Bastion addressed the med bot. "Estimated time of completion for stage one of stasis coma reversal."

"Reversal of stasis coma will take place in three stages, per Doctor Johnson's instructions. Stage one will take approximately one hour, twenty minutes to complete."

"You're bringing her out?" T'Laan asked.

"I am. Did you complete the job I gave you?"

“Yes, sir. I think you’ll find my report quite interesting.”

Bastion indicated for T’Laan to follow him into the study. He motioned for T’Laan to sit behind the desk. “Show me what you’ve found.”

T’Laan adjusted the screen so the admiral could see. “I took the information and compiled it into a timeline graph. There have been covert transmissions made from the *Maelstrom*. The extreme measures taken to hide the signal suggest a potentially nefarious motive.”

“Were you able to identify the transmission point of origin?”

“I did more than that.” T’Laan changed the display to show another graph. “Here, you can see the routine transmissions—nothing here that’s out of the ordinary. Even allowing for a percentage of unexpected comm traffic, there’s still nothing that indicates anything out of the ordinary.”

T’Laan then overlaid another graph on the current one. “But I went through the records for every transmission since the *Maelstrom* left Endara VI after you met with the emperor. I analyzed the signals on all incoming and outgoing comm traffic, and I found a pattern of abnormal sub-band transmissions.”

Bastion pointed to a section of the graph. “That’s what this is?”

“Yes. Someone spliced a sub-band signal onto the back of standard transmissions. All of the signals were outgoing, so the point of origin is on board the *Maelstrom*.”

“Were you able to isolate a location?”

T’Laan grinned. “Not only did I trace the point of origin to a specific comm terminal, but I also captured a few seconds of the audio from the live transmission.”

“Audio?”

“It isn’t the best quality. But I took the track I captured and ran it through the *Maelstrom*’s archive of

comm traffic, going back three years. I then cross-referenced it with available audio recordings in the archives, both the *Maelstrom*'s and those in the Royal Repository of Records."

"And?"

"The transmission from the *Maelstrom* originated in Chancellor Lasko's quarters. I verified the voiceprint from the recording with multiple samplings of the chancellor."

"Lasko. Not surprising."

"I also found out to whom he was talking. When he spoke with the emperor, which his duties required that he do, he used normal communication channels, so I focused on these clandestine transmissions. Chancellor Lasko's comm signals were received at the palace in Mithara City on Kallagor. I searched the archives of routine palace comm traffic and found a match to the voice talking to the chancellor."

"Who is it?"

"Chancellor Lasko was speaking each time to a man named Kardal Omhara. He appears in the palace registry as the emperor's attendant."

"Omhara. Weasel of a man, always skulking around the perimeter of the emperor's circles."

"He's apparently doing more than hanging on the perimeter now."

T'Laan followed Bastion out of the office. "What will you do now, sir?"

"You're dismissed, Mr. T'Laan. The installations are complete in your assigned quarters. You've earned a bit of downtime. I want you to report to Commander Rhola on the bridge at 0700. There are some tricky navigational calculations to be done, and your experience inside the Well is needed."

T'Laan glanced at the med unit. "Will you let me know if there are any problems during the reversal?"

"I'll keep you informed. Good night, Mr. T'Laan."

“Aye, sir. Good night.”

Bastion waited until T’Laan left retrieving the box from the sofa table. He removed the contents, dropped the box back on the table, then moved to the med unit.

“Med bot.” Bastion held out a black negligée.

“Dress the patient in this garment and prepare to begin stasis coma reversal on my command.”

Bastion retreated to his bedroom, stripped, and headed into the shower. After showering, he let the blowers dry his body and hair before getting dressed in his customary sleep pants. He stopped at the closet to grab a blanket before heading back to the main room.

Going to the med unit, he looked in at Bryanna. The negligée’s sleek black fabric contrasted with her pale skin. The thin straps that draped over her shoulders got lost in the cascade of her thick silver hair. The swell of her breasts was visible under the bodice, and the clinging fabric accented the slender contour of her waist. The rounding of her hips flared the skirt that reached to her feet.

He tossed the blanket on the sofa. “Med bot, recognize Admiral Bastion, Devon J. Begin staged stasis coma reversal.”

The med bot extended its coupling arm and linked it to the med unit. “Admiral Bastion, Devon J. voice authentication verified. Beginning staged stasis coma reversal.”

He moved to the food dispenser. “Evening meal eleven-A for Admiral Bastion.”

* * *

Emperor Ahlaric picked at a cuticle on his index finger. He sat behind the desk in his office, his latest dose of Tranquil Dark burning through his veins and buzzing in his ears. His head seemed to expand as a wave of dizziness washed through him. Multi-colored dots swirled through his field

of vision, pulsing like a field of fireflies in sync with his heartbeat.

He met here with members of his High Council. They would rather address him in the throne room with a throng of spectators to stand in awe of their importance—precisely why he refused to receive them there.

The Lady President of the High Council now had him trapped here. Why did the members elect this irritating, unattractive, half-dead slut as their leader? He detested her and the people of her home system.

AstraSuma was a backward hellhole stuck in a perpetual cycle of social upheaval. They were always going on and on about their lineage and the purity of this one's blood, or the importance of that family's accomplishments. All this bragging and one-upmanship led to open conflict between the Lineage halls.

Xanbella, Lineage Cave-Dragon, droned on and on, whining unmercifully about warlocks and whispers of malfunctions or misalignments or what-the-fuck-ever in the Flow. All this from a dried-up prune who didn't know a goddamned thing about the aetheric currents.

“So, in conclusion, Your Majesty,” she said.

Ahlaric used the tip of a letter opener to scratch inside his ear. *Thank her father's dick, she's finally concluding!*

“Your High Council of Advisors, if it pleases Your Majesty, would like to request Admiral Bastion be directed to select a task force to study the matter and dispatch same to investigate these rumors before there is widespread concern in the general populous.”

She bowed slightly then met Ahlaric's gaze, her expectation of his approval written all over her withered face.

“So, you're telling me someone broke the Flow?” Ahlaric stifled a laugh. “I want to be clear, Lady President. You're actually telling me the Flow is *broken*?”

She blushed. “Not exactly, Your Majesty.”

“But you’re saying the Flow isn’t working properly. Is that what I’m hearing from you?”

She cleared her throat. “Yes, Your Majesty. There is something wrong with the Flow. The warlocks say it doesn’t feel right anymore. Some are having difficulty connecting to their bonded realms.”

“Good!” Ahlaric jumped to his feet. “None of those bastards should be pulling energy from the Flow *anyway*! I ordered *all* warlocks in my empire to submit to permanent inhibitor collars or implanted Tranquil Dark infusers. If some are experiencing problems accessing the Flow, tell them to get a *fucking* inhibitor collar. Problem solved!”

He sat, satisfied he’d knocked this presumptuous husk of a whore down a rung or two. “Now, get out. I am *very* tired of hearing your voice, and I’m *certainly* tired of looking at you.”

He worked the stopper loose on his vial of Tranquil Dark as the Lady President bowed to him, turned, and hobbled out of his office.

His chuckle masked the sound of her walking staff striking the marble floor.

“Close the *fucking* door on your way out!” His laughter spilled into the hallway beyond.

* * *

Why did darkness have to be so dark? Bryanna detested the impermeable nothingness that engulfed her. How long had this endless blackness held her captive?

There! A faint flicker of light—ever so slight—barely noticeable. She should go to the light, discover if it was something she needed to find.

Runs of flickering light. Like fireflies flitting across an open meadow shortly after sundown. Crisp, clean air blowing in her face, whipping her hair off her shoulders.

Lights dancing along familiar pathways she should know. A name went with them—if only she could remember it.

An echo in the darkness. A familiar sound. It carried an air of tranquility, stirred a sense of belonging deep inside her. She tried to pull her mind away from the nothingness, out of the blackness, so that she could touch the echo vibrating through her.

“I will never be far away, my lady.”

The echo became a voice.

“My lady.”

The call washed over her like a warm wave. She wrapped her mind and heart around the sound, clinging to it with a desperation that both horrified and excited her.

She parted her lips and took a breath. Her body shivered.

“My lord.”

* * *

Glyndra reclined against her customary pile of pillows at the head of her bed. She carefully turned the pages of the old book propped in her lap.

She’d spent several hours on the bridge earlier—something she rarely did. The bridge was Devon’s domain. She’d questioned Commander Rhola about the Graezzon quasi-matter nebula on the Centralis map. They certainly wouldn’t be going through that thing. No expert on quasi-matter, she knew even the tiniest particle could wreak havoc with magnetic and gravitational fields.

She didn’t fully understand the workings of the Well—no one really did. Time, space, gravity, the laws of physics that formed the basis of human understanding didn’t always work correctly inside it.

Glyndra thought this outpost was probably a stationary open space platform. It didn’t make sense to

include it on the map if it phased in and out between levels of the multiverse.

Records from the diaspora led her to the book. A search through crew and passenger logs from early migration flotillas revealed multiple mentions of an outpost on the perimeter of a nebula.

She had a name for it now—Calerion Outpost and a general description of its purpose. It had served as the primary dispersal hub for ships carrying populations away from devastated worlds. Many ships left their dying planets with their populations, only to disappear into the volatile expanse that became the Well.

Glyndra closed the book and set it aside. With a stretch, she snuggled down in the bed and drew the covers over her. “Lights.”

* * *

Bastion instructed the med bot to drape the blanket over his shoulders, then drew it tight around him and the warlock he held to his side. Bryanna’s skin felt icy, and she trembled so violently, he had a difficult time keeping a hold on her.

“Walk with me.” He took a tentative step forward. She tried to follow, but her legs were wobbly.

“D-d-don’t w-w-work. Legs d-don’t...” She rested her head on his shoulder. Her eyes fluttered open, but she quickly shut them. Tears slid down her cheeks.

“Lights to thirty percent,” he said. He continued to take small steps with her as the room slid into a dusky gloom. He held her as he guided her across the room. Her trembling amplified, spasms knotted the muscles in her arms and legs.

“C-c-cold. S-s-s-o c-cold.”

Bastion lifted her into his arms and hurried into the bedroom. He lay on the bed, Bryanna cradled against his chest and pulled the covers up over them.

“Relax, my lady.” He rested his cheek on the top of her head. “The cold will pass.”

She hugged herself, her arms covered in chill bumps. “I c-can’t...am I here...s-s-so dark...so alone...”

He tightened his arms around her. “I’ve got you. You’re safe. You’ll be fine.”

He asked the med bot, “Time until initiation of next stage in coma reversal?”

“Stage two of reversal protocol begins in fifty-nine minutes, forty-two seconds.”

Within minutes, Bryanna relaxed against him. Her spasms diminished, and her breathing became less ragged.

“Dreams...so strange,” she mumbled. She molded her body against his. He lay quiet and listened to her breathing take on a more regular rhythm.

“Dream...Flow separated...can’t hold it...”
Bryanna whispered.

“Rest, my lady. We can talk later.”

“So lost...”

When she fell silent, Bastion closed his eyes and relaxed. He drifted on the edge of sleep when the med bot said, “Permission to initiate the second stage of stasis coma reversal.”

Bastion lowered the covers to expose Bryanna’s neck. “Proceed with the second stage.”

She stirred when the med bot injected her with the second dose of medication. He pulled the covers back up as the med bot moved to the foot of the bed.

“Time to initiation of the final stage?”

“Final stage implementation in thirty-three minutes, fifty-one seconds.”

Bryanna moved her hand from Bastion’s neck. “Need to wake up,” she whispered. Her voice sounded stronger now. “Wake up...”

Bastion rubbed his hand up and down her back. The satin negligée slid smoothly over the contours of her torso. Her skin felt much warmer, and she no longer shivered.

“What did you dream?” he asked.

“Everything...falling apart...you were there.”

“Tell me.”

She slowly slid her hand across his chest, fingers languid, tracing his scars. “Where it begins...the Flow...you were there...your sword...my blood...creation...all falling apart.”

“Where the Flow begins? Where is that?”

She raised her head, her eyes glazed, unfocused.

“Centralis. Take me to Centralis.”

“Why, my lady? Why must you go to Centralis?”

She lay her head back against his neck. “Us...both to Centralis...one walks away.”

“What does that mean?” he asked. “What did you dream?”

Bryanna sighed and closed her eyes. “Not a dream...premonition.”

CHAPTER 19

Bryanna's warm breath brushed against Bastion's neck. He closed his eyes and let his mind wander. He fully understood the irony of the situation. The most powerful warlock in the universe—the only one able to access the fifth aetheric realm—slept in the arms of the one warlock who could not command the magic of any realm.

She was a force he must harness and control.

Bryanna brushed a strand of silver hair from her face. Bastion took her hand and held it against his chest. While she languished in this semi-conscious state, he could question her with the best chance of extracting uninhibited answers.

The military used this interrogation technique often, had a long history perfecting its use, making it an intelligence-gathering tool with a well-established record of success. This played into his decision to pull her out of the stasis coma in stages. Also, gradually waking her negated any knee-jerk, emotional reaction that a sudden awakening could trigger.

She entwined her fingers with his and snuggled against him with a soft sigh. Her eyes remained closed, and her skin held its normal ivory tone.

He looked at her small fingers interlaced with his, the calloused hand of a sword-wielding soldier. They were both warlocks, but their lives were at opposite ends of the spectrum. Amazingly beautiful, incredibly sensual and

desirable—he couldn’t ignore the obvious. Her naiveté added to her attractiveness, but also compounded the threat that she posed. Regardless of any schoolyard infatuation she might have toward him or any attraction he felt toward her, they could not be together. It simply wasn’t possible.

He had confidence he could contain any desires or emotions he may harbor toward her. He wasn’t so certain about her.

Caring for him would bring her nothing but pain, and he would spare her that.

He drew a deep breath and slowly exhaled. Clearing his mind, he turned his attention to what his duty required: he needed to question her about the premonition while her mind remained open and unfiltered.

He squeezed her hand. “Wake up, my lady.”

* * *

Glyndra finished the last of her breakfast, then went into her bedroom and sat at the vanity. “Well, Glyndra. You aren’t getting any younger, that’s for sure. But for an old bird pushing a hundred years, you’re holding up fairly well.”

She fixed her hair, got dressed, then grabbed her tile on her way out the door. She was anxious to get to Devon’s quarters. He brought Bryanna out of the stasis coma last night, and she looked forward to seeing her.

She smiled at the two guards when she got to the admiral’s door. “Good morning, gentlemen.”

“Good morning, Commander Bastion,” Corporal Ullius said. “The admiral left orders for you to enter upon arrival.”

“Thank you, Corporal. How’s your mother doing?”

“Much better, thank you. The doctor tells us she’ll recover the full use of her leg in a couple of weeks. She’s hoping to be back at the excavation site within a month.”

“Excellent! She’s far too good a field archaeologist to lose. Give her my best when you speak to her again.”

“Thank you, Commander. I’ll do that.” He opened the door and stepped aside.

Bastion sat in the dining nook and was reading something on his tile. “Come in, Glyndra. Take a seat. We have much to go over.”

All business this morning. “Good morning to you, too, Devon.” She sat on the sofa. The door to the bedroom remained closed, and the portable med unit and med bot were gone.

“Where’s Bryanna?” she asked as the admiral took a seat in the chair across from her.

“Sleeping. The effects of the stasis coma are wearing off slowly.”

“That’s the way you wanted it, didn’t you?”

“That’s the way it needed to be.”

“I see.” Her son was a soldier, first and foremost. But since Bryanna D’Isaac entered his life, he’d changed. The disciplined, dedicated soldier now struggled with the man. For the first time in his life, Glyndra feared he might have to accept both sides of himself. The soldier and the man may have to meld.

“My lady says she experienced a premonition while in stasis coma. It’s unclear if she experienced a true premonition or just a dream.”

“She dreamed while in stasis?”

“She says *premonition*, but I can’t be sure. Doctor Johnson says dreaming in stasis is impossible. As for a premonition, no one knows.”

“I don’t remember the last time a warlock could channel enough aetheric energy to trigger a premonition.”

“I don’t think she knew she was doing it.”

“Historically, warlocks with strong ties to their bonded realms could sometimes get a glimpse of a possible future. They called it divination. It was an arduous process that required preparation. But modern-day warlocks lost that ability centuries ago.”

Bastion got to his feet and began to pace. “Her injuries weakened her natural defenses. That and the effects of the stasis coma could have left her open to an unintentional, and uncontrolled, divination.”

Glyndra thought for a moment. “I suppose that’s possible.”

Bastion stopped at the external viewport. “Our futures are shaped by the choices we make. What a warlock sees in divination is but one possible future.”

“So, what did she tell you?”

“She said this mysterious voice she hears in her spirit realm told her to come to Centralis and to bring me with her.”

“Why must you be there?”

“I don’t know.” Bastion returned to the chair.

“When the bomb exploded, she said the Flow shifted, that only the energy of the Spirit realm held the aetheric streams together.”

An ember of fear began to smolder in the pit of Glyndra’s stomach. “What would happen if the Flow lost cohesion?”

Bastion met her gaze. “My guess? Everything would fall apart. Creation itself would unravel.”

“Dear God. Tell me what she saw.”

“She saw herself in an octagonally-shaped room with what she called the Grand Crystal. She said the Flow enters our dimension there, on Centralis.”

“*Noesha uth ’johan gler ’yka,*” Glyndra whispered. “The prime conjoining.”

“She described it almost exactly as it’s described in the children’s tale.”

“I told her the story,” Glyndra said. “That could have triggered a dream. But what she described matches the information from the chip—*Laer’Maethor ah Th’tar*—the Wellspring of Life and Souls. I didn’t tell her about that.”

“Yet, she knew.”

Glyndra thought for a moment. “Maybe it *was* more than a dream.”

“It seems possible. The ancients used that machine—their aetheric enhancer—on the crystal and cracked it, causing a shard to fall off. The crack could be the physical manifestation of the breach our ancestors caused in the dimensional barrier five thousand years ago. The breach that caused the Cataclysm and formed the Well.”

“She means to undo the damage to the Wellspring.”

“The breach must be *healed*—that’s her term—and she’s the only one who can do it. But she says she can’t do it alone. She needs me there, but she doesn’t know why. Warlocks are there—warlocks she calls monsters. And there’s blood on my sword—her blood. She and I go together to Centralis, but only one walks away. Only one of us leaves Centralis alive.”

* * *

Soft, soothing sleep surrounded Bryanna like a lazy summer day. She lay in a bed that molded to her body. She yawned softly and let her eyes creep open. Light from the Lumorta sun came in through an outer viewport, and she surveyed the bedroom, blinking to push away the last vestiges of sleep.

A nightstand beside the bed had an unadorned metal lamp at its center. A glance to the other side found its mate. The headboard was flush against a wall that held double doors a few meters away from the nightstand. *Probably a closet.*

An open door in the center of one wall revealed a spacious *en suite* beyond. An antique armoire stood beside the door. A small desk with a computer terminal and a neat stack of books stood in the corner.

She rolled to her side, grabbing the other pillow and pulling it close to her chest. The scent was familiar.

“Bastion!” She tossed the pillow away and scrambled to her feet. She looked frantically about the room, expecting to see him, his arms crossed and his gray eyes boring through her.

“Calm down, Bryanna. He’s not here.”

A few deep breaths and her racing heart settled. She turned to the unlocked door and stepped back as it *swished* open. She looked into the main room. Glyndra hurried to her with outstretched arms.

“You’re awake!” Glyndra pulled her into a warm hug.

“I think I’ve slept enough to last a lifetime.”

Glyndra clasped her hands and stepped back, looking Bryanna over. “Are you okay, child? You were injured.”

“I’m fine. Just trying to get my bearings. Where am I?”

“These are Devon’s quarters. Your new quarters are on this level, on the other side of the ring. We’ll get your things moved as soon as we can. But why don’t you grab a shower and I’ll order you something to eat. You must be *famished* by now!”

Bryanna looked down at the black negligée. “Where are my clothes?”

“In the armoire,” Glyndra replied. “I sent two female yeomen down to Myra to get you some things you were missing.”

Bryanna shook her head. “Thank you, but I can’t take clothing confiscated from people who’ve had their planet purged.”

“No worries. Nothing was confiscated. Everything was paid for—from Devon’s personal account.” She turned away, chuckling.

Bryanna walked into the bedroom, pausing at the armoire. She’d never been one to fuss over fashion, but she thought perhaps she might actually enjoy these new clothes.

She slid off the negligée and headed for the shower.

* * *

Bastion sat at the head of the conference table and studied the star map displayed on the screen across the room. It showed the projected course the *Maelstrom* would take on its search for Centralis.

“Based on currently available data, that’s our best course,” Commander Rhola said. “We can get to the outpost after we skirt the Graezzon nebula. Well space or not, there’s no way we can risk going through it.”

“Skirting the nebula adds eleven-point-eight-four days to our ETA to the outpost, making our total travel time thirty-one-point-two-seven standard Imperial days,” T’Laan added.

“And the estimated ETA to Centralis from the outpost?” Bastion asked.

“Our best estimate is approximately eight months, if we have no problems en route, and assuming the estimated distances on those old star charts are close to correct.”

“Very well. Chart the course, Mr. Rhola.”

“Aye, sir. Should I prepare a briefing for the emperor and High Council?”

Bastion got to his feet. “No, I’m not ready to make a formal briefing yet.”

“As you wish, Admiral.”

“Mr. T’Laan, report to Commander Thomas in engineering. There’s an ancient data chip with an encrypted

file that's got them stumped. I want that encryption cracked."

T'Laan nodded. "I'll do what I can."

"Dismissed, gentlemen."

* * *

Bryanna sat on the floor with her back against the sofa and her legs crossed. An attendant bot went about its routine cleaning duties. *Would have been nice to have one of you aboard the Wolverine.* "Do all the crew have attendant bots?"

Glyndra lounged on the sofa behind Bryanna. "Most do. Some bots are assigned to specific areas of the ship rather than to individual crew members."

"So, tell me what I missed."

"We think we've found Centralis."

Bryanna closed her eyes against a wave of dizziness. Fragments of memories: a massive, double-terminated crystal. A jagged crack that bled streaks of smoky blackness.

"Bryanna? Are you okay, child?"

"I'm fine." She sighed and stood. "A memory, or something, popped into my mind. I don't know...forget it."

"Considering how pale you are, I don't think you'll be forgetting it anytime soon. Tell me."

Bryanna paced. "I remember the warlock's bomb exploding in the Flow. The different realms ripped apart. Not an enormous rupture, but they did separate. It felt like I was the only thing holding it all together."

"Holding the Flow together?"

"No. Not just the Flow. *Everything*. The galaxy. The universe. Hell, the entire multiverse. All of creation itself."

"Have you told Devon this?"

Bryanna laughed. "I think he probably knows more about me than I do at this point. I heard him talking to me. He kept me warm and guided me out of the fog that kept trying to pull me back into the coma. I remember his arms around me and the feel of the scars across his chest."

She turned toward Glyndra. "I remember my blood dripping from the blade of his sword, and his chest splattered with my blood. Rage burned in his eyes. It didn't feel like a dream; I'm sure of that. It had to be a premonition. It didn't feel like any dream I've ever had before."

Glyndra swung her feet off the sofa and sat up. "Devon wouldn't intentionally hurt you."

"I didn't say he did it intentionally."

"What do you mean?"

"In my premonition, there was something wrong. He wasn't himself. His eyes were his, but *not* his. Like someone else—*something* else, something malevolent—had taken his place, overpowered his will. I don't know how else to explain it."

"How is that possible?"

"I don't know. He's a violent, hard, even ruthless man, but he is *not* inherently evil. He has an incredible strength of will and uses it to keep me from sensing what he's feeling or thinking. But he can't prevent me from seeing everything. And I've seen enough to know he is *not* an evil man."

Glyndra smiled. "I could have told you that."

Bryanna came to sit beside her. "Forgive me, but I couldn't take your word for it. You must admit you have a slightly biased opinion."

Glyndra patted Bryanna's leg. "That I do, sweet child. That I do."

A comm signal sounded. "Excuse me," Glyndra said. "Let me get that."

The admiral's image filled the screen.

"Commander. Is my lady awake?"

"Yes. She's up and looking well. We've had a lovely breakfast, and now we're having a nice talk."

"Talking about what?"

Glyndra shrugged. "Oh, you know. Girl stuff. Nothing special."

"Mr. T'Laan is working on the encrypted files on your chip. I'll need you to remain with D'Isaac for a while longer. If you must go to Archives, take her with you."

"I don't really have anything pressing in Archives at the moment. May we take a stroll through the arboretum and perhaps visit the training gym?"

Bryanna sat forward, her hands clasped, and her hopes rising.

The admiral paused, then said, "Very well. Take the posted guard with you. Put my lady on."

Bryanna jumped up, her enthusiasm spiking, and hurried across the room. The admiral's stern look brought her soaring mood crashing down.

"You'll be out among my crew," he said. "I expect you to honor our agreement. Glyndra will be functioning in my stead. Your behavior will *not* disappoint me. Is that understood?"

Bryanna's face flushed. "You don't have to speak to me that way. I'm not dense, and I'm no child."

He leaned close to the screen, his gaze intense. "Do you understand what I expect of you?"

Bryanna nodded. "Yes, my lord. I understand."

He leaned back and focused on Glyndra. "I'll be shuttling to the planet's surface within the hour. Captain Montison's discovered an underground facility. It was heavily damaged in the purge, but she's confident they'll be able to gain access."

"What sort of facility?"

“Uncertain. The only thing we know is there’s a source of aetheric energy inside.”

A chill ran up Bryanna’s spine. “Other than a warlock, what could be giving off an aetheric reading?”

“That’s what I intend to find out,” Bastion said. He looked back at Glyndra. “Depending on what I find, I may need your expertise on-site, Commander. Be prepared to shuttle down should I need you.”

“Of course,” Glyndra said. “Be careful.”

“Always,” he replied with a nod before the screen went blank.

A sense of foreboding settled into the pit of Bryanna’s stomach. “I don’t think he should go down there.”

Glyndra chuckled. “Good luck stopping him. He’ll be fine. He does this sort of thing all the time. He has as much insatiable curiosity as I do. Now, come on. Let’s get ready for a stroll through the arboretum. You’ve *got* to see the Moonbeam Orchids.”

CHAPTER 20

Bryanna gazed through the Tonerian oak's green-leafed canopy at the yellow glow of the Lumorta system's sun. The *Maelstrom's* orientation allowed the arboretum's dome to face the sun's natural light.

"Most of these plants are from worlds I've never visited," Bryanna said. "Some I've never even heard of!" She tried to ignore the guard detail following them. At least the two men remained at a discrete distance.

She and Glyndra lazily wound their way through the arboretum's maze of shale-covered footpaths. Benches and gazebos dotted the trails, complete with food dispensers. The massive meta-glass dome overhead gave a breathtaking view. The yellow Myran sun shone in the distance, the automatic tinting in the dome blocking any damaging rays. The light bounced and reflected off the asteroid belt filling the space between Myra's orbit and the sun, sending rainbow bursts dancing over the treetops reaching for the stars.

"I love the smell of it all," Glyndra said as they sat on a stone bench. "The flowering plants, the grasses, and mosses. Because there are native plants from so many worlds, just about everyone can find a little piece of home here."

Bryanna breathed in the fragrant air. "I can see why it's popular."

"We have the D-and-E division to thank for it."

“D-and-E division?”

“Discovery and Exploration. It’s the civilian science sector on board.”

“Why is there a civilian sector on a military vessel?”

“The *Maelstrom* isn’t just the empire’s flagship. It’s also one of the premier scientific vessels in the Imperial fleet. Devon initiated the division when he took over as admiral, so we don’t have to wait for a science ship when we come across anomalies. It was a matter of efficiency, and it’s worked well. The team of botanists from D-and-E oversee the arboretum.”

“Makes sense.”

“As I said before, Devon has a reason for everything he does.” Glyndra patted Bryanna’s leg and stood. “Come on. There’s more I want to show you. The marshes pod with the Moonbeam Orchids is incredible. They’re in bloom now.”

* * *

Admiral Bastion gazed out the shuttle viewport at the Myran southern continent. A military supply depot was a mile inland from the small bay that formed the northern edge of Andovia City. It had been a secondary target in the purging attack. Most of the larger commercial buildings lay in ruins. The outer residential areas took damage, but some structures looked salvageable.

“Final landing approach initiated,” the pilot said. “Touch down in fifteen seconds.”

The shuttle descended. Captain Montison and a security detail waited. “Contact the *Maelstrom*,” Bastion told the pilot. “Schedule a diagnostic on this shuttle when we return. I felt a vibration when the landing array deployed.”

Captain Montison met him at the base of the shuttle's ramp. The stern look on her face told him right away that something was wrong.

"What's the problem, Captain?" he asked as Montison ushered him toward her office.

"We'll talk in my office," she replied, her voice hushed.

She hurried the admiral into her office and quickly shut the door behind them. She waved the admiral to a seat. "I've come upon some information that you need to know. There's a problem with the original orders you received for the purging attack on Myra."

Bastion took a seat in front of the captain's desk. "What sort of problem?"

Montison sat behind her desk and leaned forward, elbows on the desk and hands clasped. "The Quorum authorization and the approval by the High Council were both fabricated. The orders were illegal."

Bastion sat forward, his body tensing. "Are you certain of your information's validity?"

"Completely. I got the information from Nyrra, a handmaid to the Lady President of the High Council. She's also surrogate-patroness to my children. Lucinda and I have known Nyrra for over twenty years. My trust in her is absolute. Nyrra overheard the Lady President and another member of the Council talking about it."

"I need more than just whispers overheard in a hallway."

Montison slid a data tile across the desk to him. "I knew you would, so I did a bit of digging and called in a few favors. That's the original edict filed with the Quorum's Record of Deliberation and the vote on the Quorum floor. Look at the bio-signatures on the official proclamation."

Bastion scrolled the document to the bottom. In any legal declaration, approval of legislation required a

majority vote in the Quorum. Once that was obtained, the Motion for Action went before the High Council for consideration. It took affirmative votes by nine or more members of the High Council to then sanction it. Each of the council members voting in the affirmative had to affix their bio-signature to the original document. There were nine bio-signatures scrawled across the bottom of the declaration.

The admiral dropped the tile on the desk as he stood. “Different names, but the bio-authentication for each is the same. Same with the signatures; different names but all the same handwriting. One person signed all the names and provided the bio-authentication for each. They’ve found a way to corrupt the genetic authentication of a bio-signature.”

Montison nodded. “That’s the only explanation—and it begs a bigger question. How is it that none of the council members has questioned legislation enacted without their bio-signatures on the official edicts? Wouldn’t they remember whether or not they’d approved of and officially sanctioned something like a purging attack on a planet?”

“Not if they involved a warlock in their plan. A phantos could manipulate their memories.”

“I thought of that, so I asked Nyrra to keep her ears open. She remembered a rumor circulating about a year ago that Emperor Ahlaric had a couple of warlocks hidden away who he forced to do his bidding when the need arose. She said the palace steward quickly quelled the rumors and those spreading it disappeared.”

“That son-of-a-bitch.” Bastion began pacing. He balled his hands into fists. “I’ll kill him myself.”

“I’ll help you,” Montison mumbled.

Bastion’s thoughts churned. The information Montison gave him was devastating. He’d received official

confirmation of his orders and carried them out in good faith, but the order for the purge of Myra had been illegal.

“Which councilman forged the others’ bio-signatures?” he asked as he paced.

“Councilman Relaine of Gaalrad and Councilwoman Lixanne of Shellah III were the last to see the emperor before he signed the final edict and had it entered in the Record of Deliberation. It had to be one or both of them. Word is they’re both in the emperor’s back pocket. They do whatever he demands, and he turns a blind eye to their black-market dealings and slave trading.”

Bastion paused, his hands clenched and trembling. A low growl rumbled from deep in his chest. With a feral cry, he whirled around and punched the wall. The wood panel splintered, leaving a gaping hole.

He stepped back and hung his head, hands on his hips. Slowly, his breathing calmed, and he met Montison’s gaze. “Who have you told about this?”

“No one. Just you.”

“Keep it that way.”

“Aye, sir.”

Bastion ran a hand through his hair and straightened his shirt. “Lead the way to this underground chamber you’ve discovered.”

She escorted him out of the command building and led him toward an open crater about fifty meters from the depot site’s perimeter. “There was a secondary blast from the conversion bolt here. It opened an old access tunnel. We could have missed it if it wasn’t for a scanning error.”

“What sort of error?” Bastion evaluated the crater. A temporary elevator provided access to its base. Excavation drones hauled loads of rubble, piling them clear of the edge.

Montison opened the liftgate for the admiral. “Private Meister did a full spectrum scan instead of the

usual five-band. That's what picked up the aetheric energy reading and led to the discovery."

Bastion looked down at the darkened tunnel entrance as the lift descended. "Sometimes, mistakes can be beneficial."

"Let's hope that's the case here."

Bastion made his way to the tunnel's entrance. Well-worn stone steps faded down into the gloomy interior. "How far in have your teams gone?"

"To the end of the tunnel. There's a metal door blocking the way. An excavation crew is working to breach it."

Bastion looked to one of the security men. "Give me your comm helmet."

The man handed it over. "Shall I accompany you, Admiral?"

Bastion put it on and switched on the light. "No. Stay here with Captain Montison. No one else enters this tunnel."

* * *

Bryanna knelt along the bank of the marsh. The vanilla-sweet scent of the Moonbeam Orchids filled the air. Across the bog, a pale fog settled on the surface of small pools interspersed with tufts of moss and grasses.

The bulk of the orchid plant grew underwater, their flat green leaves floating on the surface. Thin stalks covered with clinging water droplets rose in the air, swaying gently in the marsh's lazy current. A single flower topped each stem, the slender, semi-gossamer petals ringing a thumb-sized dollop of water encased in a transparent membrane. A pearlescent coating on the upper side of the triangle-shaped fronds that dangled toward the marsh's surface gave rise to the signature name—they looked like captured rays of moonlight.

“It’s breathtaking,” she whispered as she stood. “I grew up on Eramoor. The only vegetation I saw every day were brown scrub bushes and Skeleton Hand trees.”

Glyndra chuckled. “I agree; it’s breathtaking. That’s a good description.”

Bryanna linked arms with Glyndra and resumed their walk. “A thousand years ago, a corporeal warlock could have used their power to create all of this.”

“If warlocks today could control magic the way their ancestors did, would you be okay with that?”

“Yes, and no. Yes, I’d like for warlocks to be what we were meant to be. Use of the Flow’s magic is our birthright. But no, I don’t think a lot of warlocks are up to the responsibility. My mother taught me having command over the magic carried a price. She said it was a warlock’s duty to honor the balance in the Flow.”

“Honor the balance?” Glyndra asked. “What does that mean?”

“No one warlock controls any realm, or so we thought. Not until I came along. But forget about me. All warlocks are bound together within their realm.”

“Sort of like a communal well.”

“Exactly. If one pulls an excessive amount of energy, the others feel the effects. If the majority of the energy is being siphoned by one, the others can try to draw from the realm’s well, but they’ll find their bucket only partially full.”

Am I saying too much here? Bryanna sensed no hint of subterfuge or deceit in Glyndra, but she *was* the admiral’s mother. He knew so much about warlocks; she had to be just as informed. So why the questions? They were basic questions, probably common knowledge to anyone who spent time studying warlocks as Glyndra had over the years.

She glanced at the older woman, meeting her gaze. Glyndra’s clear, blue eyes were a window to her soul.

Bryanna admonished herself: *Don't let Devon Bastion make you paranoid.*

"What would happen if there was a sustained imbalance in the Flow?" Glyndra asked.

"The aetheric realms are like flowing streams of energy. They're constantly in motion. If an imbalance occurs, the course of the stream may be altered. That would be bad. It could start a domino effect across all the streams."

"I see. But with you, it's different because you're the only warlock with a silver aura."

"The spirit realm weaves through all the others, and it's also a distinct stream all its own. When I'm in the Flow, I'm in the silver current. But I can see and feel the threads of the other realms. If I want, I can access each of them individually or all at once. But I've never done that."

"Why not?"

"Call it instinct. I just know I could siphon so much energy if I pulled from all the realms at one time, I could deplete every warlock of their magic. And that, frankly, scares the hell out of me."

"If you've never done it before, how can you be certain?"

Bryanna steered Glyndra toward a gazebo. "I just *know*." They stepped into the wooden patio. Glyndra sat while Bryanna went to the food dispenser. "Triad triple tea, two cups, over ice. It's like intuition but stronger. Since the warlock with the bomb, when the Flow seemed to strain to maintain cohesion, I'm even more certain."

She collected the two cups of tea, sat, and handed one to Glyndra.

Glyndra took a sip before asking, "This separation in the Flow. Is that what's driving you to find Centralis?"

"That's part of it. When I felt the tearing in the Flow, I heard the call in the spirit stream clearly enough to understand what it was saying."

“What or who could it be?”

“I don’t know.” Bryanna sighed. “The admiral has answers to some of my questions, but he’s not telling me.”

“He will when he thinks the time is right.”

“So damned frustrating. Everything’s on *his* timetable. He’s the most stubborn man I’ve ever met.”

Glyndra chuckled. “His security detail uses the code name Dragon for him because he’s so headstrong.”

“I can see him as a dragon, puffing and blowing fire.”

“I can’t picture him sitting on a pile of treasure like a dragon. He’s never had much interest in accumulating things.”

“That’s obvious from the lack of décor in his quarters.”

Glyndra laughed. “You noticed?”

* * *

Bastion’s footsteps crunched on the small pebbles littering the narrow staircase. “Bastion to *Maelstrom*,” he said into his helmet comm.

“Rhola here, sir.”

“Commander, I’m moving toward the underground chamber. I’ve connected a helmet cam to my commlink. You should be receiving visual.”

“We’re receiving now. Everything looks clear.”

“Maintain continuous monitoring on this signal.”

“Aye, sir.”

Looking into the darkness ahead, Bastion saw lights at the far end. The floor was uneven and filled with rubble. He squeezed around a large boulder and found the excavation crew at work on a metal door.

“Welcome, Admiral.” The lieutenant saluted then extended a hand. “I’m Lieutenant Wexman. We were just about to blow this door.”

Bastion shook his hand and glanced around at the other five members of the excavation crew, then turned to the door. It was a crude patchwork of old and new metals. A biometric identification scanner replaced its original lock.

“Have you identified the origin?” Bastion panned his light over the primitive markings etched into the door’s face.

“No, sir,” Wexman replied. “We were more concerned with getting through than what’s written on it.”

Bastion stepped back and spoke into his commlink. “Rhola, you seeing this?”

“Clear as sunrise, Admiral.”

“Record the images, then summon Commander Bastion. See if she can interpret it.”

“Aye, sir.”

Bastion turned to Wexman. “Blow the door.”

CHAPTER 21

“Ignore the looks,” Glyndra said as she and Bryanna walked from the arboretum toward the lift. Their guards remained close. The crewmen they passed showed a range of reactions, from surreptitious glances to open gawking.

Bryanna shrugged. “I understand they’re curious. I would be, too.”

Glyndra steered them through an intersection. “Now that my knee is better, I’m itching to get to the gym. I try to get in a good workout at least two or three times a week.”

“I would love to have some time in a gym.”

“Since today has gone so well, maybe Devon—”

A call came over the ship’s comm address.

“Commander Glyndra Bastion to the bridge.”

Glyndra sighed. “So much for getting in a workout. Looks like we’re headed to the bridge.”

“I don’t have permission to go there.”

“Minor technicality.” Glyndra turned to their guard detail. “Let’s go, gentlemen. Try to keep up!”

* * *

Admiral Bastion and the excavation crew took cover behind the huge rock.

Lieutenant Wexman held the remote detonator.

“This could kick up a lot of dust. Shield your eyes.” He

handed the admiral a breathing screen. “Get your filters in place.”

“On your command, Admiral,” Wexman said.

“Proceed.”

“In three...two...one...”

The charges exploded. Dust filled the tunnel, rolling over and around the stone shielding them.

When the cloud thinned, Wexman motioned two of his crew forward. “Check the door.”

The crewmen squeezed around the boulder. After a long moment, one signaled Wexman. “Door’s breached, sir. The corridor beyond looks to be in decent shape. Smoke’s coming through the opening.”

“Do not enter. We’re on the way,” Wexman signaled back.

Bastion squeezed around the boulder, followed by the others. The door was in ruins, and thick black smoke curled out from the tunnel.

Bastion drew his sword and moved into the corridor.

* * *

Bryanna stepped onto the bridge. T’Laan, standing behind a large console, smiled at her. His blue fireflies danced.

“Commander Bastion reporting.” Glyndra turned to Bryanna. “Bryanna D’Isaac, this is First Officer Commander Eric Rhola. Commander, may I present Bryanna D’Isaac.”

Rhola stood and bowed slightly. “The pleasure is mine, good lady. And I mean no disrespect, but now is not the time for a tour of the bridge.”

Something moved in the image on the forward vidscreen—a live feed from a helmet cam. The admiral’s voice came over the open commlink. “The tunnel opens up

ahead. Fan out, two-man teams. Lieutenant Wexman, you're with me."

"I take full responsibility for her, Commander," Glyndra said. "You summoned me?"

"Good enough," Rhola said. "The admiral discovered markings on a metal door." He gestured to T'Laan. "Mr. T'Laan will pull up an image for you. The admiral wants it translated."

Glyndra turned toward T'Laan's console. "I thought you were decrypting my chip."

"I am." T'Laan tapped the side of his head. "Multi-tasking. I'm running the file through thirteen thousand known decryption keys and three of my own that I've devised over the years."

Bryanna stared at the screen. "T'Laan, where does that tunnel lead?"

"That's what the admiral is trying to determine." To Glyndra, he said, "Here's the image Commander Rhola was talking about. I've been able to determine the markings are most likely some off-shoot of ancient Myran."

Glyndra studied the image. "That's ancient Myran, but it isn't a human vernacular. It looks more like Myran native warlock."

Bryanna watched the live feed. The admiral and his team were entering a large chamber. The camera slowly panned.

"Rhola, are you getting this?" Bastion's voice was clear, the image crisp. Devastation reigned, but some of the architecture remained. Twisted metal ceiling supports stood barren with large chunks of the roof structure strewn across the room. Rubble and dust covered everything.

"Receiving perfectly, Admiral," Rhola replied.

"Can you pinpoint the exact location of the aetheric energy signature?"

"Target is to your left, about nine meters, toward the back of the chamber."

“Copy that,” Bastion replied.

Darkness gave way to the helmet-mounted spotlights. Bastion moved left. The image jostled as he climbed over rubble and ducked under collapsed supports.

“Admiral,” Rhola said, “that structure is not secure. Recommend you make this quick.”

“Understood.” The camera panned again. The wall beside him was intact, supported by a single beam. He stepped over the fallen one, then shone his light into the interior of the chamber.

Towards the center of the room, a collapsed ceiling joist had cleaved a machine in half. Piles of boulders and rubble littered the chamber; machine parts, cables, and remains of corrugated hoses stuck out at odd angles.

Toward the back of the room, Bastion’s headlamp illuminated something protruding from the debris.

A human hand.

Bastion pointed with his sword. “There’s a body under that pile of rubble.” He ducked under a fallen ceiling strut then panned around again. “I can smell the decay. Fan out. Check for survivors.”

Chills crawled up Bryanna’s spine.

Bastion inched his way forward along the wall. One of the crew called from across the chamber. “We’ve found two androids here.”

“Take them to the entrance, and wait for me,” Bastion replied.

Lieutenant Wexman climbed over debris to get to the remains of the machine. “It looks odd like it was pieced together with scrap parts.”

“Any idea what it was for?”

“None. Recording images into mission log.”

“Copy that.” Bastion said. He sheathed his sword then worked his way through the rubble. The helmet cam bounced, and the image blurred as he slithered through

hanging bits of cable and tubing. “Rhola, can you hear me?”

“Yes, sir. We’re following your feed.”

“Anything on the door inscription?”

“Not yet, but we’re working on it.”

“Give me a direction to the source of the aetheric energy.”

Bryanna’s heart rate spiked. “Don’t go,” she whispered.

“To your right, about three meters,” Rhola said.

“Copy that.”

Bastion knelt beside a pile of rubble. A badly burned torso came into focus. The dome of the skull was missing—the wound looked surgical.

“What the hell?” Rhola exclaimed.

Bastion moved toward a pile of debris that lay a meter away from the remains of a shattered table. “We’ll need to stabilize this place then get a forensic crew in to find out what happened here.”

A crewman called from the entrance. “Admiral Bastion, this android’s trying to speak.”

“Do what you can to clear up the audio on it.”

Bastion’s light reflected off something buried in the powder near his foot. He knelt, pushing grit aside with his hand. “Prepare to withdraw. I’ll be there in a moment.”

“Leave it,” Bryanna mumbled as he pulled a dagger from his boot and used the tip to stir the rubble.

From the tactical station, Glyndra said, “I think we have an interpretation, Commander Rhola.”

Rhola swiveled around in the command chair.

“What’ve you got?”

“The inscription on the door is an obscure variation of the ancient Myran native warlock language. All I can provide is an approximate interpretation.”

“I’ll take it.”

“It says, ‘forever seal the damned.’ But the inscription is newer, definitely not ancient. The syntax is off and a few of the symbols are contrived. It looks more like someone tried to fake an ancient look to it.”

Rhola swiveled back to face the vidscreen. “Why scratch that in a door?”

“I don’t know.”

T’Laan spoke up. “Perhaps someone wanted to give the impression that the chamber is a warlock antiquity.”

“Why fake an ancient warlock site?” Rhola asked.

“To attract the attention of Admiral Devon Bastion,” Bryanna said.

Bastion held up a dust-covered cube the size of a die in front of the helmet cam. “I think this is the source.”

Bryanna cried out. “Drop it!”

The cube transformed into four writhing, semi-transparent worm-like creatures. They burrowed into the flesh of the admiral’s palm.

The android’s metallic voice said, “Admiral Devon Bastion identified.”

The bridge filled with a deafening roar. The screen flashed white, then blacked out.

CHAPTER 22

“Get the damned helmet feed back online!” Rhola ordered.

The bridge filled with a chaotic hum of activity. The vidscreen remained black.

Bryanna held Glyndra’s trembling hand. The pain in Glyndra’s blue eyes swam behind the tears threatening to spill over.

“Open link established,” comms reported.

“*Maelstrom* to Admiral Bastion,” Rhola said.

“Respond.”

Bryanna’s magic stirred.

“*Maelstrom* to Admiral Bastion,” Rhola repeated.

“Respond, Admiral.”

T’Laan hurried to the comm station. He whispered in consultation with the officer there before rushing back to the tactical console.

“Commander Rhola,” he said, “I may be able to restore visual feed.”

“Do it! Emergency rescue team prepare to launch to the surface.”

“Commander,” T’Laan said. “Helmet cam feed coming back online.”

In the settling dust, a grainy image took shape. Glyndra gasped.

“Clear that up.” Rhola tried the commlink.

“*Maelstrom* to Admiral Bastion. Respond, sir.”

“*Maelstrom*.”

Bryanna's stomach lurched—the admiral's voice, coarse and shaking. The bridge fell silent. Glyndra covered her mouth with her hand.

"We read you, Admiral," Rhola said. "Are you injured?"

Bryanna stiffened as the screen cleared. The helmet cam was on the ground. The admiral's trembling hand came into focus—two fingers lay twisted at unnatural angles, and blood pooled in the dirt below his palm.

"*Maelstrom*." An urgency tinged his quavering voice. "Plasma conversion bolt. My location. Now."

"No, Devon!" Glyndra cried.

His hand twitched. Something moved underneath the skin of his thumb.

"Fire, Rhola," Bastion repeated. "That's...order."

Rhola turned to Glyndra, his face aghast.

"Commander, I—"

"Don't you do it, Rhola." Glyndra glared at him.

"Do *not* kill my son!"

Rhola got to his feet. "You heard him, Commander. He gave me a direct order."

"I don't give a goddamn about that order," Glyndra growled. "He's not thinking clearly. Get him out of there!"

"Get me Captain Montison," Rhola ordered the comm officer.

Seconds dragged by before Montison responded.

"Captain Montison here, *Maelstrom*."

"Sitrep, Captain. Can you get a rescue crew to the admiral?"

"Negative, *Maelstrom*," Montison replied.

"Preliminary scans show it's all collapsed. Excavation will take sixteen hours minimum."

"Clear your people out, Captain," Rhola said.

"*Maelstrom* out."

“No, Rhola!” Glyndra’s voice broke. “Please, don’t kill him! Send a crew. I’ll go with them. Let me at least *try* to save him!”

Rhola spoke quietly. “It won’t make any difference. I’m sorry. You heard Montison—it will take hours to get to him. He’ll run out of oxygen long before that.”

Fingers of terror ripped through Bryanna’s gut. Her heart thundered against her ribs, and her knees threatened to buckle. The bridge spun, and her vision blurred. She couldn’t breathe. *Why is there no air?*

Devon Bastion was dying, was beyond the *Maelstrom*’s reach. She could try to save him, but what if she couldn’t control the magic? Would she die with him, crushed beneath the earth like her mother?

She closed her eyes, clenched her fists, and squared her shoulders. *What if I don’t fail? Are you warlock or not, Bryanna? Time to fucking find out.*

She stepped away from the tactical console. “I can get to him.”

Rhola looked at her. “What?”

Bryanna’s aura flared, flooding the bridge with its silver light. “T’Laan, I don’t know where the Medical Bay is. Take Glyndra there; I’ll find it through her.”

“Be careful, kid.”

Bryanna’s eyes locked with Glyndra’s. “I’ll bring him back.”

Rhola stepped toward her. “What the hell are you doing?”

Glyndra grabbed his arm. “Let her go.”

Bryanna nodded to Glyndra as a portal into the spirit realm opened behind her and she tumbled through it.

* * *

Bastion’s ears rang with a high-pitched buzz and the irregular thudding of his heartbeat. He tried to open his

eyes, but dust and debris filled the air. A low beam of light shone from his left—his helmet lay somewhere in that direction.

Sensations slowly returned. His training kicked in, his mind ticking off his injuries. Inhaling was excruciating—he'd lost his breather film. Left leg broken below the knee. Fractured ribs on both sides. Right shoulder dislocated. Index and middle fingers left hand broken. Burning, gnawing pain in left palm.

An image flashed across his mind—a small cube dissolving into four semi-transparent, wriggling worms that stabbed into his flesh. The cause of the pain in his palm. Some sort of parasite.

Bastion squinted. The dust was settling, the ringing in his ears fading. Off to his left, toward his outstretched hand, he heard the static of the open commlink.

Where was the damn plasma bolt? He gave Rhola a direct order to fire.

Glyndra. She would be protesting. That could explain a few moments of delay, and it was something he could forgive Rhola. After all, Eric was more than his First Officer; he was also Devon's long-time friend. Firing that plasma conversion bolt wouldn't be easy for Rhola.

Lying still, he listened to the groan of twisted metal and the crunch of rubble settling around him. There were no other voices or sounds of life. Somehow it seemed fitting that he spend the last minutes of his life alone and buried under destruction he'd caused. It wasn't a soldier's death like he'd envisioned as a young recruit, but the outcome would be the same.

Although he longed for the few moments of peace such a death offered, the things tunneling into his hand commanded his attention. He closed his eyes and focused on the parasites invading his body. They were intelligent, possibly sentient—and inherently evil.

He lifted his head—pain shot down his spine. He cried out and let his head fall. A metal stabilizer strut lay at an angle across his chest. It was dug into the rock floor at his side, just below his armpit, and disappeared into a chaotic array of stones and twisted metal above him. The sharp edge had cut a gash across his left side. Blood seeped from the wound, dripped down his side, and pooled in the dust.

His lips twitched, a parody of a smile. *That's one scar I won't have to live with.*

His wrist began to throb as the parasites dug through it. He tried to close his fingers but pain shot up his arm. A reflexive jerk of his arm unsettled the rubble surrounding him. The metal bar pressing into his left side shifted, sending white-hot bolts of pain through his chest.

He cried out, his voice hoarse. Head throbbing and heart pounding painfully against broken ribs, darkness swelled around him, pulling him toward unconsciousness.

* * *

Bryanna's silver aura chased the blackness from the underground chamber as she stepped from the open portal. The light from the helmet cam flickered on the other side of a rock wall in front of her.

She reached out with her mind. Her aura seeped over the boulder and touched on Bastion's waning consciousness. He was near death.

Her aura crackled with the power at her command. Her mind focused on her emotions and galvanized around a singular purpose—to retrieve Admiral Devon Bastion alive. Her magic blazed as she reached into the corporeal realm and funneled energy from it. She lashed it outward like a whip, encircling the massive stone. She cried out as green light engulfed the boulder and lifted it toward the ceiling.

Pulling magic from the phantos realm, she meshed together bolts of yellow-white lightning into a web that held the boulder aloft.

Bastion lay in the clear space ahead. No longer the hardened soldier with the iron will. No longer the empire's top warlock slayer, the larger-than-life figure mothers used to scare their children. She wasn't looking at the commander of the *Maelstrom* who took her captive and threatened T'Laan's life to force her to surrender to his demands.

He was a dying man—helpless, vulnerable. A life she could save—a life she wanted, *needed*, to save.

She ran under the stone and fell to her knees beside him. She threw her aura around him, the energy instantly sealing his bleeding wounds.

"I'm here, my lord." She touched his consciousness, searching for a response. He was protecting his mind with his waning strength.

An alien presence assailed Bastion's defenses.

"Leave him alone!" Her voice carried through the chamber and reverberated along the threads of the spirit realm.

An unseen force smashed into her chest, throwing her on her back beneath the levitating boulder. Winded, she struggled to draw a breath. Her eyes flew wide when the stone above her slipped.

Her aura flared as she threw up her arms. Blue fire from the astral realm slithered from her hands to billow across the web of energy holding the stone. She pushed the rock upward as she scrambled to her feet and hurried back to Bastion. She knelt beside him and wrapped him in her silver light.

She pressed her palms against his temples and channeled phantos magic, whispering to him telepathically, "My lord. Help me find you."

Fury erupted from within him but it didn't spring from the admiral—it originated with the alien attacking him. Remembering the cube he'd picked up, she took his hand and pushed his fingers open—four bloody puncture wounds in his palm.

My lady.

She shuddered. "I'm here."

Burn it.

The alien entity reacted with frenzied rage. *That's why he ordered a plasma conversion bolt.*

She looked around for the helmet cam and scrambled for it. Positioning it next to the admiral, she said, "*Maelstrom*, can you hear me?"

"*Maelstrom* here." Commander Rhola's voice. "We see you."

She grasped the metal bar lying across his chest. Green electricity sizzled from her hands, running up and down the shaft. The bar disintegrated into rust. "Is Glyndra in medical?"

She threw up a dome of crackling blue energy from the astral realm, the stones hovering over them pushed to the ceiling and back wall. Green and blue lightning sparked.

"Yes," Rhola said. "She's there."

Bryanna clenched her teeth and ratcheted up the magnitude of the energy crackling through her silver aura. A hum built in the chamber.

"Tell them to be ready. I'm bringing the admiral to medical in one minute."

"Copy that. Godspeed, Lady Silver."

Bryanna lay against Bastion, her torso across his chest and her arms encircling his neck. She sensed an arc of pain rush through him as she wrapped her aura around them both like a coffin.

Opening herself to the magic of the elemental realm, she whispered into his mind. “Stay with me, my lord.”

She lay her head against his chest as both their bodies erupted in white-hot flames.

CHAPTER 23

"Everyone's talking about it." Chancellor Lasko said. "It's like they're all holding their breath, like they're afraid the bastard won't survive. And they're scared shitless of this warlock, of her magic. They don't know if they can trust her."

Omhara's face flickered on the comm screen. "Are you certain Bastion's condition is critical?"

"Yes, I'm certain. He was barely alive, before his warlock got involved."

"You said she's bringing him back to the *Maelstrom*'s medical bay?"

"That's the word in the corridors. Whether she actually does or not, we'll see."

"Get to medical." The anger in Omhara's voice cut through the static. "Find out what's going on with the admiral. If we're lucky, he'll do us a favor and die."

"Doctor Johnson has medical locked down. There's no way to get in there."

"You're fucking *useless*!"

"All right! I'll go to medical, see what I can find out."

"Get back to me soon." Omhara cut the link.

Lasko sat back in his chair, seething. He'd had enough of Omhara and his crazy cohorts. It might be better to wash his hands of the whole lot.

The situation with the admiral could be an opportunity. If Bastion died, the most logical choice to lead the military would be Vice Admiral Younger. He was in command of the *Serpentine*, assigned protection detail for the young prince Alexander, heir to the Imperial throne. The boy remained secluded in a private school on Shellah III.

A fragmented idea floating in the back of his mind began to coalesce. If Bastion died, convincing Ahlaric to leave Vice Admiral Younger in charge of protecting the heir would be easy enough. Then someone else would need to fill the command chair of the *Maelstrom*.

Some on the High Council supported the idea of restructuring the military to get it under direct civilian command. Bastion had more than one detractor on the Council.

I could spin the admiral's death to my favor. If Emperor Ahlaric placed him in command of the *Maelstrom* and the Imperial military, at least temporarily, that would bolster him as a desirable governorship candidate in the eyes of the High Council. Simply jack-up a successful military mission while he was in command, and a governorship over a prime—and highly profitable—star system should be his for the taking.

This could work.

He stood and straightened his jacket. He'd take his time getting to the medical bay. It always paid to keep his ears open when strolling the corridors. A well-placed comment here and there generally yielded a bit of fruit or at least presented an opportunity to sow a seed or two of his own design.

Chuckling, he ambled out of his quarters.

* * *

Bastion was spiraling, tumbling uncontrollably down a pitch-black tunnel. In the millisecond of the explosion, he'd resigned himself to die alone in the cavernous tomb beneath Myra.

Now, that didn't seem so certain. He wasn't alone. Something was invading his body—something alien, malevolent.

A new sensation—a touch he remembered. His downward spiral slowed. *What's happening?*

His broken body throbbed and shivered, too wracked with pain to focus. With the last of his receding awareness, he felt her touch. He heard her voice as the silver energy engulfed him.

The faint sound of his heartbeat synced with the rhythm of hers. A rush of her strength supplemented his own.

She was pushing out the alien presence, searing it from his body.

For an instant, Bastion's mind and the mind of the invading alien touched. He got a clear glimpse of the thing's true nature, and it took from him an image of violet eyes and silver hair.

Darkness engulfed him. All sensation faded. *Am I still alive?*

There was nothing but the silver warlock. She clung to him, holding him over a dark chasm and refusing to let go.

An explosion of flame—a painless, non-consuming, cleansing fire—burned the last remnants of the alien from him.

Falling again, but not toward darkness. Now he tumbled toward a distant light—silver light.

* * *

The events unfolding on the forward viewscreen riveted everyone on the bridge. They reacted with gasps and exclamations as the metal bar across the admiral's chest crumbled in the warlock's hands. Bryanna's aura pulsed and flared with such intensity; it was blinding.

Rhola punched in a commlink to medical, never taking his eyes from the vidscreen, after Bryanna gave him an ETA on getting the admiral back to the *Maelstrom*.

"Bridge to medical. Doctor Johnson."

"Johnson here."

"Admiral is coming to you in one minute. His condition looks grave."

On the screen, the warlock stretched out beside Bastion, her arms encircling his neck and her upper body prone on his chest.

"We're ready here," Johnson said. "I'll keep you informed."

Rhola cut the link as he jerked back in the command chair. Screams rang out around the bridge as the admiral and the warlock erupted in flame—a white-hot blanket engulfing them both.

A vortex of swirling light formed beneath the admiral's body. Rhola sat forward as Bastion and the warlock fell through the floor into the silver light.

The gateway snapped closed behind them, the last of the flames consuming four worms squirming through the dust in front of the helmet cam.

"Kill visual," Rhola said. "All we can do now is wait."

* * *

Spectral cries broke the night's serenity and settled over the House of Rael compound in Rycappa's capital city. The Alpha-Transcendent jerked up from his sleeping cot. The

Flow was in chaos, something powerful churning the aetheric streams.

The stone embedded in his chest grew hotter by the second, searing the flesh around it. He scrambled to his feet and stumbled to the door, flung it open, and staggered into the corridor.

The screams of the One resounded in his head as he fumbled down the stairs. He needed to get to the altar to try to touch the mind of his god.

At last, he reached the outer door to the Temple proper and placed his hand on the identification scanner. The door popped ajar with a soft *click*, and the screaming abruptly stopped.

The Alpha leaned against the door frame, the pain fading as he gulped in air. An ominous quiet settled over the House.

Pushing the door open, his body cooled as air brushed his sweat-drenched skin. He closed the door behind him and moved into the Inner Sanctum. He listened for the slightest sound. But all was silent—an angry, foreboding silence.

Darkness shrouded the room, the air filled with the pungent odor of seared, putrid flesh. Stumbling forward, the Alpha fell to his knees in front of the altar.

The fear inside him expanded—an irrational response. Why should he fear the One? He was the Alpha-Transcendent, the chosen companion of the true Being.

“We are here,” he whispered. He bowed his head, closed his eyes, and placed his palms flat on the altar. “We await your command. We fulfill your desire. We die so that We may live.”

The tentacles beneath his flesh writhed frantically, tunneling through his body more vigorously than he'd ever experienced. He clenched his hands. Blood dripped where his nails cut into his palms.

He threw his head back, and the gemstone in his chest vibrated with the pounding of his heart. The engorged veins and filaments anchoring the stone pulsed with an angry red light. Clenching his teeth, he willed himself not to cry out.

A sound. Something rigid sliding over the stone floor.

His eyes flew wide when something wrapped around his wrists.

Looking ahead, to the back and above the altar, he made out a form in the gloom. It reached almost to the ceiling, at least four meters above—an amorphous blob of quivering, semi-transparent, gelatinous-like *something*.

A massive worm-shaped appendage with rows of serrated scales split from the side of the thing. It lashed out with whip-like speed and precision, cracked over his shoulder, and stabbed into his back, raking the flesh from his bones.

He struggled to stand, but another arm snaked toward his neck. The Alpha beat against the frigid coil as it easily lifted him.

He tried to summon the Flow's magic, but he couldn't feel it, couldn't touch it—the aetheric stream inside him was gone. Blood dripped down his back, over his buttocks, and down his legs. The pressure around his neck increased, and his vision dimmed.

The creature's hold tightened; the smell of rotting flesh so thick it burned his eyes. A warm trickle ran down the inside of his thigh.

A voice in his head—guttural, murderous. “Behold the One, the Being, your God of Rycappa.”

The Alpha strained to speak. Nothing but a soft squeak came out, like a tiny mouse dying in the cat's claws.

The One lumbered forward, undulating and writhing. Its viscous body encircled the Alpha.

The Being's touch burned.

A scream escaped the Alpha's mouth as the acid-laden semi-solid plasma engulfed his head.

* * *

Bryanna stood at the foot of the med table where Bastion lay motionless. The misshapen contours of his shattered chest turned her stomach. A fracture below his left knee twisted the limb at an impossible angle. The swelling in his left hand looked horrible.

Glyndra trembled. T'Laan stood at her side, an arm around her shoulders. Bryanna couldn't bear to look at her.

"Engage circulatory and respiratory autonomic override on my mark," Doctor Johnson instructed. "Three...two...one...mark." The monitoring screen showed the admiral's heartbeat and breathing registered zero.

Bryanna felt Glyndra's anxiety spike. She sensed nothing from the admiral.

"Bio-field integration with autonomic functions complete," the med tech said.

"Override now," Johnson ordered. "Set heart rate to a minimum of sixty beats per minute and a minimum respiratory rate of sixteen."

"Override engaged," the tech replied. The bio-field quivered, sending ripples expanding across Bastion's chest. Bryanna gasped at the lines on the monitor showed his pulse and respiration registering again.

"Prep for cold-infusion neural coma induction," Doctor Johnson instructed the tech. "Begin bone alignment and regeneration in the left leg and hand."

Johnson addressed Glyndra. "He's alive, but I won't lie to you. It doesn't look good."

"Can you save him?"

"We're going to do all we can, but I'm not optimistic. He has extensive internal injuries, and his rib

cage is in pieces. His left leg and hand have multiple fractures. His right shoulder is disarticulated. He has two skull fractures, and there's intracranial bleeding from multiple points."

He paused, his face grave. "I'm putting him in a cold-infusion neural coma to preserve his brain function and buy us some time, but his injuries are likely not survivable."

Johnson's words struck Bryanna like a physical blow, and she staggered backward.

"Oh, my God," Glyndra wailed.

Johnson took the commander's shaking hands. "He's strong. And he normally heals quickly; you know that. I'm doing all I can."

To Bryanna, he said, "If you can help him, I beg you to do it."

She stepped up to Bastion and took his hand. *Can I save him?* She didn't know. She'd never tried to heal anyone so gravely injured.

His voice replayed in her mind: *"I will never be far away, my lady."*

Her aura flared and a portal formed around the admiral. Glyndra's cry rang out as Bryanna and the admiral fell through the portal into the spirit realm of the Flow.

* * *

Jamerion finished pulverizing the dried flower petals in the mortar. He set the pestle aside and dumped the powder into an empty wine glass. He filled the glass half-way, then took a long draw of wine directly from the decanter.

He crossed the study to the window and stared out at his garden. Strange—he used to take such comfort from the quiet beauty there. Now, it looked like everything else—just one more thing waiting to die.

He understood now what Bastion wanted from his pet warlock. If the confidential reports given to the High Council were correct, no one could match the power she wielded. Combined with Bastion's murderous sword and his control over the military, they formed an unstoppable pair.

Warlocks across the Empire felt the stunning effects of this silver warlock in the aetheric currents. There is nothing more terrifying to the powerful than the threat of losing that power.

That fear now played out on worlds throughout the Empire. It took warlocks from across the galaxy less than sixty hours after the attack on the *Maelstrom* to escalate fear into panic. After ninety hours, their panic morphed into violence and revolts.

Warlocks came out of the shadows, banding together and attacking human populations. They were cutting out their Tranquil Dark infusers and hacking their inhibitor collars. Reports of fighting and pleas for help inundated the civilian communication networks. Towns, cities, planets, even entire solar systems were demanding the emperor take action.

There had been no official reaction from the emperor, but it was only a matter of time before Ahlaric lay blame at someone's feet. *Millions—humans and warlocks—are going to die in this chaos.*

Jamerion returned to his desk. He read his letter to Omhara one last time before folding it and placing it on the desk. Settling into his chair, he picked up the glass of wine. It pleased him that the pungent aroma of the poisonous petals had dissipated.

CHAPTER 24

There was no up or down in the Flow, only a vague sense of movement, like floating in a stream's soft current, a perpetual glow, the same hue as the warlock's aura, and soothing silence. A fleeting sense of time—almost like an afterthought.

The only sound was the echo of Glyndra's cry as it drifted away in the spirit realm.

Bryanna's aura blazed. Fingers of glittery smoke engulfed the admiral. She closed her eyes and lay her head on his chest, her ear over his heart. The magic stung as it seeped through her into him.

"Don't leave me, my lord," she whispered into the delicate tendrils of aetheric energy melding into Bastion's body and mind. "Stay with me."

She didn't expect him to answer, but she listened, hopeful, nonetheless. His heartbeat increased, and he drew a few shallow breaths. Her mind connected with his consciousness, but she found no spark of recognition there—none of the iron will he possessed.

Only endless, cold darkness.

She jerked up, eyes wide—she sensed his life force fading.

The energy she infused into him wasn't enough to counter the damage. Fear, adrenaline, and anger flooded through her, and the magic responded.

The stream churned with frenetic, silver lightning. Streaks of red, blue, green, and yellow twirled through the aetheric tornado engulfing them. The gyrating currents shuddered when she began siphoning from all five realms.

She pulled open the front of his shirt, then stripped off the jumper she wore and stretched out along the admiral's body. Her naked breasts pressed against the scars and muscles of his chest.

She brushed the hair from his forehead and smoothed his beard. "I'm here, my lord."

Touching skin-to-skin, the intensity of the magic escalated. Her aura flared—blinding, white-hot light radiating like a starburst as her lips touched Bastion's. She kissed him, tenderly, as the undulating aurora collapsed toward her body.

She broke the kiss but continued to hover close to his lips, her voice barely audible. "Hear me, Devon Bastion. You cannot die. I will not allow it."

She kissed him again. The magic rushed through her, transferring into him. Stifling a cry, she snuggled her face into his neck and relaxed.

Bryanna floated on the edge of consciousness; her life force permeated Bastion's body, mending bones and muscles, reconnecting nerves and blood vessels, and rebuilding internal organs. It spread like a fine mist everywhere their skin touched.

Their heartbeats and breathing synced.

* * *

Emperor Ahlaric stood on the uppermost balcony of the Imperial Palace. The darkening sky reflected multiple fires burning in the city's outer fringes, the less affluent areas. Not a section of the population that usually concerned him, but this was where the warlock and human unrest was roiling, threatening to spread throughout his empire.

“Goddamned warlocks!” He rubbed Tranquil Dark into his wrist, then handed the vial to Omhara. “This is all their doing. Rioting and open conflict in every system in my Empire. What the *fuck*, Omhara! Someone is going to pay for this!”

As Omhara surveyed the city, he held his cloak tight, both to fend off the cold and to hide the stone embedded in his chest. “Perhaps Admiral Bastion could shed some light on the situation.”

The emperor spat over the railing. “That son of a bitch isn’t answering my calls. I’ve signaled the *Maelstrom* three times in the last fifteen hours. His first officer keeps giving me nonsense about him being on Myra—communications malfunctions, or some such bullshit.”

Ahlaric held out his hand and snapped his fingers. Omhara returned the vial. He remained impassive as the emperor’s trembling hands struggled to open it—and then the inevitable happened. The vial went tumbling over the railing.

“Goddam motherfuck!” Ahlaric pounded his fists on the railing, and his face flushed cherry-red. Spittle flew from his lips. “*Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!*”

Omhara kept his tone even. “Shall I fetch another vial for Your Majesty?”

Ahlaric whirled on him. “You can follow the motherfucker down to the ground, you *worthless* pile of whore shit!”

Omhara bowed as the emperor stormed from the balcony.

He turned back to look out over the city. He hadn’t received further word from Chancellor Lasko since he learned of the admiral’s injuries. That was almost twenty hours ago. The emperor’s unending demands had prevented him from contacting Lasko on the *Maelstrom*.

He suspected the admiral's warlock of instigating the revolt. *Something* was happening in the Flow, but Omhara's bond wasn't strong enough to discern more.

"Omhara!"

He sighed, pulled his cloak tighter, and headed reluctantly into the palace.

* * *

The God of Rycappa moved its shapeless, jellylike body slowly toward the altar in its Inner Sanctum. Thanks to the energy provided by consuming its Alpha-Transcendent, it had sealed the Temple Proper, closing the House of Rael until further notice.

It was furious. Thousands of years of work now faced a growing threat. Forging even a rudimentary connection to one of the aetheric streams had taken ages. Millennia passed as it painstakingly established its presence and influence. When it learned ingesting the warlock creatures increased its bond with the Flow, it made a plan to become a native biological being in this universe. Now that plan was in jeopardy of failing.

Its strength was waning again. To continue in this dimension of the multiverse, it needed to enter abeyance—a state it could maintain for centuries if required. There was one final task to complete, however. It had just enough reserves stored beneath the altar to accomplish it, and then it could go dormant.

With a final effort, it hefted its mass onto the altar. Small filaments of its body began to bore into the altar's stone. Once it drained the altar's reserves, it would begin the arduous journey to slither back into its protected chamber behind the Inner Sanctum.

* * *

Glyndra sat alone in the admiral's quarters since T'Laan left for his shift on the bridge. She couldn't bear to leave Devon's quarters.

Here she felt close to him. He was the only family she had, and the thought of losing him...it wasn't something she could even consider.

It was the waiting and not knowing what was happening that tore at her heart the most. This wasn't the first time Devon suffered injuries because of his military service. It was a danger inherent in the work and a risk he gladly accepted. As a member of the military, she accepted the same risk and fully understood what it meant.

But that didn't make it any easier to sit, waiting, the minutes ticking by painfully slow. It didn't make it any easier to know that she could receive word at any moment that her son's life had ended, that he had not survived his injuries...that the one person she loved more than anything, more than her own life, was gone.

Glyndra startled at the sound of the comm-signal. She went to the comm console and took a deep breath before activating the screen. "Commander Rhola."

"Anything?" Rhola asked.

"No."

"Damn it. It's been two days, Commander."

"There's nothing to do but wait."

"It may be time to consider our options."

"I think we need to wait."

"The emperor is breathing down my neck. I can't keep putting him off. I have to tell him *something*."

"I know that, but I don't know what to tell the emperor any more than you do."

"We could try telling him the truth."

"And let him find out about Bryanna? You know as well as I the emperor would order her immediate execution."

“He already knows. Someone betrayed Lady Silver. The emperor is furious the admiral hid her from him.”

Glyndra’s voice broke. “He’ll surely order Devon to execute her.”

“There’s no way the admiral would do that. But admitting to the emperor what’s happened may buy them some time.”

Glyndra frowned. “I don’t know.”

“Think about it. Get back to me.”

Glyndra looked around the empty great room. “Please come back,” she whispered. “Both of you.”

* * *

Bastion drifted in the current of the spirit realm. The magic permeated his body. He lay still, eyes closed, completely relaxed.

Sensations began to register. A sound. Crackling, like electricity arcing. His body throbbed with each beat of his heart. He drew a cautious, deep breath and grunted at the pain in his ribs.

Something moved against his neck. He recognized Bryanna’s touch against the side of his face, and he opened his eyes. Her face floated centimeters away, her violet eyes glistening with reflected light. Her silver hair fanned around her like a halo.

“Tell me how you feel,” she whispered.

“Terrible.” His voice was hoarse and gritty.

She lay her head against his neck. Wincing as he moved his right shoulder, he draped his arm around her and rested his cheek on the top of her head.

“Don’t move,” she said. “You still have healing to do.”

“I must get back to the *Maelstrom*. Take us back to my quarters.”

Tendrils of red, blue, yellow, and green smoke and arcs of electricity writhed through the silver light surrounding them. She was pulling from all the aetheric realms. *Warlocks everywhere must be feeling this.*

She mumbled, “Need to sleep...few minutes...”

He rubbed his hand up and down her back.

“The *Maelstrom*, my quarters. Now, my lady.”

Her aura flickered. A jolt like a punch to the gut shot pain through his abdomen and into the center of his chest. He squeezed his eyes shut against the light of the portal as it opened around them.

Movement, like falling. The *Maelstrom*’s artificial gravity kicked in. He settled into his bed as the last of Bryanna’s portal faded around them. He looked around his bedroom—darkened, with the door closed. Faint starlight filtered in from the partially open blast shield on the external viewport.

He closed his eyes and relished the touch of Bryanna’s skin against his, then carefully slid her onto the bed beside him. She stirred and rolled to her side but didn’t awaken.

Wrapping his arm across his aching ribs, he slowly sat up. He pulled the bed linens up to cover Bryanna’s breasts. Certain she still slept soundly, he swung his legs off the bed and sat for a moment, drawing several deep breaths against a wave of nausea.

He remembered the explosive force hitting him. The marks in his palm left by the parasites were barely discernible.

He looked back at Bryanna. To heal him, she’d used herself as a direct conduit. He watched the gentle rise and fall of her chest and remembered the touch of her lips against him.

“*You cannot die. I will not allow it.*” She would remain at his side as long as he wanted—and he did want her. *Too much.*

He slowly rose to his feet and drew himself up, using the strength of his will to squash the emotions that threatened to break through his tight control. He was a soldier, commander of the *Maelstrom*, and Admiral of the Imperial military. A normal life was not something afforded him—it never had been. He was a warlock with no magic—a scarred man who still battled his own demons.

She deserved far more than he could give her.

He moved slowly into the outer room, allowing the bedroom door to slide closed behind him.

* * *

Omhara hadn't slept well in days. The empire teetered on the brink of civil war, and the admiral of the Imperial military had taken sick leave. The High Council busied itself calling for talks to quell the violence, and the emperor, as useless as ever, did nothing.

Tired and queasy, he closed his eyes. He rested his hand on the gemstone in his chest, the stone's vibrations tickling his fingertips. Warlocks across the galaxy were drawing energy to themselves, creating turbulence in the Flow.

It was distracting. Several precious seconds passed before he registered the pain in his palm.

His eyes flew wide. He couldn't move. The fiery glow of the red gemstone seeped out around his palm. A web of fine tentacles wriggled over his hand, between his fingers, and burrowed into his flesh.

He tore at the filaments. The invading parasites—dozens of them—penetrated his palm and fingers.

His breath hitched when he tried to cry out. The parasites ripped and chewed their way up his arm and into his chest. Excruciating pain consumed him as the tentacles wove their web through his heart.

Finally, his racing heart settled into a slow, steady rhythm.

A smile stretched his dry lips. The presence of the One wove its way into his thoughts, whispering to him. Visual images embedded in his memory—worlds and people he'd never seen.

The last of his resistance fell away, allowing the One to fuse with his mind. Every inch of his body felt electrified. Such power, barely beyond his reach!

He sighed as the One replayed memories of the silver warlock's presence in the Flow. It would take time and a bit of luck, but he was confident he would be able to locate her.

And where she was, Bastion would also be.

Both were a hindrance to the plans he had nurtured for centuries, and he would see both dead at his feet for it.

Were the plans his, or plans born in the mind of the One?

Had he been alive for mere decades or had he lived through millennia?

Was Omhara the One, or the One, Omhara?

Does it matter anymore?

* * *

"Glyndra, wake up." She startled awake and gasped at the sight of Devon sitting at the comm console.

"Devon!" She hurried to him. His skin was ashen, black circles surrounding his sunken eyes standing out in stark relief.

"I've been so worried." A soft groan pushed through his lips as she hugged him. She released him and stepped back. "What can I do?"

"How long?" His voice was hoarse and dry.

"Almost three days. Everyone is worried sick."

"Give me a report."

Glyndra filled him in on the unrest between humans and warlocks—the rioting, violence in the streets, the chaos, everything. The empire was on the brink of civil war, and the emperor had yet to do anything. “And someone told him about Bryanna,” she concluded. “Ahlaric is furious with you.”

“Not surprising,” he mumbled while signaling T’Laan’s room.

“Admiral!” T’Laan exclaimed. “Holy shit! She did it. You’re alive!”

“My quarters. Now.” Bastion said.

Glyndra glanced at the closed bedroom door. “What about Bryanna? Is she okay?”

“My lady is sleeping. She’s exhausted but will recover with sufficient rest.”

Glyndra stepped back as he connected a secure link to the Mithara City palace.

The enraged emperor’s face filled the screen. “Bastion! What have you done? Warlocks are going insane, and people are hounding me to act. They’re making demands of me—*demands!* This is all *your* fault—you and your damned warlock. And don’t you *dare* deny it!”

“What are your orders?”

Ahlaric frantically rubbed Tranquil Dark into his wrist. “Will you actually *follow* my orders this time? You sure as *hell* haven’t been following them! I warned you not to keep secrets from me. Did you really think I wouldn’t find out about your warlock?”

“Your orders?”

The emperor screamed. “Don’t you *fucking* ignore me! You’ve gone too far this time. And the High Council *knows* it too!”

“Orders?”

“You look like shit.” The emperor rubbed more Tranquil Dark into his wrist. “Not that I give a goddamn.”

“Orders?”

The emperor’s face flushed red, and his eyes glazed over. “Put down this warlock rebellion. Wipe the damn warlocks *out of existence*, every last man, woman, and child. Kill them all, including that bitch you tried to hide from me. Then get your ass to Kallagor, to the palace in Mithara. You have explaining to do.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Refuse? Did you say ‘*refuse*’? Goddamn you, Devon Bastion. Who the *fuck* do you think you’re talking to? I’ll have you flogged—”

Bastion switched off the comm-link and sank back in the chair. He closed his eyes.

Glyndra laid a hand on his shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Bastion opened his eyes as T’Laan hurried through the door.

He carried Bastion’s sword. “Good to see you, sir.” He put the sword and scabbard on the coffee table. “I kept that for you after they took it off you in medical. I also took the liberty of sharpening and oiling it.”

Bastion nodded. “Thank you, Mr. T’Laan. You’re on guard duty here once more. You’re not to leave unless I throw you out or my lady leaves. If she does, you go with her. Understood?”

“Completely. Is she okay?”

“Fine. Take a seat.” Bastion focused on the comm station once more.

“Admiral Bastion!” Rhola’s face lit up the comm screen. “Good to see you, sir.”

“Report, Commander.”

Rhola ran through a condensed report on the ship’s operations and the latest on events in the Empire.

“All military assets are in stand-by posture, awaiting your orders.”

“Very well. Maintain current orbit and stand by.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Have comms notify Vice-Admiral Younger to expect a priority call from me within the hour. Bastion out.”

“Let me get Doctor Johnson,” Glyndra said after he cut the commlink.

“Mr. T’Laan.” Bastion slowly sat up. “Your assistance.”

T’Laan hurried to Bastion’s side to help him to his feet, then aided him to the sofa.

“Let me get Doctor Johnson,” Glyndra repeated.

“He’ll be here shortly, I’m sure,” Bastion said. “It won’t take long for word to reach him that I’m here.” To T’Laan, he said, “Tell me about your base inside the Well.”

“It’s a derelict supply depot. Only a small section has life support. Nothing fancy. Why do you ask?”

“We need a base inside the Well but near Empire territory. We’re going rogue.”

CHAPTER 25

“He’s going to need metabolic support,” Doctor Johnson said. “I’d like to see him spend some time in a portable med unit, which I know he isn’t going to do, so I’ll settle for a round of hyper-infused Zeynorial drinks. Two of them every ten hours.”

“I’ll make sure he drinks it,” Glyndra said.

Bastion lay stretched out on the sofa, his eyes closed. “Stop talking as if I can’t hear you.”

“Sorry, Admiral,” Johnson said. “I meant what I said—drink the fluids I’m ordering.”

Bastion opened one eye. “I don’t like Zeynorial drinks, hyper-infused or not.”

Johnson laughed. “I’ll flavor them for you.”

The admiral grunted and closed his eye.

“You’d be more comfortable in a portable med unit with some mild analgesics.”

“No. Dismissed, doctor.”

“Not yet, sir. I would be remiss in my duty if I didn’t make this abundantly clear. Lady Silver saved your life. The injuries you sustained would have killed you within an hour had she not intervened. But you still have a way to go. Take it easy for a few days, drink the fluids, or I’ll have no choice but to relieve you of command on medical grounds.”

“Don’t even think about it.”

“Don’t *make* me think about it.”

“Didn’t I dismiss you?”

Johnson smiled and shook his head. “Yes, sir. I’m leaving now.”

Glyndra got to her feet. “I’ll walk you out.”

“I’ll check back later,” Johnson said to Bastion.

“Would it do any good to order you not to return?”

“No, sir, it would not.”

Glyndra walked him to the door and kept her voice subdued. “He *will* recover, won’t he?”

“Lady Silver did an unbelievable job on him. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“His own ability will finish the healing?”

“Yes. I expect he’ll be up and about in another day, two at the most. He’s going to want to get to the bridge and back to work ASAP, but you have to keep him resting for at least another day. The ship’s not going to fall apart in the next thirty hours if he’s not sitting in his command chair.”

“I’ll do my best, but he doesn’t listen to me much more than he does to you.”

* * *

T’Laan stood at the viewport, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. It wasn’t so much the position felt comfortable—one position offered as much comfort as the next to him—but it was more a cultivated behavior. He’d learned biological beings were more at ease around him when he mimicked their mannerisms.

Bastion slept on the sofa. It had been a long night. He had insisted on reviewing all the current status reports from every department, and he’d met privately with Commander Rhola for over an hour.

Glyndra had gone to her quarters to get some sleep only after the admiral threatened to court-martial her if she didn’t.

Left alone at last, T'Laan and the admiral talked for a couple of hours. Bastion's knowledge of all things warlock was impressive. "Someone might wonder how you came by it," T'Laan had said.

Bastion merely cocked an eyebrow. "I think we both know how."

"Are you going to tell Bryanna you're warlock?"

"Eventually. Will you be telling her before I do?"

"No. It's your place, not mine."

It had been nearly a full thirty-hour day since the admiral and Bryanna returned to the *Maelstrom*. It was now early morning, ship's time. Hopefully, the day would see Bryanna waking.

A change in the sound of the admiral's breathing drew T'Laan's attention back to the sofa. Bastion inhaled cautiously as his eyes fluttered open. "Lights to fifty percent." His voice sounded hoarse.

"Good morning, sir," T'Laan said as he moved to the food dispenser.

"Is my lady awake yet?"

"No, but I don't think it will be much longer." He brought Bastion a hyper-infused drink. "Your morning supplement, per the doctor's orders."

"Remind me to bust Johnson to the lowest rung of ensign for this," Bastion said.

"Yes, sir."

Bastion drew a deep breath and chugged the drink. "Goddamn! That is disgusting."

T'Laan smiled again. "But it seems to be working. You don't look nearly as dead as you did thirty hours ago."

"Would you care to estimate how much longer we have before Glyndra returns to hover over me?"

"Considering you threatened her with court-martial last night, I expect her to wait at least until official crew rotation."

“That’s probably about right. So, we don’t have much time.”

“For what?”

Bastion sat forward. “Help me stand.”

When the admiral got to his feet, T’Laan asked, “Where are we going?”

“You’re going to help me shower and get dressed, and we’re not going to awaken my lady.”

“Okay, we can try.” T’Laan supported him while Bastion took a tentative step. He still favored his left leg. “But in your current condition, your ability for stealth is questionable.”

“Don’t underestimate me, android. That would be a serious mistake.”

“Duly noted, sir.”

* * *

Omhara sat in the booth with his back to the wall, cupping his drink. He stared into the brown liquid, lost in his thoughts, before gulping it down and ordering another.

The fighting between humans and warlocks spread across Kallagor, just as it had engulfed planets across the empire. The emperor did not attempt to face the crisis, placing the blame squarely on Admiral Bastion.

Omhara tightened his cloak collar. The gemstone in his chest throbbed, the multitude of twisted, gnarled, invasive tentacles boring deeper with each pulse. The presence of the One was now thoroughly interwoven into his mind, body, and soul. He could no longer discern which thoughts were his and which came from the One.

He downed the last of his drink and got to his feet. He swayed slightly, then found his balance. His red aura built as he walked toward the door, orbs of sizzling flames erupting from his palms. He flung them to all corners of the bar. He made sure gouts of fire encircled the screaming

bartender, then stepped out and slammed the door behind him.

He'd gone a full block away when the bar's windows exploded. The cries of the dying inside bled out into the city's night air.

* * *

Tranquility.

That was the sensation circulating through Bryanna's body and oozing through her waking mind. The first threads of consciousness nudged into her dream. She tried to fight against waking, tried to relish the softness of the pillow and the warmth of the blanket covering her.

She startled awake and recognized her surroundings—Bastion's bedroom.

From beyond the closed door, his hushed voice floated like a whisper on a gentle wind, but she couldn't understand what he said.

She sat up as memories began to churn. She pulled the bedsheet tight around her naked body, a chill walking over her as she recalled pressing herself against the admiral's scarred and bloodied chest—the magic of the Flow thundering like a white-water river between them.

Something was different; deep inside, something had changed, an unfamiliar sensation blossomed, as though waking for the first time.

The unique pulse of each of the aetheric currents remained. They seemed agitated, angry. Probably a reaction to what she'd done, she quickly blocked the sensation from her conscious mind. Her actions impacted other warlocks, she knew, but she would deal with that later.

Bastion's voice again, like the rapidly fading remnants of an interrupted dream. It seemed elusive, lacking in clarity and definition—as though a shadow of him were whispering in her ear.

She swung her legs off the bed, and when sure of her balance, she stood.

Goosebumps raced up her arms as an image of the admiral floated unbidden across her mind's eye. A rush of carnal desire swamped her. She reflexively slid a hand between her legs, a moan escaping her mouth as the aching wave passed.

"What have you done, Bryanna?" she whispered. A memory stirred—her own voice. *Please, my lord, don't leave me.*

She shuddered. Bastion's voice—soft, soothing, resolute. *"I will never be far away, my lady."*

She'd changed, and it wasn't a change that a cold shower could wash away.

* * *

Bastion leaned back on the sofa and extended his swollen leg so T'Laan could help pull a boot on.

"Bryanna's awake," T'Laan said. "The shower unit came on."

"Help me to my office."

T'Laan helped the admiral to his feet, then followed him into the office.

"Where are you on decrypting that file from Glyndra's chip?" Bastion asked.

"Done. The report is ready whenever you want it."

Bastion motioned for him to sit behind the desk.

"Hold it, for now. I need something else first. I want to know what Lasko has been up to during the chaos." The door chime sounded. "Get me a report together while I let Glyndra mother me for a bit."

Glyndra hurried in. "What are you doing up? You should be in bed, young man!"

Bastion chuckled, then winced. "Young man?"

Glyndra took his arm and guided him toward the sofa. “I think I should get Doctor Johnson to check you over.”

“You’re hovering, Glyndra.”

She stepped back and studied him for a moment. “When’s the last time you had an infused drink?”

“Earlier—”

“I can get you one right now.”

“No. Enough, Commander. You’re past hovering now, Mother. You’re into smothering. Scale it back.”

Glyndra faced him, frowning. “Forgive me, Devon. I’ve been in ‘mother-mode’ for too many hours.” She took a seat opposite the coffee table. “I’ll shift my gears, or at least try to.”

She looked up as T’Laan came out of the office. “How is Bryanna?”

T’Laan took the seat next to her. “She should be joining us before long.”

“Give me your report on Lasko,” Bastion said.

“Our good chancellor has been a busy boy. He’s made his routine reports to the palace in Mithara. He gave the emperor information on Bryanna—from her arrival onboard to the warlock attack. And, just for good measure, he also embellished his reports, casting your command decisions in a negative light.”

“No surprise there,” Glyndra scoffed.

“Lasko had more than one conversation with his compatriot Omhara. He complained about the way you handled Bryanna, his distrust of your motives, and stressed his belief that, as he put it, your ‘pet warlock’ should be terminated without delay.”

“I’ll deal with Lasko personally.” Bastion nodded toward the bedroom door. “But first, it’s time for my lady to know the truth.”

* * *

“He cut me off, right in my face!” Emperor Ahlaric reclined on his divan, a migraine relief pack across his forehead. “That son of a bitch has gone too far this time. I’ll have him relieved of duty and thrown in the brig.”

Omhara spooned Tranquil Dark onto a tray, ignoring the emperor’s ramblings. He’d received his instructions from the One and had no time for pandering to a sniveling royal.

“I should have him arrested and publicly flogged.” The emperor accepted the tray and dug into the black powder.

“That is your right, as Emperor.” *That would be fun to watch.*

Ahlaric’s hand trembled as he gave back the tray. He closed his eyes and slumped on the divan. His face flushed, and a trickle of drool rolled down his chin. “Lose military support....if I hurt...”

When the emperor began to snore, Omhara hurried to his quarters, making sure he locked his door behind him. He retrieved his biphasic teleporter, entered the destination coordinates, and closed his eyes against the customary flash of green light.

When he again opened his eyes, he stood in the foyer of Jamerion’s home on Rycappa. “Jamerion! Where are you?”

An eerie heaviness hung over the home. Omhara pushed the door open to the study. The stench of death assailed him. Jamerion sat behind his desk, his head slumped. His arm dangled toward a shattered wine glass on the floor.

“Coward. You always were worthless.”

Papers littered the desk. One addressed to him caught his attention. He unfolded it and read: *Bastion’s warlock is unstoppable. Khoren and Syndria died horrible deaths. It’s my fervent hope that you meet the same fate.*

Omhara dropped the paper. “Fuck you, Jamerion.”

His red aura blazed, columns of white-hot fire clung to the walls, undulating like the muscles of a predator waiting to pounce.

The fiery aura swirling around Omhara masked the teleporter’s green light. “Burn in hell, Jamerion.” He faded away as the flames sprang to life.

CHAPTER 26

Bryanna studied her reflection in the armoire's full-length mirror. "Calm down, Bryanna," she whispered. "Everything's okay."

She smoothed the front of her leisure gown and ran her fingers along the base of her neck. *Needs a necklace. Something delicate.*

She sensed Bastion's presence in the outer room, something she'd not been able to do before healing him. It was like a spark of his life force had settled inside her heart and soul. It had to be an after-effect of the extensive healing she'd done on him. She'd never attempted anything like that before—didn't know what to do or how to do it.

But she knew the magic would respond to her. So, she'd conveyed to the Spirit realm that she wanted his body repaired, then she'd given herself over to the magic.

She didn't remember everything that transpired between them during the healing. She'd placed her trust in the magic and acted on the instinctive compulsions that resulted. She'd saved his life, repaired his body, and returned him to his ship.

But at what cost? She didn't know.

There were only three things that she knew with absolute certainty in the aftermath of what she'd done to save Bastion's life. First, he would survive. Second, every warlock in the galaxy felt her drain on the Flow's energy in all the realms. Third, something had changed within her.

What that was and how it would affect her remained a mystery.

She met her gaze in the mirror, smoothed her hair once more, and sighed. "Can't hide in here forever, Bryanna."

Upon entering the great room, she trained her gaze on the admiral. He sat on the sofa, his leg propped on the coffee table. T'Laan sat opposite him.

Glyndra hurried forward and embraced her. "I'm happy to see you! I was worried sick about you, child."

"I'm fine."

Glyndra guided her to a chair beside T'Laan. "You must be starving. What can I get for you?"

"Just a Triad triple tea, please, for now." Bryanna smiled and took T'Laan's outstretched hand.

"How're you feeling, kiddo?"

"I'm good." She took the tea Glyndra offered, sipped, then met Bastion's gaze over the rim of the cup.

"You're looking well, my lady."

"As are you, my lord."

He settled back. "We have much to discuss. You begin, Commander."

Bryanna looked at Glyndra. "Begin what?"

Glyndra shot a glance at the admiral, then asked Bryanna, "What do you know about the Cataclysm that formed the Well?"

Bryanna shrugged. "As much as anyone else, I suppose."

"Okay. The best way for you to understand this is probably for me to start at the beginning, before the Cataclysm."

Bryanna set her cup on the coffee table. "You're giving me a history lesson?"

"In a manner of speaking," Glyndra said. "Let's start with what we know. The historical records we have from before the Cataclysm are scarce. We know humans

and warlocks originated from the same homeworld. Mitochondrial DNA tells us humans and warlocks are, for lack of a better term, 'sister races.' Different branches of the same evolutionary tree.

"Culturally, humans and warlocks developed similar societies. They were initially unaware of each other, but later extensive interaction began, including procreation."

Bryanna glanced at the admiral. He sat slumped in the cushions, his head laid back, and his gaze locked on the ceiling.

Glyndra continued, "Once technology progressed to the point of nuclear power, advancement moved forward at an incredible pace. Within a few hundred years, humans and warlocks branched out into the galaxy, to other solar systems, searching for habitable worlds and colonizing them."

"What about alien races?" Bryanna asked. "I remember stories about our ancestors encountering them."

"Our ancestors were well established in dozens of solar systems before the first encounter with an alien race. It was fear of them and the possibility of others that led to the formation of the Empire. Eventually, after a few skirmishes, borders were set, and treaties were signed that remain in force today. There hasn't been an encounter, peaceful or otherwise, for thousands of years."

"We're not concerned with them," Bastion said.

"Right," Glyndra said, "Anyway, the first ruler over the Empire was Bethelsmae, an empress. She began the royal bloodline of succession passing through the female children. Somewhere along the way, the role of empress changed to a supportive role, with the empress's mate ruling the Empire."

"That's how we ended up with Ahlaric on the throne," T'Laan said. "Her parents betrothed Elyahna to

him at birth. After she died, Ahlaric was alone to rule as he pleased.”

Glyndra nodded. “For generations, the royal family has used the betrothal of the first female child as a political prize. Elyahna and Ahlaric only had one child—a son. He was only eleven when his mother died, and thus unable to ascend the throne.”

“So Ahlaric rules in his stead,” Bryanna said. “Until the boy comes of age or Ahlaric dies, I guess.”

“With so much of the historical record missing,” Glyndra continued. “It’s difficult to understand what and why events happened. But bit by bit, for many years, I’ve worked toward piecing it together. After I adopted Devon, he helped fill in some missing information. Between the two of us, we’ve managed to pull together a plausible scenario that goes a long way toward explaining the Cataclysm, its relationship to present events, and what we may be facing in the future.”

“He was a child when you adopted him,” Bryanna said. “What could he possibly fill in?”

“Let’s say he had a unique perspective on certain things.”

Bryanna focused on Bastion. “Why are you letting Glyndra do all the talking, Admiral? Don’t you have anything to say?”

“When I have something to say, I’ll say it.”

“Bear with me, Bryanna,” Glyndra said. “I’ll try to make this as clear as I can. The Cataclysm greatly impacted humans on many levels, but it didn’t alter human evolution. Warlocks, on the other hand, seem to have changed dramatically.”

Bryanna frowned. “Are you thinking the Cataclysm altered the warlocks’ ability to channel the Flow?”

“Yes. That’s precisely what I’m thinking.”

“But that’s nothing new. Everyone knows today’s warlocks are nothing like those who first came out of the Well.”

“What most *don’t* know is where the Cataclysm started and where all of us—humans and warlocks—came from originally. I used Devon’s access to military information to put together a picture of the societies in which our ancestors lived. But I never found where we all began.”

Glyndra glanced at T’Laan. “With T’Laan’s help, and using some information Devon gleaned from you, we’ve made some remarkable discoveries. I now believe that humans and warlocks originated deep in Well space, on a planet called Centralis.”

A memory walked across Bryanna’s mind—her own voice, “Take me to Centralis.”

Glyndra continued, “Centralis was an advanced world, with the two races developing separate but similar cultures. Humans relied on technology, and warlocks relied on their magic. A warlock of old was a formidable opponent. Humans were equally as daunting with their superior technology. But they apparently didn’t like each other very much. Human society excluded warlocks, and warlocks excluded humans.”

Bryanna scoffed. “Sounds familiar.”

“They struggled endlessly for global supremacy. When they began to colonize space, they took the conflict with them. Each saw the other as mortal enemies. Then a major breakthrough happened that would revolutionize human technology. Humans saw it as a giant leap forward, but warlocks viewed it as an assault on their very existence.”

Anxiety gripped Bryanna’s stomach. “What sort of technology?”

Glyndra nodded toward T’Laan. “I’ll let T’Laan tell you about that.”

“I focused on the warlock tale of the *noesha uth’johan gler’yka*.”

Bryanna rolled her eyes. “Oh, hell. We’re back to bedtime stories again.”

“*Noesha!* Don’t let me burn!” Bastion sat up and locked his gaze on Bryanna. “Those were *your* words when you made the telepathic link with the other warlock.”

“I don’t really...I mean, that’s all fuzzy in my memory. I don’t remember—”

“I do.” Bastion’s glare bored into her. “Why would a dying warlock—one burning alive—cry out to a child’s fairy tale figure?”

Bryanna glanced at Glyndra then T’Laan. “I...I don’t know.”

A wave of emotion assailed her—a smoldering rage emanating from Bastion. Her breath hitched, the depth of the emotion she sensed overwhelming.

“She would,” Bastion said, “in her desperation to save her life, cry out to whomever or whatever she thought could rescue her. A mate. A god. A warlock of legend she’d come to believe was real.”

Bryanna’s anxiety solidified into a knot in her gut. “You think she connected with me because she thought I was this mythical *noesha*? That’s ludicrous.”

“Other warlocks have felt your presence in the Flow since you were born. Every warlock in every realm knew when you used your magic. It may have been nothing more than a whisper of your presence, but it was *there*. The more you used it, the stronger footprint you left in the Flow.”

“That doesn’t make me some fairy tale—”

“*Every* warlock.” He pounded his fist on the arm of the sofa. “*Every* realm. *At. The. Same. Time.* That’s not supposed to be possible. Yet, it *did* happen, and they *did* feel it. *Every time* you punched the *Wolverine* through the Well perimeter grid. *Every time* you listened for that elusive voice. They felt you. They knew you were

impossible, but they couldn't deny *you were real*. You became the *noesha* incarnate."

His intense gaze held her captive, threatened to consume her. He believed every word he said. It was a reality in his mind.

Fear spiked inside her.

"Fearing it won't change anything, my lady."

"How did you—?"

"What do you suppose other warlocks are thinking now? After you drained energy from *every* aetheric current to heal me, do you think any of them doubt that you exist? Whether they call you *noesha* or Lady Silver or evil itself, accept the fact that you are now *very much* in the minds of every warlock in this universe. And rest assured, they do *not* all welcome you."

Bryanna clasped her hands in her lap to mask their trembling. She couldn't meet his gaze anymore. The force of his will was overpowering. *Does he expect me to believe I'm some sort of demi-god or mythical warlock savior? That's fucking insane!*

"Bear with me, kiddo," T'Laan said. "I'll help you understand all of this."

She nodded, her eyes downcast.

"As Glyndra can attest," T'Laan said, "most legends have at least some basis in fact. The *noesha* tale is no exception."

"I obtained an ancient data storage chip," Glyndra said. "It held records that I'd never seen before—all written in pre-Cataclysm warlock dialect. There was one section heavily encrypted. It took T'Laan working with Commander Thomas and an engineering crew to decrypt it."

T'Laan nodded. "We correlated data from the same time period. You know I've been collecting information on the Well for years. I shared what I had with the *Maelstrom's* D-and-E scientists. We compiled everything

we had on the Well and Cataclysm. What emerged is probably as close to the truth about what happened as we'll ever get."

Bryanna's gaze locked on her clasped hands. "I don't understand what—"

T'Laan said, "The humans of Centralis tried to harvest the Flow as a power source for themselves."

Bryanna's eyes flew wide. "They tried *what*?"

"They wanted—or from their point of view, they *needed*—a reliable, sustainable fuel alternative. They saw the Flow as an endless, universally accessible resource. Mind you; this was centuries before the development of self-replicating dark matter conversion processors. The humans thought if they could harness aetheric currents as a fuel source, they could tap it from anywhere in the galaxy."

"That's insane." Bryanna looked at Bastion. He had settled back in the cushions again, hands behind his head, gaze fixed on the ceiling.

T'Laan continued, "Apparently activation of this technology precipitated the Cataclysm. That, in turn, resulted in the formation of the Well."

Bryanna stood and went to the food dispenser. "Whiskey. I don't care what kind." To T'Laan, she said, "You said they designed their technology to harness energy from the Flow. How did they do that?"

T'Laan shot a glance at the admiral. "I'll get to that in a second. Bear with me, kid."

Bryanna downed the shot of whiskey, then returned to her chair. She didn't know where all of this was leading, but she suspected she wouldn't like it. She'd had so many questions for so long, wanted answers about so many mysteries that seemed eternally elusive. Now, the information she'd craved her whole life dangled right in front of her, easily within her grasp. Faced with the reality of it, however, her growing fear threatened to control her.

She looked at Bastion, met his gaze. A sensation shot through her, branching out from her spine, sending sparks like electricity crawling over her skin. She suppressed a shiver, forcing herself to look away from him. She fisted her hands against the storm of emotions—fear, anger, anxiety, dread, lust—that his gray eyes churned up inside her.

T’Laan sat forward in his seat, his blue fireflies buzzing. “Trying to tap into the Flow through artificial means triggered a degradation in the natural barrier between our layer of the multiverse and one or more other dimensional layers. The aetheric background matrix—the Flow—holds together the very fabric of the multiverse. A disruption in the Flow—it may have been no more than a millisecond—formed a rift in the barrier between one or more dimensions. This created an area spanning light-years, like a gigantic bubble.”

“The inside of this bubble is the Well?” Bryanna asked.

“Exactly,” Glyndra said. “It’s where layers of the multiverse and our own dimension are in constant flux or phase. These phasing events are entirely random and unpredictable and vary in strength and duration. There’s no way to see them coming.”

“Things come through these rifts from other layers of the multiverse sometimes,” T’Laan said. “The breakdown causes the horrific manifestations seen in the Well. An entity that may be perfectly harmless on its indigenous level becomes the thing of nightmares on our side of the barrier.

“What gets caught in a flux event can vary. It doesn’t have to be biological matter; it could be asteroids or comets. Hell, even entire moons or planets could theoretically be pulled through. Once here, they would continue phasing in and out, on both sides of the dimensional barrier. They would exist in a constant state of

uncertainty—are they here, in this dimension and reality, or are they in another layer of the multiverse? Are they experiencing time differently than the space around them? For a sentient being, it would be maddening.”

“Information on the data chip included records of an archaeological expedition that we believe was from Centralis,” Glyndra said. “An expedition to a place called the *Laer’Maethor ah Th’tar*. That translates to ‘Wellspring of Life and Souls.’ This was a religious compound with a central complex. The Wellspring was in the primary chamber there. It’s described as a massive crystal, double terminated, free-floating and slowly rotating over a floor inlaid with pure copper.”

Images flashed across Bryanna’s mind. A large crystal. Free-floating. Spinning. The admiral’s sword dripping with her blood.

“Exactly as in the *noesha* tale,” T’Laan said.

Bryanna’s eyes met Bastion’s. She whispered, “My premonition.”

“I found an addendum from an archaeological field station,” T’Laan said. “It detailed a covert study only known to those in the highest levels of government. The scientists were conducting experiments on the floating crystal. They used a machine they called an aetheric interface. It supposedly amplified a warlock’s bond with the Flow, allowing them to channel more aetheric energy and focus it with laser-like precision.”

“This was part of their attempts to harness the Flow as a fuel source?” Bryanna asked.

“A side experiment, more likely, but it worked off the same principle and utilized the same technology,” Glyndra said. “Using this machine on the Wellspring crystal is, I believe, what caused the Cataclysm.”

Bryanna stood and paced, anxiety gnawing at her nerves. “Tell me this isn’t happening.”

“When you were in stasis,” Bastion said. “You said you had a premonition. I believe what you experienced is what warlocks called divination. It’s a glimpse into the future—one possible future, anyway. You described what you called a Grand Crystal in an octagonal-shaped room. You said you saw a crack in the crystal and it looked like a shard was missing.”

Bryanna nodded and tried to catch her breath.

T’Laan said, “We found a report of what happened when the scientists used their aetheric interface machine on the crystal. It fractured, and a shard broke off.”

“But that happened millennia ago,” Bryanna continued to pace. “It’s not like someone is roaming the galaxy using aetheric interface machines on giant crystals today.”

“Stay with me, kiddo,” T’Laan said. “The report on the Wellspring crystal experiment talked about warlocks saying the Flow felt incredibly strong in the area surrounding the crystal. Like the currents were racing through a dam spillway, or like a flood of energy bursting through a wall. Suppose this crystal is the physical manifestation of the Flow’s entry point into this level of the multiverse. If you think of the Flow as an actual river, it has to have a fountainhead somewhere.”

“You named it yourself, my lady,” Bastion added. “You called it the place where the Flow begins.”

Bryanna kept her eyes downcast. She couldn’t look at him. *He’s made up his mind. Why can’t I breathe?*

“If the Wellspring crystal is the physical manifestation of the aetheric matrix,” Glyndra said, “damage to it could generate a ripple effect across all levels of the multiverse, but especially in the barrier that keeps our dimension—our reality—a cohesive universe unto itself. The crack you saw could be the physical equivalent of the breach in the dimensional barrier caused five

thousand years ago. It could represent the rift that caused the Cataclysm and formed the Well.”

“We know warlocks began to have problems with their connections to the Flow after the Cataclysm,” T’Laan said. “Their powers diminished over the next generations. If the Wellspring crystal suffered damage, it could have altered the manifestation of the Flow in this dimension. Hence, Well space. And a lessening of warlock connections to the Flow. Over time, the diminished abilities became the norm for warlocks.”

“Until recently,” Glyndra said. “We’ve all heard the stories. Warlocks talking about the Flow changing.”

Bryanna said, “After that Warlock’s bomb went off, I felt a shift in the aetheric streams.”

Bastion spoke up. “That attack was not intended to target the Flow. It only impacted the aetheric streams directly because you took the bomb into the spirit realm. Doing so saved my ship, for which you have my gratitude. But that wasn’t the first time an outside, artificial force tampered with the natural order of the Flow.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Military scientists have been amassing evidence for several years that someone or something is attempting to artificially interfere with the natural workings of the aetheric energy background matrix.”

The knot of dread and anxiety in her stomach stabbed upward into Bryanna’s heart. “Are you saying someone is actively trying to interfere with the Flow in the same way the humans did before the Cataclysm?”

“Yes. I found the proof of it in that underground chamber on Myra.”

“I don’t understand. I don’t remember seeing anything like that in the chamber.”

Bastion sat up, his face stern. “You weren’t there before the androids exploded. I was.”

“Bryanna,” T’Laan said. “The decrypted portion of the chip held explicit information, including schematics and operational protocols for a machine called an Aetheric-Neural Interface or ANI. The machine’s purpose was to pull aetheric power from the Flow, collect it into retaining repositories, and store it for use as a fuel source. While we could debate the feasibility of such a plan, it was the method of implementation that’s the problem.”

She looked from him to Glyndra, then to the admiral. Returning to her seat, she said, “I don’t think I want to hear this.”

“Finish it, Mr. T’Laan,” Bastion said.

T’Laan’s neuro-network danced with blue lights. “The humans were using warlocks as the conduit for drawing off aetheric energy from the Flow. We assume the warlocks were not willing participants because the extraction procedure resulted in their deaths.”

“Oh, my God,” Bryanna whispered.

“They surgically removed the dome of the skull and used bio-metallic probes to create a network through the warlock’s brain. The filaments of this network pulled aetheric current through the warlock and funneled it via the ANI machine to a storage reservoir.”

Bryanna shook her head. “Why would anyone do that now? What good would it do someone today?”

“Lieutenant Wexman took visual recordings of the inside of the chamber on Myra,” Glyndra said, “before he died in the explosion. He entered the images directly into his mission log, so they were preserved. Couple the images he took with what Devon discovered about the condition of the bodies there, and it’s clear someone has rediscovered the Aetheric-Neural Interface technology and is forming an artificial interface with the Flow. They’re killing warlocks to do it.”

Bryanna fought against the acid in her stomach threatening to revolt. “I saw them. On the bridge, the

images on the vidscreen. Those burned bodies with their skulls opened.”

“Doctor Johnson managed to extract traces of the parasites from the wounds in my hand,” Bastion said. “They were living things made of a bio-metallic compound that we can’t identify.”

“Bio-metallic?” Bryanna asked. “I’ve never heard of that.”

“The material has a metallic component that’s integrated with biological cell-like structures,” T’Laan explained. “The parasites were probes, for lack of a better word, designed to embed themselves in a host, working their way to the brain. Once integrated at the neuro-cellular level, they would form an artificially integrated link between the host and the origin creature.”

Bryanna sat back and crossed her arms against the chill that settled over her. “There was a presence in those things. It threw me across the room when I tried to force it from your body.”

“You’re right, my lady—I sensed the consciousness in them,” Bastion said. “When it touched my mind—something it wasn’t expecting—it left itself open to me. It’s a sentient being that doesn’t belong in this level of the multiverse. It exists here and in its native dimension simultaneously, constantly phasing between the two. It’s pure evil, and it’s quite insane.”

“How did it get here?” Bryanna couldn’t sit any longer. She went to the external viewport.

“I suspect it came through the breach created when the Wellspring crystal cracked,” Bastion said. “It’s been trapped here for millennia, in constant flux between dimensions.”

Bryanna frantically searched the darkness of space. “I don’t understand why this thing would leave a piece of itself laying around for you to find. Why show itself to you?”

“The parasites, and the entity to which they were tethered, seemed surprised to be active inside me. I think the parasites were there in a dormant state—the bio-metallic cube—to draw me to the chamber. The android self-destructed only after it heard the crewman call my name. That explosion triggered the other android.”

Bryanna met Bastion’s gaze. “You’re saying it was an assassination attempt?”

“The second one. The first was aimed at you and me.”

“The warlocks,” Bryanna said. “One thing doesn’t make sense. Why did you say the parasites were not expecting to show themselves? They were parasites. Invading a body is what they do.”

Bastion sat forward, his gaze intent. “The parasites only became active in the presence of the prey they desired most—the blood of a warlock.”

Bryanna scoffed. “That proves your theory incorrect, Admiral. I was nowhere near that chamber when the parasites attached themselves to you. There was no reason—”

Her voice trailed. Her vision blurred. Her breath caught. Frigid fingers clawed up her spine, and her heart thundered against her ribs.

She looked at the admiral as though seeing him clearly for the first time.

“You son of a bitch.” Her aura flared. “You’re warlock!”

CHAPTER 27

Bryanna glared at Bastion. Electricity pulsed through her aura, matching the cadence of her heartbeat.

“You son of a bitch,” she repeated.

“Mr. T’Laan, escort Glyndra to her quarters.”

Bastion moved to stand between Bryanna and the others.

“Remain with her until I call for you.”

“Aye, Admiral.”

“T’Laan? You *knew* about this?” Bryanna demanded.

He extended his arm to Glyndra. “I suspected but didn’t learn the truth of it until last night.”

“Bryanna, please listen to Devon,” Glyndra said.

“Go! Now!” Bastion ordered.

Glyndra followed T’Laan out. When the door slid closed, Bastion took a step toward her.

“It’s time for clarity, my lady.” His voice was ominous. “We’re both warlocks. There needs to be peace between us.”

Bryanna scoffed. “You call yourself warlock? Show me the color of your bonded realm. Use your magic to collapse my aura.”

He stepped into her energy field, towering over her. “Withdraw your aura. No magic is needed here.”

The enormous strength of his will was palpable. His gaze was withering, the heat from his body unbearable. He stood only inches from her, the scent of him clouding her awareness.

“How can you be warlock? I don’t understand.”

“You’re bonded to a realm never known before. That sets you apart from every other warlock. You’re an anomaly. My biological parents were warlock, just like yours. My blood is warlock, just like yours.”

He gestured at her aura. “My blood lets me stand in an aetheric field without harm. I can heal myself, to a degree, as any warlock can. What sets me apart is I have no bond of my own with the Flow. Like you, I’m an anomaly.”

He moved closer. “I don’t know why I am what I am, any more than you can explain why you are what you are. Now power down, my lady.”

She searched his face and forced her magic down. As her aura faded, she closed her eyes. His face would haunt her dreams—the curve of his lips, the shadow of his beard, the set of his jaw—everything about him would reside within her, whether she wanted him there or not.

She shoved him and pounded against his chest. “Goddamn you, Devon Bastion! You lying, deceitful, warlock son of a bitch!”

He made no move to block her blows.

She searched his eyes, hoping for some sign of what he was thinking or feeling. Seeing nothing, she stepped back and slapped him across the face. “Say something, damn you.”

He remained stoic. When she raised her hand to strike again, he snatched her wrist. He spun her around, pulled her against him, and held her arm across her chest.

“*Never* raise your hand against me again, my lady,” he whispered in her ear.

She struggled and tried to kick at his legs. He lifted her off her feet. She screamed and fought to break his hold. But he was unrelenting.

At last, she gave up and collapsed against him. Her head lay against his neck, and her feet dangled above the floor. “Please put me down.”

“Are you done?” he asked quietly.

“I hate you, Devon Bastion.”

He set her down but kept her pinned against his chest. “No, you don’t.”

“Please let go of me.”

“Take a seat,” he said as he released her, then headed to his study.

She settled on the sofa and drew her knees to her chest. Now it all began to make sense—how Bastion was able to stand in her aura without harm. How he knew so much about warlocks, and why he hated them so. He’d been rejected by his own parents, tortured by them and other warlocks.

His own people ostracized him because he was different—she could relate to that, could understand why he felt the way he did. That didn’t justify his treatment of warlocks in general, including killing them on the orders of the empire. But being an outcast was a part of him she could understand.

He returned with a data tile in one hand and a small box in the other. He sat opposite her and handed her the tile. “Look at this star chart.”

The outpost she and T’Laan called home was the first thing she noticed. Next, an unknown outpost in open space at the edge of a giant nebula. Of the several star systems shown, one drew her immediate attention—a single star with a solitary planet orbiting it.

She looked up. “That’s where we’re going?”

“You asked me to take you to Centralis. I had Glyndra and Mr. T’Laan search for it. We’ll first find that outpost. It’s called the Calerion Outpost—that’s all we have. It’s deep in Well space. From there, we’ll go to Centralis.”

“I don’t know if there’s anything at Centralis. The voice I hear in the Flow could be my imagination.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“No. But I don’t know what I’m supposed to do when I find it.”

He stood and began to pace. “When those parasites attacked me, I got a glimpse of the entity that spawned them. It doesn’t belong here—it’s not native to this level of the multiverse. It’s been here for millennia, though, and it’s a malevolent, depraved, vile sentient being. I believe it’s behind those interfering with the Flow. I think humans or warlocks—maybe both—are helping it. What I don’t know is why.”

“Where is this entity?”

“I don’t know.”

“What does it want?”

“It wants the warlock race wiped from this universe—maybe humans, too. It wants control over *everything* and *everyone*. And it does *not* want us going to Centralis.”

“If it sees us as a threat, it could try to stop us.”

“Exactly. The warlocks who attacked my ship were from Myra. Someone in the Myran government arranged the whole thing.”

“So, why set a trap in that chamber if they were sending warlocks against you on the *Maelstrom*?”

“I wondered the same thing. If the trap on Myra was a back-up, it was a lousy one. There were too many variables.”

“Do you think this entity arranged it all just to get to you?”

“No. When it realized its parasites entered my body, I felt its genuine surprise. It wasn’t expecting that. I think the trap was to stop me from uncovering what’s disrupting the Flow.”

“But why? A disruption of the Flow will alter the balance of energy across the entire universe. Warlocks across the empire would feel the impact and experience the repercussions. There would be chaos.”

“Or civil war, just as the empire is facing now.”

“You think the threat of civil war is a smokescreen.”

“Yes.”

Bryanna went to the viewport, looking out at the darkness. “What’s the end game for this creature?”

“It wants control over the Flow, over all the realms. Then it wants dominion over everyone and everything.”

“How’s it supposed to accomplish all of that?”

“Through you.”

* * *

The Rising Twilight was one of the most popular lunch spots in Mithara City. Always crowded, it offered a decent place for meetings that easily went unnoticed. Nomen waved for the waiter to bring him another round, then turned to the man seated opposite him. Speaking softly, Nomen said, “I’m a damn good navigator, but even I can’t guarantee safe passage through the Well.”

Omhara glanced up from his drink. Nomen was a weasel of a man, from his mousey brown hair to his hawkish nose, a face easily overlooked and seldom remembered. This gave him a degree of anonymity that he used to his advantage. A degenerate that Omhara detested, he was useful at times. He and Omhara had a long-standing relationship, one that proved mutually beneficial.

Nomen dealt with the unsavory side of society. The black-market. Drug dealers. Mercenaries. Slavers. Warlocks for hire—all were Nomen’s bedfellows.

“The pay will reflect the risk, we assure you,” Omhara said.

Nomen waited until the server left, then said, “You’re seriously thinking about this? You’re going into the Well after Bastion and this silver warlock?”

“We want them both dead.”

“You actually think you can pull this off?”

“We are certain of it.”

Nomen chuckled. “And what is this *we* shit? How many of you am I talking to?”

“All we need from you is a ship with trans-light capability and a warlock crew of at least twenty-five. Thirty-five would be better.”

Nomen drummed his fingers on the table. “And?”

Omhara pulled a leather pouch from his pocket and pushed it across the table.

Nomen looked inside, drew the strings tight, and gingerly bounced it in his palm. “This’ll get us started.”

“There are instructions in the pouch. Follow them to the letter. Let us know when you’ve procured the ship. We have commissioned all the supplies and a crew to do the alteration work.”

Nomen downed the last of his drink. “Whatever you say. You are one crazy bastard. But it looks like you’re the boss on this little junket. I’ll be in touch.”

After Nomen left, Omhara closed his eyes at the stirring of the Being inside him. The god was preparing to enter a period of stasis. Omhara would carry on until the Being re-emerged.

He looked forward to bringing down Admiral Bastion and destroying the silver warlock abomination. It all began on Centralis, and the One intended for it to end there. Then, a glorious new dawning could emerge.

* * *

Bryanna’s instinctive, go-to response gnawed at her—flee. But there was no fleeing from the chain of events playing out.

Bastion moved up behind her, but he could no longer sneak up on her—not since she channeled her magic

through her soul to fortify the fading energy of his life force.

He was a part of her now, linked by a bond she feared nothing short of death would break. Was he aware of it? She didn't know. He refused to allow her insight into his heart and mind.

He moved close, his arms encircling her. He held a small box. "Open it," he whispered.

Her hands shook as she slid it open. Inside, a delicate silver chain coiled around a silver dragon—the charm glinting in the light. The beast sat on its haunches, and its tail wound around its feet. Its wings folded over its back, its head held high. In its mouth, a glittering violet gemstone.

Bastion withdrew the necklace and held it in front of her.

"This is to thank you for saving my life." He draped the chain around her neck, clasped it there, then carefully pulled the thick braid of her hair through it. His hands went to her shoulders, his touch burning into her skin.

She reached up to caress the delicate pendant. Again, a rush of emotion—her heart pounded, and blood roared in her ears.

His grip tightened, and he spun her around. Hands cupped her face, turning her lips up to meet his. Her breath froze, her lips molding to his. She parted her lips as his tongue brushed across them.

Her arms encircled his neck while his slid around her waist. His tongue probed her mouth. She reciprocated, trembling, her knees weak and her arousal nearly unbearable.

He at last broke the kiss. She slowly opened her eyes, looking up at him.

"Devon..." She exhaled his name.

"Why did you save my life?" He smoothed an errant strand of hair from her face.

Heat flushed her face and neck. "I...it was...I mean..."

He slid his hands down to her buttocks and pulled her even closer. He bent to kiss her neck, his tongue tracing around her ear. "Why, my lady?"

She moaned. "I couldn't...couldn't let you die..."

"Why not?" Again, he pressed his lips to hers, then slid his hand to her breast.

She shuddered, her body melting into him. She closed her eyes, the sensations overwhelming her. "I couldn't...I can't..."

"You can't what?" He rubbed his thumb across her hardened nipple—telegraphing to every nerve in her body how much she wanted this man.

"I can't." She was breathless. "Can't lose you."

He leaned his mouth close to her ear. "Is this what you want, Bryanna? Do you want to give yourself to me?"

The room spun. Her knees weakened. Her heart pounded.

"Do you?" He slid a hand between her legs.

A faint whisper. "Yes."

She sank to the floor as he abruptly released her. She caught herself before landing in a sprawl, supporting herself on her shaking arms and gasping for breath.

When her head cleared, he was across the room at the comm console. *What just happened?*

Without looking at her, he said, "If I wanted the same thing, I'd take you up on that offer. But I don't. I'm not interested, Lady Silver. Get yourself under control and concentrate on what's ahead."

She hung her head, tears falling to the floor. She'd made a total fool of herself. Never in her life had she felt so small, so useless, so rejected, and so humiliated.

"Go freshen yourself, my lady," he said after a few moments. "I'll escort you to your new quarters."

She got slowly to her feet, her body trembling and her breath coming in ragged gasps. Escort her? Hell, no! Did he really expect her to walk beside him, with her hand on his arm, as though nothing happened? As if he hadn't just ripped away every ounce of her dignity?

Escort her? She wanted to scream at him, to curse his soul to the depths of Hell. She wanted to claw those deceitful, mocking gray eyes from his face.

Walk beside him as his willing companion? She'd rather drop herself into open space, to freeze as solid as the ice that was his heart.

Instead, she turned toward the bedroom, walking carefully so she didn't stumble.

He wouldn't wait long, so she hurried to the lavatory. She couldn't take any more humiliation at his hands. Fighting against more tears, she splashed cold water over her face. Looking at herself in the mirror, her eyes broadcast the wound he'd inflicted. The face looking back at her radiated defeat, devastation, insecurity, and doubt.

Her magic stirred as tears welled in her eyes. "No!" she whispered. "You've shed enough tears because of Devon Bastion. No more." She threw cold water over her face once more. When she again met her gaze in the mirror, she squared her shoulders, forced her magic down, and fisted her hands.

"Get myself under control?" she muttered. "I gave you my word, and I'll keep it. But it will be on my terms now. You won't get an opportunity to ravage my dignity again."

Wiping away the last of her tears, she unwound her braided hair, running her fingers through it as the tips settled in the small of her back. She pinched her cheeks to bring a bit of color to them, then drew herself up straight before heading out to face the admiral.

* * *

Bastion waited until Bryanna closed the bedroom door before contacting Commander Rhola on the bridge. “Are you picking up the tracking signal?”

Rhola nodded. “Coming through loud and clear. It shows her current position in the lavatory of your quarters.”

“Maintain constant track. This is command-level eyes only.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Bastion out.” His hands clutched the edge of the console. His arms trembled; his knuckles blanched white.

In his mind’s eye, Lady Silver lay on the floor, sobbing. The pain, humiliation, and devastation in her eyes already haunted him. She’d had no experience with men—she was unprepared for what he just threw at her. Telling himself it was for her own good didn’t dampen the anger building inside him—anger at himself.

It had to be this way, he told himself. They didn’t need emotional or physical entanglements between them. Protecting her had to come first—he had to be her defender, her champion, not a lover or mate.

But God! How he wanted to be all of that to her! To feel her lips against his, her arms around his neck, her breasts pressed against his chest. Every cell in his body ached to have her near.

He stood, raised his fists, and smashed them into the console. The top of the desk buckled. The front legs collapsed, pitching the table forward. It crashed to the floor, sparks flying and electrical ozone filling the cabin.

“*Fuck!*” He moved to the small side closet and activated the cleaning bot. “Clean that up.”

As the bot began its work, Bryanna returned. She appeared composed—her back straight, her shoulders squared, and her mass of silver hair cascading over her shoulders and down her back.

She still wore his gift around her neck.

“Come.” He extended his arm as she approached.
“I’ll escort you to your new quarters.”

She hesitated, reluctant. “I’d rather not take your arm if you don’t mind.”

“I *do* mind. Willing companion, remember?” He again hooked his arm toward her.

Bryanna placed her hand lightly on it. She looked at the demolished comm table. “What happened here?”

“Malfunction. It won’t happen again.”

CHAPTER 28

Bastion took Bryanna's hand from his arm as the doors to her quarters slid open. "Your assigned quarters, my lady. You can gain access via your palm print or voice recognition."

Bryanna moved into the foyer as Bastion continued. "I'm withdrawing your guard detail. Since these quarters are usually reserved for visiting dignitaries, they have the highest-level security precautions."

Why give me quarters like this? He could be trying to make up for his horrid treatment of me. Don't be silly, Bryanna. There's no compassion in Devon Bastion.

"I'll be on the bridge." With that, he left.

Bryanna stood in the ensuing silence, looking at the closed door. With a sigh, she turned and began an inspection of her new quarters. The outer wall of the main room faced into open space, with three meta-glass portals stretched floor-to-ceiling.

She made cursory rounds through the cozy dining nook, locating the food dispenser. A quaint study with a comm console lay off the small library. To her delight, many of the books were by Triad authors, both classic and contemporary.

An open archway led into a hallway at the back of the main room. A doorway at the end of the short hall opened to the bedroom. It included more floor-to-ceiling windows, a walk-in closet already stocked with an

extensive wardrobe—complete with an array of shoes—and a luxurious *en suite* attached.

The door chime brought her back to the main room. She hurried to the door, calling out, “Come in.”

“Hey, kiddo.” T’Laan greeted her with a smile. “I have three hours of downtime and thought maybe we could find something to do.”

Bryanna thought for a moment. “I’d love to hit the gym until I’m exhausted.”

T’Laan bowed with a grand flourish. “The gym it is, Lady Silver. Mind if I check out your new place while you change into more appropriate attire for sweating your ass off?”

Bryanna laughed and waved him inside. “I have a whole closet full of new clothes. I can probably find something.”

* * *

“Attend the deck,” Rhola announced as Bastion stepped off the lift.

“Resume.” Bastion moved to his command chair. “Report, Mr. Rhola.”

Rhola stood beside Bastion. “All systems report clear. We’re ready to break orbit on your command.”

“Captain Montison?”

“She reports smooth transfer of command on the surface. She’s back on the *Maverick* and prepared to break orbit in eight hours.”

Bastion swiveled his chair to face the navigation station. “Our ETA to Well perimeter at best speed?”

“Estimate Well perimeter in sixteen hours,” the navigator replied.

The admiral looked back at Rhola. “And once we breach the Well security grid?”

“Course to destination is laid in and awaiting initiation once we cross the grid. If we don’t encounter any problems once inside the Well, we should arrive at Lady Silver’s outpost within ten hours.”

“Montison acknowledges receipt of course to the outpost?”

“Aye, sir. Her navigator spoke directly with Mr. T’Laan regarding the specifics.”

Bastion nodded. “I want constant sensor sweeps ahead of us as we approach the Well. Pinpoint the location of this outpost on long-range scan. When we’re in range, I want a full spectrum penetrating scan of the outpost—the structure itself and the space rock on which it sits.”

“Aye, sir.”

Bastion stood and moved toward the forward screen. “Forward vidscreen on. Helm, take us out of orbit.”

Rhola came up beside him. The admiral looked out into the vastness of space, his brow knitted and his shoulders tense. “Anything I can help with, sir?”

“You can remove Chancellor Lasko’s name from my crew roster. I’ll be dealing with that matter before day’s end.”

“Already done.”

“I need a new comm console installed in my quarters.”

“I’ll get right on that. Anything else?”

“Just follow my lead.”

“Always, sir.”

* * *

After a rigorous three-hour workout, the hot shower felt exquisite. Bryanna now stood naked, except for the pendant Bastion had given her, and regarded her reflection in the mirror. She slid a finger over the smooth face of the

pendant's gemstone and remembered how her skin burned at his touch when he hung the necklace around her throat.

The symbolism wasn't lost on her. Giving her a pendant shaped like a dragon, his security designation code, was a glaringly clear way of marking his territory. He couldn't have been more transparent if he'd used a branding iron.

Could there be more to it than he admitted, more than just a token of appreciation?

"It means nothing, Bryanna," she whispered. It was just a trinket he'd given her as a thank you for saving his life. It was foolish to read any more into it than that. She should take it off but couldn't bring herself to do it.

"I'm such an idiot," she mumbled as she turned from the mirror. She went into the bedroom to quickly dress in the fitted pants and over-sized shirt she'd laid out beforehand. She discovered the rest of her belongings arrived from the admiral's quarters while she was in the gym.

She slid her shoes on, threw her hair back over her shoulder, and headed for her food dispenser. She was suddenly ravenous.

* * *

"We left Myra a few hours ago," Lasko reported. Emperor Ahlaric's face filled his comm screen. The emperor's dilated pupils and his slurred speech were no surprise.

"And you're certain he's heading into the Well?"

"Yes. Positive."

Ahlaric's face flushed. "I didn't order him into the Well. We have problems here he needs to deal with."

"Admiral Bastion is obviously out of control, Your Majesty. Perhaps it's time to consider a new commander at

the *Maelstrom*'s helm. Someone loyal to Your Majesty, someone who follows your orders.”

Ahlaric rubbed black powder into his wrist. “If he’s leaving orbit, there’s no time to get Vice-Admiral Younger to the *Maelstrom*. He’s the next in rank to Bastion.”

Lasko chose his words carefully. “May I suggest a possible alternative for Your Majesty’s consideration?”

Ahlaric massaged his temples. “Yes! Please do. Thinking about all of this military stuff has given me a massive migraine.”

Lasko leaned in toward the screen. “Has Your Majesty considered placing a civilian in the command chair of the *Maelstrom*?”

* * *

Glyndra looked up when the door to the admiral’s quarters slid open. She glanced behind Bastion at the door. “Where’s Bryanna?”

“She has assigned quarters.” He ordered one of Doctor Johnson’s concoctions from the food dispenser. “She’s on this deck, quarters Y3-M12.”

Glyndra smiled as he turned the drink up and gulped it down. The look of utter disgust on his face was priceless. “Good to see you following the doctor’s orders.”

“I’m having the man executed at 0600 in the morning.”

Glyndra chuckled and got to her feet. “Where are you heading now?”

“Engineering.”

“I’ll go see if Bryanna needs help settling in.”

Glyndra fell in step with him as he walked into the hallway. “I was thinking. I could use an extra hand in archives. Can I offer Bryanna a position? It will be something for her to do, to keep her mind occupied.”

“That’s probably a good idea. Proceed.”

When they reached the intersection, Glyndra waited until Bastion entered the lift before turning down the side corridor toward Bryanna's new quarters.

* * *

Bryanna looked over the collection of books in her library. This room would be an excellent retreat for her. She enjoyed reading both printed text and electronic versions on her data tile.

The sound of her door chime drew her into the great room. She stepped into the foyer and said, "Come."

Glyndra strolled in, smiling. "There you are! I've been looking for you." She hugged Bryanna then took her arm. "Give me the tour. I'm going to be jealous, but I'll try not to let it show."

"What's there to be jealous of?" Bryanna gestured around the great room. "Aren't the windows incredible?"

"*Those* are the source of my envy." Glyndra laughed. "I have one little round viewport. You get a whole wall of floor-to-ceiling windows."

"There's a library and study through that door."

"You have a library?"

"And through that hallway," Bryanna pointed, "is the bedroom, with reading area and holo-fireplace. The walk-in closet is like a black hole, and the *en suite* is a religious experience."

"You sit and I'll get us a drink so we can toast your new quarters."

Bryanna settled into the sofa's cushions.

"Rycappan Dawn-Stone whiskey, two, doubles."

When the drinks appeared, Glyndra took them and joined Bryanna.

"Here." She extended one of the glasses. "A toast to your new quarters. May you have as much fun in here as I've had in *my* quarters."

Bryanna laughed, almost spilling her drink. “Thank you, I think.” She looked down at the whiskey. “I’ve never been much for drinking hard liquor.”

“I’ve never had this kind.” Glyndra held her glass mid-air. “But I think now’s as good a time as any to check it out. I’ve been told it’s ranked the best in twenty-seven systems.”

Bryanna clinked her glass against Glyndra’s, then gingerly smelled the drink. The pungent aroma burned her nose. “Damn! People really drink this?”

“Yes, and so do we, now.” Glyndra turned up her glass and downed a good swallow. She managed to keep from coughing for at least three seconds.

Bryanna chuckled, then drank half of hers in one gulp. The liquid scorched its way down her esophagus to set her stomach on fire.

“Shit!” Glyndra choked out the word when she could at last draw a breath.

“Is it supposed to burn like that?” Bryanna wheezed.

“I think it’s an acquired taste.”

Bryanna coughed. “Are we going to work on acquiring a taste for it?”

Glyndra giggled. “Sounds like fun, don’t you think?”

Bryanna raised her glass in a salute. “Why not?”

“So, tell me what you’ve been up to this morning, besides settling into your new place.”

“T’Laan and I hit the gym for about three hours. He doesn’t need it, obviously, but it was nice to get in a grueling workout. I’ll probably regret it in the morning.”

“Oh, I would have loved to join you! I actually had to work in archives, though.”

Bryanna strolled to the dispenser and returned with fresh drinks.

“Do you think we’ll be running into anything when we get into the Well?” Glyndra asked. “You probably know more about what’s there than anyone.”

“Probably not. There’s seldom anything prowling in the sub-sector where we’re going.”

“Let’s hope not,” Glyndra said. “I think we could all use a few days of nothing spectacular happening.”

“I agree.” Bryanna took another gulp. “Tell me something. How did the admiral get those scars on his chest?”

Glyndra swirled the whiskey before taking a long draw. “That’s a difficult story to tell and just as difficult to hear.”

Bryanna pulled her legs up on the sofa. “Please.”

Voice subdued, Glyndra said, “I first met Devon when he was still a child. Actually, I guess *found* would be a better word. My archaeology survey crew and I were assigned to investigate the Black Moon of Thor, the fourth moon in orbit around the planet Drannor.”

“Drannor is a dead planet. The atmosphere’s toxic. What were you doing on its moon?”

“Looking for an ancient warlock outpost, one built only a few centuries after the Cataclysm and diaspora. A group of warlocks got the idea to work their wonders on Drannor and make it habitable. Obviously, it didn’t work. They abandoned the project and left the outpost deserted.”

“So, you went to take a look.”

Glyndra nodded. “We located the ruins within a few hours. I’d investigated many ancient warlock ruins in my career, but nothing like this. Most of the courtyard’s outer wall had collapsed, and the first level of the structure showed severe weathering, but a great deal of the magnificent architecture remained intact. It was breathtaking!”

“And that’s where you found the admiral?”

“Yes. I entered the structure and found a stairway leading down. I didn’t intend to go down there at first, but I heard something, like someone moaning. Not thinking, I rushed down the stairs and entered a small chamber. I will *never* forget that room.

“It reeked of death. A tiny amount of light crept in from cracks in the ceiling, but it was enough. I saw the decapitated bodies of three warlocks, their heads impaled on poles, faces staring at the wall. There, hanging from chains...was Devon.”

“Dear God.”

“Just a boy.” Glyndra’s voice broke. “No more than ten or eleven. He dangled above the floor, legs twisted and broken. Chest cut to ribbons, the flesh peeled away to expose ribs. His face was battered and so swollen he didn’t look human anymore. Blood covered the floors—the walls—and him. But that wasn’t the worst of it.”

Glyndra covered her mouth to stifle her sobs. “His eyes—what they’d done to his eyes...”

“Tell me.”

“They’d sliced his eyelids. He couldn’t blink or close his eyes. The heads of his parents and his grandfather, on the poles in front of him, stared back at him. He’d been there for three days.”

“Oh, my God.”

“We took Devon back to the ship, and I looked after him. The doctor on board said he wouldn’t live, but he did. Regenerative and reconstructive surgery on his eyes had to wait until he regained his strength, so he had to endure functional blindness for four months—a terrified, traumatized child who couldn’t see the faces of those around him, talking to him. More than one warlock offered to help him, but he’d have none of it. He sensed them when they came near, fought them viciously. He ended up requiring five surgeries to reconstruct his eyes, but he thankfully suffered no permanent loss of vision.”

“And he stayed with you?”

“Yes. I took a leave from my work and stayed at his side. He couldn’t see me, but he could hear me. We’ve been together most of the time since then. I never took a mate nor had any children of my own. I was pushing the limit of middle age—well into my seventies by then. I was too busy digging around in old ruins and musty books to think about a family. But after being with Devon, I regretted it. I guess he stirred up my long-suppressed maternal instincts, and I asked him if I could adopt him. He said ‘yes.’ Then, one day he asked me if he could take my last name as his own. I happily agreed.”

“He told you about his childhood? About how the warlocks treated him?”

Glyndra nodded. “Eventually. Not willingly, at first. But, over time, he warmed up to me. We’ve been through a lot together. He gives me strength and support. I worry about him, which irritates him greatly, and we argue sometimes, but we’re comfortable with each other. We understand each other.”

“I will never understand him.” Bryanna turned up the last of her whiskey.

“Devon’s father rejected him because the boy couldn’t touch the Flow. His mother was heavily addicted and quite mad. She tormented him at every turn. His grandfather was the only person Devon ever cared about, and the warlocks murdered the poor old man before his eyes.”

"Why?"

"Devon's father and grandfather were working with the warlocks at Drannor. His father got into a fight with another warlock. Humiliated in the fight, Devon’s father sought revenge and ended up killing the other warlock and his entire family. Devon and his family paid the price for the crimes of his father.”

"Why torture the old man or Devon? They didn't kill anyone."

"A family lost its life. The life of a family was needed to balance the scales. That's how society functioned in Devon's birth clan."

"That's why he hates warlocks so much and doesn't want to admit his heritage. No wonder he treats me the way he does. I'm one of them, in his eyes."

"I don't think he sees you that way," Glyndra countered. "You two are unique. Neither of you is like other warlocks."

"No, we're not." Bryanna sighed as she got to her feet. "He says we're both *anomalies*. That's his word for me."

"I have another word for you." Glyndra grinned. "How does the word 'job' sound?"

"Job? I've never had one."

"You have one now if you want it. I need help in archives—mostly reading through translated ancient texts and categorizing and indexing them."

"Yes! I would love it."

"Excellent. You'll start in the morning. Report to Archives at 0700. You're going to love the people you'll be working with."

"I've got butterflies already." Bryanna smiled. "I can't wait to tell T'Laan."

"We need to celebrate."

"More whiskey?"

"We need food."

Bryanna gestured toward the food dispenser. "I can order whatever you want—"

"No, no, no." Glyndra chuckled. "You and I are going to the officer's mess. We're going to sit with other people and have polite conversation. We're going to laugh and talk and generally enjoy ourselves."

Bryanna smiled. "Can we do that?"

Glyndra took Bryanna by the hand and pulled her toward the door. “Absolutely. I’m an officer on this ship. I can dine in the officer’s mess whenever I want. And I can bring a guest with me if I so choose.”

Bryanna laughed as they walked out the door. “You’re going to get me killed, Glyndra Bastion.”

“At least you’ll die with a belly full of good food and whiskey.”

CHAPTER 29

Omhara scanned the command cabin once more. Though cramped for his taste, it would do.

Nomen said, "The construction crew says they'll have your modifications in the mess hall done by daybreak. They'll have to work through the night, but they assure me they'll meet your deadline."

Omhara slid his hands over the smooth metal arms of the command chair. "And the warlocks we require?"

"I have signed contracts from thirty-three, with a mix of bonded realms. They think they're participating in an expedition to a newly opened colony in the Pterous asteroid ring's mining belt. They're all collared or implanted."

"We are not interested in what they think. They will serve our purpose, willing or not. Thirty-three is an adequate number."

"The last of the supplies are being loaded. We'll have crew, be fully stocked, flight checked, and ready to go by 0800."

"Very well. We will complete our personal preparations for departure, then rendezvous here at the *Enigma* at 0800."

"Whatever you say, boss. This is your show." Nomen gave a perfunctory bow as Omhara left.

* * *

I will never be far away, my lady.

The admiral's voice floated through the remnants of Bryanna's dream. The door chime chased the last shade of sleep from her mind. She jerked awake, sitting up on the sofa, momentarily unsure where she was.

The chime sounded again, and she hurried to her feet. Memory clicked in—her new quarters. She stepped into the foyer and called out, "Come."

The door slid open to reveal Admiral Bastion. She turned and walked back into the great room. She returned to the sofa, fell into the plump cushions, closed her eyes, and rubbed her temples.

"You're not feeling well," Bastion said as he approached. "What's wrong?"

"I'm fine. Something I drank didn't agree with me."
Now I know what a hangover feels like.

"I'll escort you to medical."

"No. Thank you, but that won't be necessary. I'll be fine." *Nothing's wrong that staying away from your mother won't cure.*

Bastion sat in the chair across the sofa table from her. He leaned forward; his hands clasped, brow furrowed. "Interesting that you don't ask how I knew you weren't feeling well."

She met his gaze. "I don't have to ask. I know how."

His jaw tightened. "Would you care to explain—"

The door slid open, and Chancellor Lasko strolled in, a smug smile plastered across his face. The *Maelstrom's* security chief, Commander Flayson, followed, along with two armed guards.

"What the hell?" Bryanna stood. "You can't just barge—"

"Shut up, warlock bitch," Lasko growled.

Bastion got slowly to his feet, eyes hard, jaw set, shoulders tense. Bryanna sensed a surge of anger burn through him. Hands on his hips, he glared at the chancellor. "Commander Flayson. Explain this."

"Forgive the intrusion, Admiral Bastion, Lady Silver," Flayson said. "This wasn't my idea. He demanded we locate you and escort him here."

"Quiet, Flayson!" Lasko snapped. "I'll let you know when you have leave to speak."

Bastion crossed his arms over his chest and cocked an eyebrow. "Is that how it is now, Chancellor Lasko?"

"You're damned right."

Bastion's voice took on a deadly calm. "You will apologize to my lady."

Lasko laughed. "I'll do no such thing."

"Are you sure?"

Lasko drew himself up and faced the admiral squarely. "Admiral Devon Bastion, by order of His Majesty, Emperor Ahlaric, you are hereby relieved of duty. You are ordered to surrender yourself immediately to the brig of this vessel. By order of the emperor, I am assuming command of the *Maelstrom*."

Bryanna stepped beside Bastion. "You can't be serious."

"You would be wise to keep your *fucking* mouth shut," Lasko said. "You will be dealt with *now*, be assured of that."

Bryanna's face flushed, her body tense. "I don't take orders from you."

Bastion slowly smoothed his beard, then locked his gaze on Lasko. "My lady, please retire to the other room. This does not concern you."

Bryanna stepped away. "As you wish, my lord."

"No!" Lasko held up a hand. "She's going to the brig. And she'll be placed in a chemically induced coma to prevent her using her powers against this ship."

Bryanna sneered. “Now *you* want to put me in a coma? Try it, asshole.”

Bastion cleared his throat, drawing Lasko’s attention. “Not happening, Lasko.”

Lasko’s hands curled into fists, and his face flushed. “You have been relieved of duty and stripped of your rank, *Mister* Bastion. Now surrender your weapons.”

Bastion dropped his hand to the hilt of his sword. “No.”

“You are relieved, Bastion. Surrender your weapons immediately!”

Bastion slowly drew his sword. The ominous scrape of metal against the scabbard sent chills up Bryanna’s spine. She backed toward the bedroom.

The admiral’s sword cleared the scabbard, and he leveled the point at Lasko’s chest. “I have a better idea, *Mister* Lasko. Why don’t you tell me why you’ve been using my ship’s communications systems without authorization? Care to explain who you were talking to?”

Lasko swallowed hard; his face grew pale. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Really?” Bastion flicked his sword, nicking Lasko’s neck before leveling the tip at his chest, the chancellor’s blood marring the blade.

Lasko staggered back and grabbed the small cut in the base of his neck. He gestured frantically toward Commander Flayson. “Don’t just stand there, man. You saw him! He attacked me! Take him. I want him in chains in the brig. Now!”

Commander Flayson signaled for his men to withdraw. He nodded to Bastion. “If you don’t need us, Admiral Bastion.”

Bastion glared at Lasko. “You are dismissed, Commander.”

“Wait! You can’t—” Lasko turned and rushed toward the door. Flayson shoved him back into the room, saluted the admiral, then led his men into the corridor.

Lasko sprawled on the floor in front of Bastion. Grabbing the chancellor by the back of his shirt, Bastion jerked him to his feet. He threw Lasko backward so hard the chancellor’s head *whumped* against the wall.

Bastion pinned him there with the point of his sword. The racing pulse in the chancellor’s neck pressed against the blade.

“My lady.” Bastion’s voice crawled over her skin like stinging ants. “Retire, and close the door.”

Bryanna hurried down the hallway. She shut the bedroom door and flattened her back against it, her heart pounding. She covered her ears as Lasko’s screams echoed in the outer room.

* * *

Bryanna sat curled in a chair in her bedroom. Eyes staring into the flickering flames in the holo-fireplace, arms hugging herself, she swayed back and forth. Chancellor Lasko had stopped screaming about fifteen minutes ago. Now only mumbled groveling, sobbing, and an occasional cough and retch came from the outer room. She could make out Bastion’s voice, but she couldn’t understand what he said.

At last, silence. It was then she felt Lasko’s soul release from his body. The final scream from his tortured spirit faded into the stream of the spirit realm. She leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes.

It was over.

She sat up when she heard the bedroom door slide open. The admiral was using his shirt to clean his sword. Blood streaked his bare chest, splattered his face and arms, and coated his hands.

He said, "Chancellor Lasko will no longer present a problem."

"I know."

He wiped his hands on his shirt, then flung it over his shoulder. "Do you disapprove?"

"He got what he deserved. As you said, it didn't concern me."

He studied her for a moment, then slowly nodded. "I'm going to shower, and then you'll get a chance to earn your place on this ship."

Bryanna followed him into the great room. She caught a glimpse of two guards guiding a hover cart through the main door. Her two cleaning bots were diligently removing traces of Lasko's blood from her floor and walls.

She asked Bastion, "Earn my place how? What does that mean?"

"I won't be long, so be ready to go."

"Go?" She stopped at the threshold. "Go where?"

He walked away as crewmen scurried to move out of his way.

* * *

Bryanna returned to the great room after changing, stepping around the cleaning bots and the last blood splatter stains.

She'd meant what she said: Lasko got what he deserved. The chancellor must have been entirely out of his mind to attempt a coup on board the *Maelstrom*. Challenging Bastion on his own ship was the definition of suicide.

Pushing thoughts of Lasko from her mind, she sat to finish lacing her boots. She didn't know where the admiral was taking her, so she'd settled for casual attire and a light

jacket. She'd braided her hair into a single plait centered down her back.

Minutes dragged. Not knowing what Bastion had planned for her fueled her growing anxiety. She paced. Had he changed his mind?

She glanced at the comm console on the desk in her study. *Should I call him?*

Her door chime sounded, and she called out, "Come!"

Admiral Bastion entered then locked the door behind him. His hair was still damp from his shower. He wore a fresh black shirt and pants and carried a data tile.

She backed up as he came toward her. "Tell me what's going on. What do you want me to do?"

He held out the tile. "That's Captain Amelia Montison. She's the commander of the *Maverick*. It's currently in orbit around Myra."

Bryanna took the tile and studied the woman's image. "I don't know her."

"I need you to find her through the Flow, then take me to her location. Can you do that?"

"Take you to her through the Flow?"

"Yes. Can you do that?"

"I guess...I mean, I'm not certain...I probably..."

Bastion took the tile from her and dropped it on the sofa. "Can you take me to her or not, my lady?"

"Why do you need to go? Can't you call her? We just left Myra. Didn't you see her before we left?"

"You gave your word to follow my instructions without question or hesitation. Are you now negating our arrangement?"

"No. I'm just asking—"

"*Without question* means you don't ask questions. Now, can you do as I ask or not?"

She stiffened. "I won't know until I try. That's the best I can do. Once I take you to Montison, will you tell me what's going on?"

"No." He stepped up to her, clasped her shoulders, and spun her around. He wrapped his arms around her waist. "Find Montison and get us to her. Now."

Bryanna's aura flared around them. Closing her eyes, she focused on her mental image of Captain Montison and opened herself to the magic of the spirit realm. Only a few seconds passed before her mind brushed across the consciousness of Amelia Montison.

"I've found her."

"Good. Take us to her."

CHAPTER 30

Bryanna and the admiral sailed along the Flow's current, the silver light of the spirit realm undulating past them like river turbulence. The colors of the other domains streaked by in elongated threads, as though they traveled through the tube of a kaleidoscope, one with soft turns and gentle spirals.

Bastion was behind Bryanna, his arms locked around her waist. So close, his scent billowed around her. Here, in her spirit realm, his proximity threatened to overwhelm her. *It's the bond the magic forged between us.*

"Almost there," Bryanna said, thankful her voice was steady. "Please tell me what you're doing."

"It's better if you don't know."

"You're making me do this. Can't you give me some sort of explanation?"

"No."

His curt reply brimmed with tension and smoldering rage. Though he held his emotions walled away behind the fortress of his will, she caught glimpses of his feelings. A conduit existed between them, a link between their souls, and as hard as Bastion tried to keep his thoughts and feelings hidden away, this mysterious connection forced a hyper-awareness Bryanna couldn't ignore.

A portal formed ahead, an opening from the Flow to the *Maverick*. Bastion spoke softly in her ear. "You are

here to transport me. That's all. If I require your input, I'll ask for it. Understood?"

Bryanna bristled. "I'm to stand aside and keep my mouth shut. Is that about right?"

"That will do."

She bit back a retort as her anger flared. They stepped through the gateway into the great room of Captain Montison's quarters, and Bryanna pulled away from Bastion. When he released her, she breathed a sigh of relief and stepped back to stand against the wall.

Captain Montison smiled up at the admiral and gave him a brisk salute. Bastion returned the gesture then extended his hand. "Are we set?"

"Aye, sir." She shook his hand. "Nyrra reports all quiet, but you need to hurry." She looked past Bastion to Bryanna. "An honor to meet you, Lady Silver."

Bryanna nodded. "And you, Captain."

Montison retrieved a data tile from the coffee table and held it out for Bastion. "That's Nyrra. The image was taken in the royal concubine bedchamber. It's unoccupied. Nyrra is waiting there."

The admiral studied the image for a moment before handing the tile to Bryanna. "I need you to take me to this woman. She's in the Imperial palace in Mithara City on Kallagor."

Bryanna studied the image for a moment as her aura seeped out to engulf her. "As you wish, my lord." She handed the tile back to Bastion without meeting his gaze.

"You sure you don't want me to come with you?" Montison asked.

"No. This will be my doing, and mine alone. You and Nyrra will be protected. You have my word."

Montison patted his arm with a familiarity that surprised Bryanna. This woman and the admiral were obviously friends; she sensed the high regard Bastion held

for her. Montison was an easy read—she would give her life for Bastion, without question or hesitation.

“Have you found Nyrra?”

Bastion’s question brought her out of her thoughts. She looked up at him, the light of her aura reflecting in his eyes. “Yes. We can leave whenever you’re ready.”

The admiral shook Montison’s offered hand and didn’t resist when the captain pulled him into a warm embrace. She patted him on the back. “Godspeed, my friend.”

Bastion held the embrace for a moment before releasing her. He stepped into the light of Bryanna’s aura and slid an arm around her waist. He pulled her next to him and held her securely at his side.

“Take care of him, and yourself, Lady Silver,” Montison said.

Bryanna drew a breath as she opened a portal beneath their feet. The admiral’s proximity was a distraction, but she forced herself to concentrate. With one last glance at Montison, she and the admiral dropped into the spirit realm of the Flow.

* * *

“Why are we going to the Imperial Palace? To a concubine’s quarters?”

“No questions, remember?”

They moved through the current of the Flow much more rapidly than before. “I think I should know what you’re getting me into.”

“You’re simply following instructions. This is my responsibility.”

Bryanna lost her impulse to argue in the wave of his rage that pulsed through the bond. His face remained a mask—revealing none of the emotional storm churning inside him.

The silence that settled between them remained until a gateway began to open before them. Bastion slowly slid his sword from its scabbard.

“You will remain in the concubine’s quarters until I return,” Bastion told her. “Keep silent and wait for me. Understood?”

“I don’t like this, Admiral.”

“I don’t care, my lady.”

Bastion stepped through the portal, pulling Bryanna with him. Darkness shrouded the bedroom with only a sliver of light peeking through a small gap in the floor-length drapes. The headboard of the canopied bed sat against one wall. Doors flanked either side. Opposite, a massive armoire stood next to a closed door, presumably the exit.

Bastion released his hold on Bryanna as Nyrra stepped from behind the drape. She was young, about Bryanna’s age. Her black hair blended into the low light, and the cinched belt of her robe accentuated her slender frame.

“How much time do I have?” Bastion asked.

Nyrra moved closer, her voice a whisper.

“Attendants begin preparing for the morning ablutions in three hours. No one should enter the chamber before then.”

Turning to Bryanna, Bastion said, “Remain here, my lady. Do nothing to draw attention to yourself. Be ready to return us to the *Maelstrom* when I get back.”

Bryanna backed toward the wall, allowing the shadows to engulf her, and watched Bastion and Nyrra walk into a large closet. Nyrra flicked on a pendant light she wore around her neck, then reached up to twist a coat hook on the back wall. A section of wall swung inward, revealing a passage beyond.

As they disappeared into the passageway, the wall swung closed behind them.

Bryanna slid down into a crouch and wrapped her arms around her knees. Darkness and a crushing silence settled all around her. The farther away the admiral moved, the less she could sense him. Within minutes, she felt utterly alone in the shadows, as though abandoned to the gloom.

“What have you gotten me into, Devon Bastion?” she whispered.

* * *

Bastion followed Nyrra through the narrow walkway. They moved as quickly and quietly as they could.

“The palace is riddled with these secret passages,” she whispered.

“I am in your debt for this, good lady.”

“You owe me nothing, Admiral. A great wrong was done. Amelia trusts you without question to make it right. Therefore, so do I.” She led him around a corner into a dead-end. A faint light seeping in from the other side outlined a doorway. “That’s it. The release panel is to the right of the door.”

Bastion stepped ahead of her. “This is as far as you go.”

She nodded. “I’ll wait with Lady Silver.”

“No. Return to your quarters. Your part in this is done.”

“As you command, Admiral. Be careful.” Bastion watched her light recede down the passageway, then turned his attention to the doorway.

When he reached the end of the passageway, he leaned close to the wall to listen. All was quiet on the other side. He tightened the grip on his sword and squared his shoulders. Feeling along the wall to the right of the doorway, he found the release panel.

Carefully, he pushed on it. He tensed as a low *squeak* accompanied the door as it opened. Looking through, he saw an elaborate *en suite* with a partially open doorway leading into a bedroom beyond. The lights over the vanity gave off a soft glow.

Stepping cautiously, Bastion moved toward the bedroom.

* * *

Bryanna looked up when she heard the hidden door swing open. She scrambled to her feet when Nyrra returned. "Where's the admiral?"

"He won't be long," Nyrra replied. "He's instructed me to return to my quarters. You should be fine here alone. No one comes into this room."

As Nyrra began to move past her, Bryanna grabbed her arm. "Wait. Tell me what's going on. What is Bastion doing?"

"What he must. It's not my place to say more."

Bryanna released her and stepped back. "I'm just supposed to wait here, in the dark about everything?"

Nyrra met her gaze. Bryanna could sense the intensity of the woman's resolve. "Yes, exactly."

Bryanna slid back down the wall as Nyrra opened the bedroom door. After looking into the corridor beyond, she slipped through the doorway and closed it silently behind her.

Crouching once again with her arms around her knees, the darkness and silence engulfed Bryanna. "I shouldn't be here."

* * *

Bastion pushed the door open and scanned the bedroom beyond.

Emperor Ahlaric slept with a light on beside his bed. He lay on his back, his head and upper torso elevated by the mass of pillows piled beneath him. A plush, satin comforter covered him to the waist. His arms lay splayed as if awaiting crucifixion. Wheezing and a moist gurgling marked his breathing.

Bastion checked the exterior door—locked. He moved to the emperor’s dressing table. A small decorative tray held a mound of black powder. The admiral picked up the tray and carried it to the emperor’s bedside table.

He then placed his sword at the emperor’s throat. “Wake up, you son of a bitch.”

Ahlaric’s eyes fluttered slightly, and he mumbled a few incoherent words. His wheezing, watery breathing resumed. Bastion raised his fist and slammed it into the center of the man’s chest.

The emperor’s eyes flew wide, and he jerked up, gasping for breath. In response, the admiral punched him squarely in the nose. Ahlaric fell back on his pillows, his hands flying to his face, where blood streamed over his fingers as he held his nose.

Bastion stood back, the point of his sword pressed against Ahlaric’s forehead.

Blinking several times, Ahlaric’s gaze danced around the room before settling on the admiral. He drew a sharp intake of breath, his voice hoarse. “Bastion? What the *fuck?*”

“We need to talk, Your Majesty,” Bastion said. “You can do that quietly, or I can cut out your tongue, and you can answer my questions with a nod. The choice is yours.”

Ahlaric’s face flushed. “You broke my fucking nose, you son of a bitch! I’ll have you executed for this.”

Bastion pushed the tip of his sword into Ahlaric’s forehead, slicing through his skin. Ahlaric drew back, his visage morphing from anger to fear.

“Why are you here?” Ahlaric demanded.

“For the truth. Was the order for a purge attack on Myra properly vetted?”

Ahlaric pulled the satin comforter up and pressed it to his face. A trickle of blood ran from his forehead to join the red stream coming from his nose. “What the fuck kind of question is that? Are you insane?”

“Did you properly verify the order? Authenticate it through the High Council?”

“Of course, I did, you imbecile!”

“Tell me the names of the High Council members who approved the purge.”

Ahlaric looked up sharply. “Names? I...uh...that is...I don’t remember.”

Bastion’s sword slid down to press against Ahlaric’s chest. “Start remembering, or I’ll run you through.”

“You don’t have the balls,” Ahlaric sneered.

Bastion stabbed his sword through the satin comforter until the blade struck the emperor’s breastbone. Ahlaric reflexively jerked upward, only to have Bastion grab him by the throat. His sword scraped against the emperor’s bony sternum. “You may be missing a pair before I’m finished with you.”

Ahlaric’s face flushed red as he tried to breathe. His fists beat against the admiral’s arms, but Bastion refused to let him go.

“Okay...I’ll tell...you...just let...me go.”

Bastion slammed him down on the bed. “There was only one High Council member who bio-signed the proclamation for the attack against Myra. Correct?”

Ahlaric held the bed linens against his bleeding chest. He looked up at Bastion, his eyes wide and his face pale. “So what if there were? I said to purge the planet. That’s all the orders you needed.”

The admiral stiffened, and a vein in his forehead throbbed. “It wasn’t a legal order. The attack on Myra wasn’t a legally mandated purge. It was a massacre, and you’re responsible for it.”

Ahlaric tried to laugh but fell into a fit of coughing. When he could again drag in a breath, he said, “I didn’t fire a single missile at that planet. You did.”

“Because you lied,” Bastion growled, and his sword pressed harder against Ahlaric’s neck. “Women, children—all dead because you lied. It was a wrongful, illegitimate attack, and you *knew* it.”

“*You* killed those people, *not* me. And I’ll bring you up on charges for it. You’re dead, Bastion. I’ll see to it.”

“I don’t think so.”

Ahlaric chuckled. “You’re upset because I tricked you into mass-murder? Deceived you into committing genocide? Because you killed a whole planet for me? Is it the dead you’re really upset about, or that you know you’re nothing more than a trained attack dog? You’re no better than a rabid animal. Is that what’s really pissing you off?”

Bastion stood stoic, his sword against the emperor’s throat. Blood covered Ahlaric’s forehead. His broken nose had swollen and the skin discolored, a broad streak of blood covering his lips and chin. Red spittle sprayed when he spoke.

The admiral looked at him, rage filling his veins. He’d followed the order in good faith, but the approval confirmation was a forgery. This man’s lies and deceit had turned Bastion and the crew of the *Maelstrom* into murderers. The military’s mission dictated it must protect the Empire and carry out the emperor’s orders—lawful, duly vetted orders.

Because of this sniveling degenerate, the blood of innocents covered Bastion’s hands. He heard Bryanna’s voice echoing in the back of his mind: “*Don’t be the monster people say you are.*”

Bastion stepped back and sheathed his sword.
“Open your shirt.”

Ahlaric sneered. “Why, Devon, aren’t you the kinky boy.”

The admiral sprang forward, his fist pummeling the emperor’s face. Blood splattered from Ahlaric’s nose and split lips. His eyelids swelled, and his own blood smeared his cheeks.

A whimper escaped the emperor’s battered lips, and Bastion straightened. Several of the emperor’s teeth were now missing, and one side of his lower jaw hung at an unnatural angle.

“Mm...mmee...merrrccyy.” The emperor’s plaintive muttering only fueled the admiral’s rage.

“Like the mercy you showed Myra?” He grabbed the satin cover and flung it to the foot of the bed. The emperor lay on his back, blood staining the linens all around him. A wet stain spread from his groin, and the smell of ammonia permeated the room.

“Mercy? Children died in the plasma bolts you ordered. Were *they* offered mercy? Were the women of Myra offered mercy?” Reaching down, he ripped the emperor’s shirt open, exposing his bloodied chest.

The emperor raised his head from the pillow, his neck muscles trembling. “Fff...fuck...yy...you.”

Bastion picked up the gold tray from the bedside table. “I didn’t come here to offer you mercy.” He dumped the mound of black powder onto the emperor’s chest. Grabbing the bed linen, he used it to grind the powder through the smeared blood and into the wound over the emperor’s breastbone.

Ahlaric gasped, his head falling back onto the pillows.

Bastion straightened, his chest heaving, his fists trembling. He glared at the emperor, watching silently as Ahlaric relaxed, his muscles going flaccid. His breathing

grew irregular, then labored. The gurgling and wheezing became louder, as though rumbling through a cave.

Bastion remained motionless, his breath slowed, and his blood-covered hands relaxed. He watched, impassive, as the emperor struggled to breathe. “I came here for a reckoning.” His voice cracked. “For the people of Myra.”

When the emperor exhaled his final breath, the admiral picked up a corner of the satin cover and wiped the blood from his hands.

“I came for retribution.” He dropped the cover and turned his back on the dead emperor. “And I now have it.”

He got to the bathroom door just as a knock came at the door—someone calling for the emperor, asking if Ahlaric was all right. Moving quietly, Bastion hurried to the secret door and pushed it open. It clicked behind him as the first alarm klaxon sounded in the halls.

CHAPTER 31

Bryanna waited as long as she could. The hallways of the Imperial Palace filled with shrill alarms, frenzied footfalls, and shouted orders. Someone must have discovered the admiral. She opened a gateway into the Flow and stepped into the extradimensional space.

Measured panic coursed through her veins. *What will I do if Bastion is arrested? What will I tell Glyndra?* Surrounded by her bonded realm's silver aetheric energy, she peered into her native dimension from the interdimensional space.

“Where are you, Admiral?” She searched, and within seconds found the admiral moving through the secret passageway leading back to the bedroom. Satisfied she knew where he was, she looked into the emperor’s bedroom.

Emperor Ahlaric’s face was a bloody mangled atrocity atop a chest splayed open. A crust of black powder mixed with drying blood spread from the open wound to the bedsheets. Palace guards buzzed about, flitting through the open door and back.

Fighting fear and nausea, she moved through the Flow, following Bastion through the hidden walkway to the concubine’s bedchamber. Her heart pounded, body trembled. Perspiration dotted her forehead.

What should I do? The admiral brutally murdered the emperor—in his own bed. The palace was up in arms, guards storming the hallways.

Bastion entered the bedchamber. “My lady,” he whispered into the gloom.

The soul bond between them pulsed, his rising anger telepathically transferred to her along the threads of the magical tether linking them. This man just murdered the emperor and was calling to her to help him escape. *What am I to do?*

“My lady!” Bastion’s call pulled at her, demanding action.

The bedroom door vibrated with pounding blows. She looked beyond the double doors—armed men tried the handle, but the lock held. More guards coming, neuro-electrical disruptor pistols and swords at the ready. A ranking officer hurried forward, keys in hand.

“Damn you, Lady Silver.” Bastion’s words struck her like a jolt of electricity, jarring her into action. Her aura flared, cutting through the barrier between the aetheric stream and normal space.

She wrapped her magic around him and pulled him into the Flow.

* * *

“Make way!” The Sergeant of the Guard pushed through the growing crowd of guards responding to the palace alarm. They parted to allow him access to the locked door. He pushed the key into the lock, automatically disengaging the electronic field. He turned the key. The release sounded.

He pushed the double doors open. Guards scrambled into the room behind him. They pulled up short, the fading silver light of a warlock’s aura visible in the darkness.

* * *

Bryanna fidgeted with her dragon pendant necklace. Bastion floated at her side with his arm around her waist as they moved through the Flow. A strained silence hung between them.

She was taking them back to the *Maelstrom*, to her quarters, back to where his journey to kill the emperor started—an endeavor she knew nothing about beforehand. Before he'd made her an accomplice to murder, she'd begun to feel comfortable and accepted among the *Maelstrom's* crew. Now...

"Say what's on your mind."

She startled at the sound of his voice and shook her head. "I have nothing to say."

"Stop here." He moved to face her, hands on her shoulders. "Say it."

The silver current of the Flow slowed to a crawl. The aetheric tunnel's shimmering, incorporeal walls swirled with red, yellow, blue, and green streaks.

She shook off his hands and drifted back. *He's warlock, not human—he can stand alone in the Flow without harm.* "You killed Emperor Ahlaric."

He straightened, squared his shoulders, and met her gaze, his expression dark. He walled his emotions away, denying her access to his thoughts and feelings. The telepathic bond between them reverberated with her emotions alone.

"Yes."

"How could you? You beat him to death!"

He cocked an eyebrow. "I beat him *almost* to death, sliced open his chest, and shoved enough of the Tranquil Dark into his wound to kill half the population of Mithara City. He died of an overdose of his damned drug."

Her face burned as her anger spiked. “Don’t you *dare* be flippant about this! You murdered the emperor and made me a part of it.”

“My duty is to protect the empire and its citizens. The late emperor was clearly insane and an imminent danger. I did what my duty required. Your involvement is negligible and irrelevant.”

She threw up her hands, the aetheric stream heaving with her mounting frustration. “How *could* you? Why didn’t you tell me what you had planned?”

He shrugged. “You provided transport—that’s all. All you needed to know was the intended destination.”

She glared, tears welling in her eyes. “You beat him with your *bare hands*. What kind of man does that?”

A rush of anger pulsed through the soul bond, jolting through her like electricity. He stepped toward her, brow furrowed. “Where was your righteous indignation when I interrogated Chancellor Lasko, the spy the emperor put on my ship? How many times did you demand I stop as his screams echoed through your quarters? Where was this moral condemnation when nothing more than a closed door separated you from the carnage? How many times did you implore me to stop before I decapitated him?”

“Lasko’s actions were treasonous...you had to...”

He drew his sword and extended it toward her, hilt first. “If you think I murdered Emperor Ahlaric on nothing more than a whim, after everything that’s passed between us, then take my sword, give it to Commander Rhola, and tell him you alone sat in judgment of me, found me guilty, and imposed your sentence. Then leave me here in the Flow to die.”

Her hand flew to her throat. Her breath hitched. “Are you *insane*? I’d never do—”

“I do what I *must*, my lady.” He sheathed his sword. “I make no apologies for my actions, and I take full

responsibility for them. I harbor no regrets, and I will suffer no impugning of my motives—from you or anyone else.”

She hugged herself to mask her trembling. The telepathic link confirmed what she knew in her heart: had she accepted the offered sword, he would have allowed her to abandon him to a certain death here in the Flow. But it was an empty gesture because he also knew she would never leave him to die, here or anywhere else. She’d already proven that.

She asked, “You’re saying what you did was justified?”

“You should know by now that I have reasons for everything I do. Condemn my methods, if you must, but not my motives. Your condemnation there isn’t warranted.”

Wiping the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand, she moved up to him. “I want to believe you; I truly do. It’s just that...seeing him like that...so much blood...”

He wrapped an arm around her waist, pulled her close again, and lifted her chin with his hand. “I trusted you with my life on Myra. Is it so difficult for you to reciprocate?”

He stared, his gaze imploring, and the tender undertone of his voice soothed her frazzled emotions. Waves of warmth rippled through the soul bond, flashing into desire.

In a breathless whisper, she said, “I’ll try, my lord.”

He kissed her forehead. “That’s all I ask, my lady. Now, take us back to your quarters on the *Maelstrom*.”

Bryanna turned from him, his arm still firmly around her waist. They resumed moving. A gateway formed ahead within seconds.

They stepped from the Flow into the great room of Bryanna’s quarters. She pushed through a wave of dizziness when he released his hold.

“What happens now?” she asked.

“Now, the *Maelstrom* goes rogue.” He stepped back from her. “We’re going into the Well in search of Centralis. Get some rest. I’ll need you on the bridge tomorrow.”

He headed for the door, with her close on his heels. “The bridge? Why would you need me on the bridge?”

He used the control panel to unlock the door. “Because you’re the only warlock on board who can channel the Flow.”

She stepped back into her quarters as he walked away. Locking the door, she moved into the great room and went to the large meta-glass windows, clutching her dragon pendant. Her thoughts churned.

He was right—she’d made no protest when he brutally tortured and killed Chancellor Lasko. But Lasko had tried to arrest Bastion, strip him of his command, and take over the *Maelstrom*. He’d even threatened her, making it clear he would see her executed. Bastion *had* to act.

Now the emperor’s blood was on the hands of the leader of the Imperial military. She’d pulled him out of that room at the palace before the guards came through the door, so chances were they didn’t know, at this point, who killed Ahlaric. But she suspected it wouldn’t take long before fingers pointed toward the *Maelstrom*’s commander.

By that time, he’d have the ship deep in Well space, where it would be almost impossible to track. With the emperor dead, Bastion would move to the next task on his agenda—getting her to Centralis to find the cause of the anomalies in the Flow.

She rubbed her temples. There was also the matter of their soul bond. She had to find a way to break it. His presence was intimidating enough without an uncontrollable telepathic link between them.

He easily blocked his side of the link with the strength of his will. She, on the other hand, was like a book, laid open and bare for him to flip through whenever he wanted. As long as the soul bond remained, he would

always have the upper hand. She would never be able to completely get away from him.

Admiral Devon Bastion became a murderer tonight, and he'd involved her in it without her knowledge. How could she ever give him her unwavering trust after what he did to Emperor Ahlaric? The image of the bloodied, beaten emperor would fester in her mind for the rest of her life.

She turned from the window. "Close blast shields." The room fell into darkness as she made her way to her bedroom. She sighed as she turned down the bed.

"Get some sleep, Bryanna." Her voice sounded tired and strained. "You can figure all this out in the morning. After some rest, you'll see things more clearly. Then you'll know what you should do."

A wry smile touched the corners of her mouth as she turned from the bed. She stripped as she headed for the shower, content with the lie she'd just told herself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bobbie R. Byrd retired from teaching junior high science in 2015. Before her years spreading her vast knowledge to the next generation, she worked for almost 20 years as a registered nurse. After retirement, it didn't take her long to realize she sucked at doing nothing, so she began building a following as a freelance writer. That went quite well for several years and gave her the time and freedom to branch out into her true passion: writing science fiction, fantasy, and horror novels. She's dabbled a bit in short stories, too, but they're more of a side fling than a full-on passionate pursuit.

Bobbie now spends her days writing, playing with her three dogs, and honing her skills as a recluse-in-training at her home deep in the backwoods of Mississippi.