



# GALAXY UNDONE

F O R G O T T E N   G A L A X Y   B O O K   4

# M.R. FORBES

# **GALAXY UNDONE**

FORGOTTEN GALAXY

BOOK 4

M.R. FORBES



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# CHAPTER 1

“Stand up,” the guard ordered, eyes barely visible through the reflection of his helmet. “Slowly.”

Caleb did as the man said without question or complaint, not only because his hands and feet were shackled, or because there were half a dozen more guards on the transport, but because he was exactly where he wanted to be. In the custody of a recruiter, the Prime Recruiter, in fact. A man named Bellet. His heavily starched and perfectly pressed uniform was a near-copy of Caleb’s, though it had been cared for to a level of precision he would never bother to match.

After introducing himself and leading Caleb away from the courtyard of the Nexus Orphanage, he’d shoved him into a seat in the transport’s main cabin before vanishing through the hatch to the flight deck. He reappeared now that they had landed, pulling to a stop just in front of Caleb. Shorter than Caleb, with an olive complexion and an arrogant demeanor, he was obviously pleased with his day’s catch.

“Mister Creb,” he said. “How was the flight?”

“Not bad,” Caleb replied. “Where are we now?”

“Transfer processing area,” Bellet replied. “You’ll be scanned, cleaned, and logged before moving to holding with the other inmates. That’s where you’ll remain until we have a full boat to ship you out to the belt.”

“How long will it take to fill up a ship?” Caleb asked.

Bellet raised an eyebrow, surprised by the question and the relative impatience with which Caleb had asked it. “A day or

two at most. I have some questions before we leave the transport.”

“Ask away. It doesn’t mean I’m going to answer them.”

“You’re pretty cocky considering you’re heading for the belt.”

Caleb responded with a shrug.

“I want to know why you accessed restricted records at Acala Primary, and then, rather than escaping when you were found out, you went to the orphanage to cross-reference them. You had to know you were likely to be captured.”

“I honestly didn’t think you would capture me. Do you even know what those records are?”

“No. They’re restricted. I don’t have access, nor would I want it. They could send me to the belt with you for that.”

“Who has the power to indict the Prime Recruiter?”

“Baroness Kagata, or any of the other nobility. And they would if I’m not careful. Answer the question. What were you looking for?”

“You’ve already sentenced me to life in the belt. Why should I tell you anything?”

“I haven’t completed my indictment. I can still change the terms, based on how cooperative you choose to be.”

“I’m not in a very cooperative mood.”

Bellet smiled. “Your associates left you behind, and yet you still want to protect them?”

“They don’t need my protection. They’ve already escaped.”

“While abandoning you.”

“I didn’t leave them much choice.” Caleb cocked his head to the side as he smirked up at Bellet. “We can play this game all day. You won’t get anything out of me.”

“You came all the way to the Combine for those records. I will determine the reason, whether or not you help me. But

you can improve your position greatly by helping me.”

“Understood. No, thanks.”

“Perhaps you’ll reconsider once the reality of your situation sets in. I’ll speak to you again before you transfer out.” He glanced at the lead guard, already waiting by the hatch. “Take him away.”

“Yes, sir,” the guard replied, stepping forward as Bellet moved aside. He clamped a hand around Caleb’s upper arm and pulled him to his feet. “Follow me.”

The transport’s hatch opened, and the guard led Caleb toward it, a second guard at his back, ready to shove him forward if needed. Caleb shuffled to the hatch and down a short ramp to the ground. He realized right away that he was back at the Acala spaceport, in a section he had seen during Medusa’s descent. He had taken the large facility nearby for a warehouse, only now realizing its true function.

*Vraxis says Medusa has safely returned to Gorgon, Ishek told him. Damian wants to know what they should do now.*

*Tell Vraxis this will take a few days at best. Likely longer. Have Penn tell him to park Gorgon somewhere within a few light years and wait for further orders.*

*Consider it done.*

The guards led Caleb through a side door of the warehouse and into a small room where another pair of guards waited. These guards wore full body armor and carried stun batons. “We’ll take it from here,” one of them said, clamping a hand on Caleb’s shoulder. “Stay calm,” he warned, “and everything will go smoothly. Try to resist, and...” He raised his baton threateningly.

”Hey, I’m calm,” Caleb said as the planetary defense guards left

The additional guards led Caleb through a secured door, into the next room of the facility. A machine resembling an airport metal detector sat against one wall, a desk near the other. A stern older man sat at the desk, a tired expression on

his face. “Enrollee 746971,” he said in a dull voice. “Take off your boots and step in the scanner.”

“Do I have to hold my arms over my head?” Caleb joked, mimicking the posture.

The man glanced up at him. He obviously didn’t understand the reference, but Caleb’s lack of concern clearly confused him. “Just step inside.”

Caleb pulled off his boots under the watchful eyes of the guards before stepping into the machine.

*I hope this thing can’t see me.*

*Me, too,* Caleb replied.

Green and red lasers swept over him, needing only a few seconds to complete their task.

“Step out of the scanner,” the man ordered. Again, Caleb did as he was instructed. The man tapped a few times on the control board for his terminal. “Please state your name for the records.”

“Cayheb Creb,” Caleb replied.

“You aren’t from Callus.”

“No. I just got here today from Atlas. I’m finding your hospitality... lacking.”

“We have found you guilty of viewing restricted information, resisting arrest, assaulting an officer of peace, and disrespecting a recruiter.”

“I never had a trial.”

“This isn’t Atlas, Mister Creb. How old are you?”

*You should tell him your actual age.*

“Two-hundred ninety-one,” Caleb replied.

The man frowned. “You do understand, we’ve sentenced you to life in the belt?”

“Yes.”



“I’ve been processing convicts for nearly thirty years. You’re the first person I’ve seen with a life sentence who hasn’t begged me for clemency.”

“Why would I do that? I’m looking forward to working in the belt.”

The man stared at him in disbelief. “Are you mentally deranged?”

“I don’t think so.” He shrugged, grinning. “But who knows?”

The man shook his head and pointed to a door on the other side of the room. “You can change in there.”

“Change?” Caleb asked.

“Since you’re not from the Combine, I’ll explain. The scanner took your physiological measurements. An automated system produced a rocksuit for you, while a second system created a profile that will ensure you’re given appropriate nutrition based on your body composition. No more, no less.”

*Why is it that the mining operation seems to have the most advanced technology of anywhere we’ve been so far in the Spiral?*

*It makes you wonder who the Spiral’s founders really are, Caleb agreed. But it may simply be a case of technology driven by necessity. If the owners want to squeeze every coin of profit, they need to maximize efficiency.*

“Quit stalling,” the larger guard said. “You aren’t the only criminal we have to process today.”

“Make sure you remove all your clothing before putting on the rocksuit. It contains systems to assist with bladder evacuation and filtration.”

“You mean it’ll store my piss?”

“Not exactly. Your liquid waste is filtered and recycled in-suit for reuse. This allows for extended time in the field. There are no toilets beyond the substations.”

“How do you define extended time?” Caleb asked.

“Workdays are eighteen hours in a twenty-six hour period. One hundred periods equals one cycle, after which you’ll return to holding on Callus for thirty periods of recovery.” He paused. “Strike that. Since your sentence is life, you won’t return for recovery. In time, your body will adapt to the artificial gravity of the substation and the weightlessness of the belt and will become unviable outside of that environment.”

By the way he said it, Caleb knew the man wanted to crack his calm demeanor. He didn’t give him the satisfaction, instead nodding and turning toward the hatch leading into the changing area. It opened at Caleb’s approach, closing immediately behind him and leaving him in a small room. A simple brown jumpsuit and thick magboots waited on a shelf built into the wall. What impressed Caleb the most was how quickly the systems had assembled and delivered the package.

*Efficiency*, Ishek reminded him.

Caleb picked up the rocksuit, surprised by its light weight. He inspected it, noticing what appeared to be sensors on the inside of the suit near where his heart and lungs were located. A quick examination revealed a small control panel on the right wrist. He tapped on it, not expecting it to function with the battery missing from the included pack. A small holographic display activated, displaying a menu of options including oxygen flow, waste filtration, power output, and more.

*In the Spiral, the convicts have the best technology*, he commented to Ishek as he stripped off his clothes and donned the rocksuit, doing his best to keep Ishek hidden from the view of any potential cameras. The rocksuit fit snugly over every part of his body except his head. Looking down at the suit, he put his hand over the bright yellow number stamped to his chest. 746971. The same number was also printed on the suit’s back and each shoulder, keeping it visible from every angle.

Next, Caleb pulled on the boots. Again, perfectly sized, along with their standard magnetic locking functionality, they had retractable grips in them he imagined were useful while standing on an asteroid. Finished dressing, he turned back to the door, unsure how to open it from the inside.

He didn't need to. A hidden door on the other side of the room opened instead. A different guard stepped in, trailed by a woman in plain brown utilities with a number stamped on her clothes. Obviously, a convict on her recovery period, she looked gaunt and weak as she silently collected his discarded clothes. A moment of eye contact revealed a sea of compassion in her gaze, pitying him for ending up like her.

"This way," the guard said, waving him forward with his baton.

They entered a long corridor, walking to a door halfway down and stopping there. A door on the opposite wall a little further down opened.

Recruiter Bellet stepped out.

## CHAPTER 2

“The rocksuit fits you well,” Bellet said to Caleb as he approached. “A shame, though. You don’t belong here, Cayheb. Your people abandoned you. And for what?” He and Caleb stared at one another. He continued when Caleb didn’t reply. “Answer and I’ll reduce your sentence to five cycles. Sixty-three percent of convicts survive five cycles and they’re not built like you. Not at all.”

Caleb looked over his shoulder, to the convict woman nearing the end of the corridor. He didn’t know how many cycles she had left, but he was pretty sure she wouldn’t survive more than one or two more. “How can you do this to your citizens?”

Caleb noticed the flash of guilt and remorse that washed over Bellet’s face before vanishing completely. “They serve a necessary purpose. They suffer for breaking the law and provide for their fellow citizens as penance.”

“Is that what it says in the vacation brochures?” Caleb asked spitefully.

Bellet’s face tightened. “We all do what we must survive. For you to survive, you need to answer my question. What were you looking for in that data?”

“You’ll know once I find it.”

The statement confused Bellet, but not enough to give him pause. “Consider your sentence upheld,” he said stiffly, turning and leaving the way he’d come.

Caleb heard the guard chuckling under his breath. “What’s so funny?” he asked.

The guard froze, not expecting him to notice. “You’re an idiot. That’s all.” He turned to the door to his left, tapping the control panel.

The heavy door slid aside, revealing the holding area beyond. Nearly five hundred convicts filled the large room, some standing in groups, some sitting on the floor alone, others asleep on one of the many cots. A line had formed near the far end, where recovering convicts doled out rations through a small gap in a barred door. A second line led to an unmarked door that Caleb assumed was a toilet.

His eyes fell on the closest group of convicts. The most recent additions prior to his arrival, they huddled together, their fear clear both in their expressions and in Ishek’s reaction.

*I am going to like this place.*

“In you go,” the guard said, about to shove Caleb into the room when he stepped forward on his own. He walked over to the group nearest him as the door closed behind him. The newcomers fell silent as their heads swiveled in his direction. He glanced at each of them, noticing how some of their rocksuits fit much more tightly than his. Apparently, the system built the suits for what they expected the people to look like over time, rather than during their intake.

“Mister Creb?”

Caleb’s gaze went up to the face of the speaker, his jaw clenching. “Maggie?”

The receptionist from the hospital nodded, tears immediately springing to her eyes. “You tried to help me, Mister Creb. But then something happened in the hospital and that recruiter came back, blaming me.”

Caleb’s hands clenched next. “How long?”

“Two cycles. I’ll survive it. I have to. My mother is old and has no one to take care of her now. The thing is, I did

nothing wrong.” She broke down sobbing, holding her face in her hands.

“I’m sorry, Maggie,” Caleb said through gritted teeth. “I’m going to do what I can to put a stop to this. But I’ll need some time.”

“What can you do?” one of the other newcomers asked. “You’re going to be out in the belt breaking rocks, just like the rest of us.”

“Yeah, you’re delusional if you think you can change anything,” another said.

“We’ll see,” Caleb replied. He circled to Maggie to put a hand on her shoulder. “Hang in there.” His fingers tightened before he left the group, continuing through the room.

The odds he would find Castra waiting to be shipped back to the belt at the end of a recovery period were slim, but he couldn’t afford to make any assumptions. The teens at the orphanage had told him she had short, auburn hair and light eyes with a freckled face. Cute, but not striking. No doubt a few years in the belt had hardened her look, but he didn’t see anyone even close to the description on his first sweep of the holding area.

“Are you looking for somebody?” an inmate asked, approaching Caleb from the left. Average height, rail-thin, and bald, he had the gaunt, sunken look of a man who had served multiple cycles already. “Because you’ll be getting plenty of exercise soon enough. No need to waste your energy here.”

Caleb paused, grinning when he turned to the man. “Believe it or not, I am.”

“One of those, eh,” the man replied with a laugh.

“What do you mean, one of those?”

“I’ve seen it before. People do some stupid things to get the attention of a recruiter, just to get themselves sent to the belt for a cycle or two, hoping to be reunited with someone special. A lover, a mother, or significant other. As if it’s that simple.”

“I didn’t expect it to be simple. I didn’t really expect to find her here, either. But I had to look.”

“Yeah, I get it. So who’s she to you? I’m guessing lover.”

The comment made Caleb cringe. “She’s too young for me. Her name is Castra. She’s an orphan. Nineteen years old, brown hair, light eyes, freckles.”

The man made a thinking face before shrugging. “She’s not popping to the front of my mind, but then your description of her makes her sound pretty unremarkable. Besides, these rocksuits make us all look the same.” He tugged at the tight fit of his. Anyway, I don’t know anyone named Castra, but that doesn’t mean much. There are ten thousand of us up at the primary station, three thousand more on the substations.”

“How many substations are there?”

“Six. You aren’t from around here, are you, asking a question like that?”

“No. I’m from Atlas.”

He whistled. “What the hell are you doing all the way out here?”

“I’m looking for Castra.”

“And you know for a fact she’s here?”

Caleb nodded. “I do, or I wouldn’t be here.”

“You’re a brave soul to get yourself puckered to look for her, I’ll give you that. Whatever she is to you, I hope she appreciates you.”

“She doesn’t even know I exist.”

That comment cracked the man up. “This is my fourth cycle. I’ve heard of folks getting arrested to be here, but never someone who had never met the person they were looking for. You’re crazy, man.” He put out his hand. “I’m Mathis.”

“Creb,” Caleb replied. “Cayheb Creb.”

“Your name’s as odd as you are, Cayheb Creb. Good to meet you though.” When they shook, Caleb thought Mathis’

grip might break his hand, it was so strong. “I can help you look for her. Ask around.”

“I’d prefer the guards didn’t know about it,” Caleb replied.

“You got me puzzled again. Why not?”

“I’d just prefer it.”

Mathis shrugged. “Okay, Crazy Creb. I can be discreet. Let me ask the slopper if she’s seen a Castra in the recovery cells. I’ll find you.” He clapped Caleb on the shoulder and wandered over to the chow line. The others on the line complained when he skipped ahead, only quieting once they realized he hadn’t gone there for food. He spoke to the woman behind the bars for a minute before returning to Caleb.

“Good news, she isn’t here,” he said.

“How is that good news?” Caleb asked.

“It narrows your search. She’s definitely out in the belt.”

Caleb smiled despite himself. “Thank you for asking.”

“Yeah, no problem. Stick with me, Creb. I’ll show you the ropes once we get blasted out.”

“Why would you do that for me?”

“I’ve decided I like you. And I want to see if you can pull this off. It’s my last cycle, so I’m eager for a little more entertainment.”

“Then you’ve come to the right place,” Caleb said. “Stick with me, and you’re guaranteed to be thoroughly entertained.”

Mathis cracked up with laughter again. “I’m getting goosebumps already.”



## CHAPTER 3

The holding area fell silent when the door opened on the far side of the room. The inmates all turned their heads in unison as two guards stepped into the space between them and the exit. A third guard entered and stood behind them, his stun baton at the ready while they waited. After only a few seconds, another man entered the room. He was tall and thin with short brown hair and an angular face that made him look like someone had carved him from stone. His eyes swept across the suddenly silent and still convicts.

Caleb watched him from the back corner of the holding area, where he leaned against the wall. Mathis sat on the floor beside him, along with Maggie and Reesa, another newcomer who had followed Maggie over to him soon after he arrived. Maggie had told him she preferred his confident comfort to the nervous coping of the other recently incarcerated, and she already knew from the hospital that he was, as she put it, good people. She could have blamed him for her arrest, considering it was the retrieval of the hospital records that gave the recruiter a reason to charge her, but she insisted the recruiter would have found another reason. It made no sense why he had targeted her, but it rarely made sense. Sometimes they wanted a bribe, like money or sex. Other times, they just enjoyed making someone else miserable.

“I’m Crew Manager Nells,” he said in a soft, flat tone. “It’s my bad luck to be responsible for the whole sorry lot of you for the next cycle. Some of you have been through this process before, so you already know what to do.” His gaze scanned the room. “For the newcomers among you, and there appear to be

more of you than usual, once I leave, you're to form a single line that winds through the holding area, starting at that door over there." He pointed to a side door Caleb already knew led outside to a buffer area that prevented escape. "You'll be guided onto the transport single-file, registered, counted, and assigned to your work groups. You'll claim the first available seat. I'll warn you now, there aren't enough seats for everyone in this room. If you fail to get a seat, it's your responsibility to prevent your own injury. So hang on. Getting hurt on the transfer will not allow you to avoid work; it'll only make that work harder for you and force your group to pick up your slack. That won't make you any friends. When we arrive at the primary station, many of you will be directed to freshly rotated billets. If you've been assigned to a substation, you'll remain on board for transfer. If you have questions, find a veteran to ask."

Nells eyed them all again, his gaze pausing on Caleb. It lingered there, leaving him to wonder if Nells recognized him. After a few seconds, the crew manager turned around and left without another word, vanishing through the door behind the guards.

"That's our cue," Mathis said. "Come on, Crazy Creb."

The convicts began forming lines as they headed for the exit. They were orderly despite their condition, especially those who had already spent time in the belt. There was a quiet sense of urgency among them that made them move quickly while avoiding an unruly scramble for seats that would get them in trouble.

Mathis led Caleb into line with Maggie and Reesa following close behind. Caleb could sense Ishek's delight as the level of fear in the room exploded, providing the symbiote with enough fear and apprehension for a feeding frenzy.

*If only we could bottle it for later.*

*I feel bad for these people. The Combine treats their citizens as badly as the Relyeh would if they were in control.*

*Yes. It's wonderful, isn't it?*

*Cut it out, Ish. You're getting drunk on their pain.*

*Such is my nature. But I will try to be sympathetic while enjoying their fear.*

They moved steadily toward the door, until Caleb was finally close enough to see the buffer area, where a pair of guards and an inmate on his recovery cycle waited. He watched as the inmate used one handheld device to scan each prisoner before pressing a second device against their rocksuit.

“That one prints an invisible tag onto the rocksuit,” Mathis explained, loudly enough for Maggie and Reesa to hear as well. “It fades over time until it’s gone by the end of the recovery cycle.”

“What if you don’t get a recovery cycle?” Caleb asked.

“You’ll get a permanent, visible tag. It’ll be cool.”

“I don’t know how you can be so calm, Cayheb,” Maggie said. “You’re going to spend the rest of your life in space, mining asteroids.”

“We’ll see,” Caleb replied. “I have a trick or two up my sleeve.”

*You mean you have me up your sleeve.*

They reached the buffer area a few minutes later. Mathis made eye contact with the man checking them in. “How many days do you have left in your recovery, Hatch?”

“About two weeks. I’ll be on the next transport out.” He scanned Mathis. “You didn’t tell me this was your last cycle.”

Mathis put a finger to his lips. “Come on, man. You know to keep that quiet. Nells will work extra hard to find something to pin on me to extend the sentence if he finds out.”

“Sorry,” Hatch said, stamping him. “Group C, Substation Three.”

“What?” Mathis said. “See, that crap’s started already.” He glanced at Caleb. “That’s the worst assignment in the belt, with the highest fatality rate.”

“Keep moving,” a guard barked, holding up his stun baton.

Mathis joined the continuing line outside on the tarmac. One of the huge ancient transports he'd seen in orbit had landed, the lights from the open loading ramp casting an eerie glow.

Caleb stopped in front of Hatch, who methodically ran the scanner over him. His eyebrow went up when he looked at the results at the base of the wand. "I don't think we've ever had someone as physically fit as you," he said. "Good thing for you, I guess, since you're here for life." He raised the other device, pressing it to Caleb's rocksuit. It left a round mark like a circuit board on the chest. "Group C, Substation Three."

Of course, they had given him the worst assignment. No doubt Bellet had a hand in that. At least he already knew someone in the work group. "I can't wait," he said, surprising both Hatch and the guards with a smile as he moved out the door, quickly catching up to Mathis.

"Well?" the other man asked.

"C3," Caleb replied, drawing a quiet laugh from the other man.

"I mean, I didn't want you to get the crap assignment, but I kind of wanted you to get the crap assignment. You know?"

"I get it," Caleb replied. "Misery loves company."

"Forget that. Daily quotas are group based. You'll take a lot of pressure off the rest of us. I might actually make it back to Callus."

"Until a recruiter grabs you again."

Mathis shook his head. "Nope. They can extend your current sentence with justification, but they can't indict you twice." He pointed at the stamp on Caleb's rocksuit. "Nice badge."

Maggie quickly joined them, fresh tears running down her cheeks. She broke out sobbing when Caleb looked at her. "Group C, Substation Three. I'm going to die up there." She grabbed Caleb's arm, pressing her head into his shoulder. "This is worse than I ever thought it could get."

“It’ll be okay,” Caleb said, certain she had also received the assignment because of him. “We’ll look out for one another, and everything will be fine. Right now, you need to calm down and focus on getting onto the ship and getting a seat.”

She let go of him, wiped her eyes, and nodded. “If you can be strong, then I guess I can, too.”

When Reesa arrived, she seemed less upset than before. “Primary, Reserves.”

“What?” Maggie cried. “You’re so lucky.”

“What are reserves?” Caleb asked.

“Nells said it looked like the holding area was crowded,” Mathis replied. “They have more rock crackers than they have work slots for them, so they form a reserve that does administrative and maintenance duties on the station until they’re needed in the field.”

“It’s a walk in the park compared to mining,” Maggie added.

“Good for you, Reesa,” Caleb said, congratulating her.

She smiled at him as he continued forward with Mathis. The line moved quickly toward the ship, where another pair of guards waited to ensure the convicts continued into the cargo hold. Caleb quickly discovered that Nells had undersold the lack of seating. The middle of the ship’s massive hold contained numerous crates and boxes, no doubt an assortment of gear and sundries needed by the mining stations. Judging by the number of seats on the port side, it would leave a hundred or more prisoners standing. It would be up to them to deal with the g-forces of liftoff and atmospheric egress, not to mention when they slowed at the other end of the trip.

Fortunately, they had boarded early enough that there were still plenty of seats available. Mathis led them to a row a quarter of the way along the bulkhead, waving Reesa and Maggie in first. He went in beside them, giving Caleb the end.

“Are you okay?” he asked Maggie. She had calmed down considerably since their conversation, but she remained visibly

shaken by what lay ahead.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever be okay again,” she replied. “But I’m doing my best to stay strong.”

“You’re doing great,” Caleb said.

“My first cycle went by so fast, I hardly remember it. It’ll be a walk in the park for you.”

“Really?” Maggie asked.

“Sure thing.” She smiled, relaxing a little more. Mathis leaned over to get close to Caleb’s ear. “Not really.” He chuckled softly. “No sense in freaking her out any more than she already is, right?”

“Good call,” Caleb replied.

They sat together in silence as more convicts boarded and took seats around them until someone sat in each seat. The guards continued urging inmates into the hold until there were nearly fifty standing at the front of the compartment’s port side and it seemed as if the flow of prisoners had finally ended. The guards climbed the ramp into the hold, one of them moving into position beside the controls. He had just put his finger on the button to close the hatch when one last man rushed onto the ship. Built like an oversized bulldog, he didn’t so much run as lumber into the cargo hold.

“You’re late,” one guard said. “Two more seconds, and you would have been subject to immediate execution.”

The man didn’t respond. Instead, he turned away from the guard, heading down the length of the compartment. Caleb noticed how all eyes followed him, especially those belonging to convicts who had already served cycles in the belt.

The guards closed the hatch, ignoring the newcomer now that he was on board. The man prowled the rows of seats like a predator, eyes flicking over each of the seated convicts until they at last came to rest on Maggie.

“You,” he growled, shoving a finger at her. “You’re in my seat.”

“Me?” Maggie said. “No. I.I.I...”

Caleb knew why the man had chosen her. She was obviously the most frightened person on the ship. That he would be so brazen to pick on someone so much weaker than himself instantly pissed him off. “You should have been here sooner, if you wanted a seat,” he said.

“Oh, is that right?” the man said, looking down at Caleb. “You her pimp or something?”

“She’s in my work group. That means if you have a problem with her, then you have a problem with me.”

The bulldog laughed. “I don’t have a problem having a problem with you, newbs. If you don’t want her to give up her seat, that’s fine. I’ll take yours.”

“I’m not giving you my seat,” Caleb answered. “And she’s not giving you her seat. Like I said, you should have been here sooner.”

“I didn’t say I’ll ask for yours,” Bulldog growled. “I said I’ll take yours.”

Without warning, his hand shot out, the bully obviously intending to wrap his paw around Caleb’s throat. Too fast for him, Caleb jerked his head aside while bringing his legs up in tandem to kick him in the chest with enough force to shove him back. He jumped to his feet, his eyes shifting to the guards momentarily, looking to see if they’d get involved. Their eyes expressed their interest in the fight, but not in stopping it.

Bulldog laughed, obviously enjoying the moment. He put up his fists. “Think you can fight the likes of me, newbs? I’m gonna bust that pretty face of yours.”

Caleb grinned. “You can try.” *Ish, boost me.* Not only was Bulldog obviously stronger than him. He wanted to make this a quick fight. The last thing he needed was to still be out of his seat and throwing punches when the transport blasted off.

*It is done.*

Just as Bulldog rushed him, Caleb felt the icy sting of the chemicals race through him. The big man led with a flurry of quick, hammering blows, proving his brute strength as he advanced and forcing Caleb to retreat.

“Not so sure of yourself now, are you, newbs?” Bulldog laughed with glee, obviously convinced he had already won the fight.

Caleb chuckled as he absorbed the brute’s painful punches. “Just keep coming, asshole.” Knowing Bulldog would tire before him, he ducked and weaved, waiting for his opening. He was determined not to waste his chance when it came.

The prisoners in the surrounding seats displayed a mix of curiosity and fear, the latter of which strengthened both Ishek and Caleb even more. The guards had closed the distance between themselves and the battling pair, but showed no intention of interfering. Meanwhile, a blue light flashed and a warning tone sounded, indicating the ship was about to lift off.

*You should stop toying with him,* Ishek suggested.

Caleb let the bruiser land three more hits, the last of which left him wide open for Caleb’s right hook to the jaw. He stumbled back a step, disoriented enough for Caleb to hit him with a single open-handed strike to his chest. The enhanced blow knocked the air out of him, the power of it sending the big man reeling back to land on the deck. Clutching his chest, Bulldog sat there gasping for air.

Caleb stood over him. “Get up,” he growled, challenging the man to continue the fight. Still unable to speak, a shocked Bulldog stared up at Caleb and shook his head, refusing to rise.

The guards hurried over to a pair of jump seats near the hatch and buckled themselves in. A second tone sounded, a warning of imminent high-velocity maneuvers as the engines rumbled to life, shaking the entire ship.

Caleb maglocked his boots to the deck, reaching down and extending his open hand to the bruiser. The man looked at it for a second, his confusion passing over his craggy features before quickly turning to realization. He accepted Caleb’s hand up, and Caleb pulled him to his feet. “Hang onto me!” he shouted, clutching the man’s hand to his chest. Bulldog wrapped his other arm around Caleb’s shoulders as the pilot



fired the transport's main thrusters, sending them rocketing toward orbit.

The g-force tore at both men, straining Caleb's muscles as he held them both upright. Some others without seats, unable to get their maglocks activated in time, screamed as the force of takeoff launched them over the heads of the seated prisoners. They sailed the length of the hold, slamming into the rear bulkhead. Caleb knew it was unlikely any of them would survive.

The high-G acceleration continued for nearly three minutes, leaving some of the standing room prisoners flat on their backs, their ankles obviously broken, the maglock still holding their boots to the deck. Caleb remained braced, handling the maneuvers easily enough while holding onto the man who had attacked him. He knew they had reached orbit when loose debris began drifting upward, no longer held down by gravity.

Bulldog tore himself loose from Caleb's grip, taking a few steps back from him, his clenched eyebrows shadowing his eyes. "You could have let the burn launch me into the bulkhead."

"Why would I do that?" Caleb replied.

"I was ready to kill you."

"That's not a good enough reason for me to let you die. Especially after you lost the fight."

Caleb thought the comment might enrage the man. Instead, he cracked up. "Who the hell are you, newbs?" he asked.

"Cayheb Creb," he replied, tapping on his stamp. "Lifer. You?"

"Usef O'kalo, gang lead, Substation Three."

"Gang lead?" Caleb asked.

"It means I'm the ranking con, just under the paid Gang Manager. What's your assignment, Creb?"

"C3," Caleb replied. "Same as the group I was sitting with."

Usef tried to laugh. The hit to his chest turned it into a coughing fit instead. He clasped his hand to his sternum and glared at Caleb, a sinister grin spreading across his face. “You embarrassed me in front of everyone, Creb. Just wait until we get to Sub Three. I’m going to make your life a living hell.”

Caleb smiled, refusing to let the man stare him down. “You’re welcome to try.”

## CHAPTER 4

Caleb returned to his seat, doing his best to temper his anger as Usef found someone else to rip out of their seat. The bastard had sworn to punish him for beating him in a fair fight, the fact that he'd saved the idiot's life be damned.

*Maybe he didn't want his life saved? The belt is clearly no walk in the park.*

*He's not a lifer. He'll be free one day. Considering his position, probably soon.*

"You weren't kidding about keeping things entertaining," Mathis said as Caleb sat down. "Crazy Creb one, Usef zero."

"You know him?" Caleb asked.

"Anyone who's been in the belt more than a cycle or two knows him. You already had the full experience, so there isn't much more to tell."

"How'd he get to be gang lead with an attitude like that?"

"Are you kidding? That's exactly what they're looking for. Management doesn't want unity among the work groups. That leads to the potential for an uprising. If you're charismatic and strong, if you're a natural leader, then you're a threat. Which makes *you* a threat."

Caleb exhaled sharply, releasing some of his anger. "At least now I understand why he gave me crap after I saved his life. If I'm a threat now, just wait."

Mathis laughed heartily. "The Creb Show continues. I love it."

Maggie leaned over Reesa from her seat behind them. She had been silent, too afraid to say anything or even move, since Usef had targeted her. Now, she looked at him with wide eyes, still surprised by how quickly and easily he had dispatched Usef. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“You don’t need to thank me,” Caleb replied. “Like I said, we’re in the same workgroup. That means we look out for one another.”

“I just told you, that isn’t what it means,” Mathis countered. “Each group works to fill the daily quota, but outside of that it’s every man for himself. Or woman.” He smiled at Maggie.

“Maybe in the past. Not anymore.”

“You have a lot of confidence for a convict.”

“That’s because this is nothing compared to what I’ve already been through, or what’s coming in the future.”

Mathis’ amusement faded. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s nothing you need to worry about,” Caleb answered. “For now, we need to focus on the present. I need to find a young woman named Castra.”

“Who’s Castra?” Maggie asked, not having heard him mention the name before.

“His daughter,” Mathis replied, regaining his grin.

“She’s not my daughter,” Caleb replied. “She’s someone else’s daughter. Someone important. I promised I would find her.”

“Do you always keep your promises?” Maggie questioned.

“He must,” Reesa replied. “To get himself arrested to look for her in the belt.”

“I try,” Caleb agreed. “I assume Primary Station has a datastore with records for all the inmates?”

“Of course,” Mathis said. “But there’s no way in hell any of us are getting near a manager’s terminal, and even if we do,

there's no way in hell it would be unlocked. Especially since the three of us are transferring directly to Substation Three. I'm sure only the Station Manager has access to the network link."

"Is there any chance the gang lead can access inmate records?"

"I smell what you're thinking, Creb. Usef can see records for personnel on the station. He won't have access to the entire datastore."

"But he has access to a terminal?"

"He must. He's responsible for adjusting work schedules. Since he hates you now, we'll probably spend extra hours out on the rocks."

"What?" Maggie gasped.

"He said you didn't need to thank him," Mathis replied. "He didn't do you a favor going against Usef like that."

"I would be smashed against the bulkhead right now if he hadn't," Maggie said. "Or at least have two broken ankles."

Caleb could still hear the moans and cries of the injured, who wouldn't receive any help until they reached the station. Like everything else surrounding the Combine, their inhuman treatment of the prisoners made him sick.

The transport continued at a constant speed toward the station for another twenty minutes before the G-Forces shifted again, signaling the ship's rotation as it prepared to burn off its velocity. They were approaching Primary Station, but with no viewports or camera feeds, Caleb had no chance to watch the approach. He knew from his research that the station was shaped somewhat like a starfish, with six long arms extending out from a central hub. The hub housed most of the critical life support systems and hundreds of living quarters for both convicts and staff.

The arms each ended in a large, circular platform where work groups spent their days mining captured asteroids for precious metals and minerals. As the primary station could only support so many rocks at one time, they'd built the

substations to add capacity and efficiency. Since they were mobile, giving them the ability to pick the most mineral dense asteroids in the belt, to gather the best cut of the meat so to speak, and quickly move on.

“What makes Three-C the most dangerous work group?” Caleb asked, glancing at Mathis.

“Substation Three works in the innermost part of the belt,” Mathis replied. “The rocks there are too big to bring back to Primary, and the gravitational interactions can sometimes create chaos. So it’s already a more dangerous assignment than One or Two. Work group C handles Level Five HVTs. High-value targets. HVT means they’re highly profitable with only minimal extraction. Level Five means there are active impacts ongoing in the area.”

“Active impacts?” Maggie said. “You mean the asteroids are colliding with one another?”

“Yup. But don’t worry too much. The dropship’s automated systems are good enough to get the workers to the surface most of the time, but once you’re there, it’s pretty much up to the stars whether you make it back.”

Caleb sensed the spike in Maggie’s fear response. “If the asteroids we mine are that large, the odds of being hit are still pretty small, aren’t they? The debris would have to hit the small area we’re occupying.”

“Yeah, tell that—” Mathis clammed up in response to Caleb’s narrow glare. “Yeah, pretty small. But still more dangerous than any of the other work groups.”

“It’ll be okay,” Caleb said, looking at Maggie. “Whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

She nodded, obviously still unconvinced.

The transport continued on a vector toward Primary Station for another few minutes before slowing and rotating again as it approached its docking position. Caleb felt a slight jolt through his seat when the ship connected with the station. Then came a second thump that reverberated through the

docking arm, likely one of the substation transports attaching itself to the opposite side.

A tone sounded throughout the hold, followed by an announcement over the PA system: “All personnel are to remain seated.”

None of the inmates moved as the guards opened the hatch. Two full squads of additional guards rushed onto the transport, armed not with stun batons, but with plasma rifles. Caleb tensed, at first convinced that Crux had gotten a message to the Combine nobility after all, and the guards were there for him. He relaxed when they spread across the deck instead of singling him out.

Once the guards were in place, medical teams rushed onto the transport, floating gurneys trailing behind them. They collected the hurt and dead as quickly as they could, fighting to get through the overcrowded vessel to render aid. Caleb’s heart wrenched at the eight filled body bags that went out with nearly thirty additional injured from his side of the hold.

The collection completed, the medical teams left the ship, replaced almost immediately by Crew Manager Nells. “If you’re assigned to Primary, stand up now,” he ordered. Most of the prisoners came to their feet, including Reesa. “You will come forward and give me your assignment. I’ll point you to your gang lead, who you will form up behind in a single line. When I give the word, and only when I give the word, the gang leads will, as their name implies, lead you to your areas within the station. You’ll have one hour free time to eat and get settled before your shift begins.”

A collective groan rose from the group in response to the quick turnaround.

“The Recruiters didn’t send here you on vacation,” Nells roared. “You’re law-breakers, all of you. So quit your whining and serve your time.”

“The only law I broke was not knowing something that was impossible for me to know,” Maggie said under her breath. “It’s so damn unfair.”

“It sure is,” Mathis agreed. “Not that anyone on that side of the coin gives a damn. There ain’t much we can do about it.”

“Not yet,” Caleb said.

“Let’s go, people!” Nells barked. “Any delay reduces your free time.”

The inmates staying on Primary started forward, stepping up to Nells, who quickly directed them off the ship. It didn’t take long before it was Reesa’s turn to go.

“Good luck, Mags,” she said, leaning over to hug Maggie.

“You, too,” Maggie replied.

“See you around, Lucky,” Mathis said to Reesa as she passed him.

“Goodbye, Creb,” Reesa said, leaning over and kissing his cheek. “Thank you for looking out for us.”

“Anytime,” Caleb replied.

She offered them all one more wave before stepping into the line and moving forward with the others. Finally, only a few dozen remained in the hold.

“If you’re assigned to Substation One, stand up and come forward,” Nells said. A group of ten approached him, quickly dispatched to a waiting transport. The same thing happened to the prisoners assigned to Substation Two. At that point, only Caleb, Mathis, Maggie, and Usef remained on the port side of the hold. “Usef,” Nells said, smiling at the gang lead. “It’s good to have you back.”

“Thank you, sir,” Usef replied. “You’ve still got me for a few more cycles. I appreciate the extra time off, though.”

“We need our leaders strong,” Nells said. “It looks like you have some fresh meat for the grinder.” He motioned to Caleb and the others. “There should be a few more on the other side of the hold.” He raised his voice. “If you’re assigned to Substation Three, stand up and come forward.”



Usef joined Nells at the front of the ship as Caleb and the others joined him, leaving him with a group of seven. “This bastard here is going to be trouble,” he said, thrusting a meaty finger at Caleb. “I can already tell.”

“You know how to deal with trouble, Usef,” Nells replied. “I trust you to handle it.”

“Oh, I will,” Usef laughed. “All right, newbs, transport’s this way. Follow me.”

He cast one last angry glare at Caleb before turning and marching them off the transport.

*Are you having fun yet? Because I am enjoying this so far.*

*Sure, Ish, Caleb replied. Oodles.*

*It’ll be fun when we kill Usef.*

*Who said anything about killing Usef?*

*No one, yet. But I guarantee, he will give you no choice in the end.*

Caleb looked at the back of the big man’s bald head and wrinkled neck. *You’re probably right.*

## CHAPTER 5

While Caleb expected that Substation Three would be small—it had to navigate through the asteroid belt—the cramped confines of the station still took him by surprise. The corridors leading away from the docking arm were narrower by half than those found on Gorgon, with barely enough room for two people to pass each other without touching shoulders. They also weren't as tall as he expected either, forcing him to duck his head down to keep it from scraping the overhead.

Usef guided them along the corridor at a quick pace, turning left at the first intersection and then taking a right after that. A blast door at the end of the corridor opened into the station's primary hub, where the Station Manager had apparently been waiting for them.

She didn't immediately give off the appearance of a manager. Lanky, with loose, wrinkled skin laden with faded tattoos, she had long, once blonde hair that had nearly gone white. Caleb would have thought she was a convict like him if she had been wearing a rocksuit instead of a disheveled uniform.

"Usef, good to have you back," she said, her voice dry and scratchy.

"Thank you, ma'am," he replied, his lack of the rejoinder *it's good to be back* a stark reminder that even he wasn't there by choice.

Her attention shifted to the newcomers, giving them the once-over before fixing on Caleb. "A pretty sorry lot, except

for this one.” Her eyes fell on his stamp and she smiled, making eye contact. “A lifer, eh? What did you do?”

“Spat on a recruiter’s boots,” Caleb replied.

The Station Manager laughed. “You’re going to be a pain in the ass, aren’t you?”

“He’s already a pain in the ass,” Usef said. “He doesn’t take well to authority.”

“We can’t afford to have dissension in our ranks. It’s life or death out here, and any deviation from standard operating procedure puts the lives of everyone on this station at risk. Do you understand that, Mister...?”

“Creb, ma’am.” Caleb answered. “I understand perfectly. Gang Lead Usef and I had a misunderstanding on the transport. That’s all.”

Usef huffed but didn’t counter his statement. The Station Manager broke eye contact to sweep her gaze across the others again. “My name is Station Manager Ezra. That’s a mouthful, so you can call me sir, ma’am, boss, chief, or anything else that establishes that I’m in charge of this part of the operation. I’ve been running the show on Substation Three for twenty-one years. In fact, I’m the longest tenured manager in the Combine. I’m not telling you that to impress you. I’m telling you that because it means I know my job, which means I know your jobs, and how to keep you safe and get you through your cycles alive. You might think I’m some hoity-toit bitch looking to drive you into the rock to meet quotas and get paid. That’s partially true. I have a family that needs to eat, too. While you’re here, I’m also your mother hen, looking out for you so you can go home to your families at the end of your incarceration. Some other managers might take pleasure in the pain of their gangs. That’s not me. The word in Sub Three is survival. You listen to me, you follow Usef, and you’ll survive. Any questions?”

No one spoke up.

“Good,” Ezra said. “Usef, give them the usual tour. They get fifteen minutes for chow and then I want them at their

racks. One hour to rest, and then everyone on the station goes through basic.”

Mathis put up his hand.

“What is it?”

“I’ve already done four cycles. I don’t need to run through basic again.”

“Have you done four cycles on Substation Three?” Ezra asked. “Nope, you haven’t, or I would recognize you. We’re a whole different animal out here, 742101.”

“My name is Mathis, Boss.”

“Noted. Usef, as you will.” She pointed at Caleb. “Except him. He comes with me.”

“Ma’am?” Usef questioned, obviously confused by her singling Caleb out.

“You have your orders. Get to it.”

“Yes, ma’am. You heard her, let’s go.”

Caleb looked over at Mathis and grinned. “See you later.”

Mathis nodded back while Maggie shrugged helplessly and shook her head. They and the other newcomers followed Usef out through the hatch on the other side of the room, leaving him alone with Ezra.

“Come with me,” she said, leading Caleb through another door on the left, down a short, dark corridor and into a small office space where she motioned him toward a chair facing her desk. A terminal rested on top of it, along with an empty glass and half-empty bottle of whiskey. There were only two chairs in the room; one behind the desk and one against the wall beside a cabinet containing more bottles of liquor. Hardly inviting. Ezra went to sit in her seat, grabbing up the glass and pouring herself two fingers of whiskey before looking across the desk at Caleb.

“You’re not going to offer me any?” he asked, remaining on his feet in front of her.

She laughed as if his question was hilarious. “You have a serious lack of fear in you, Mister Creb. To be honest, it makes me uncomfortable.”

“Sorry?” Caleb offered with a smile.

His answer drew an even louder laugh from her before her face turned stone serious, her eyes narrowing. “Fear keeps us alive out here. Without fear, you’re a liability. If you’re a liability, well then, you’re useless.”

“Not that I’m not afraid. I just know how to channel that fear constructively, rather than destructively, the way Usef does.”

“Maybe you can harness your fear, maybe you can’t.” Her expression turned speculative. “What happened between you two on the transport?”

Caleb didn’t answer right away, remembering what Mathis had said about management frowning on teamwork. “I didn’t like his attitude.”

She didn’t laugh this time, but he could see the hint of a grin at the corners of her mouth. “He’s a mean son of a bitch,” she admitted. “That’s what makes him a good gang lead. Out on the rocks, you need to look out for yourself foremost. You try to be a hero, you try to help others, you end up compounding the trouble. You know what I mean? If you want to be constructive, you’ll do as Usef says without complaint. He’s an asshole, but he’s cut fatality rates on the rocks by over sixty percent.”

“I’m not here to make trouble with him,” Caleb said. “I know how to follow orders.”

Now Ezra’s smile returned. “That’s good.” She downed the last of her glass and poured herself another. Caleb let his eyes drift from her to her terminal. How hard would it be for him to get access to the computer, if only for a few minutes?

*You could knock her out right now.*

*And if we don’t get what we came for, then what? They’ll execute us within the hour.*

“What are you still standing there for?” Ezra rasped. “You saw which way Usef went. Better go on and catch up to them if you want to eat.”

“Sure, Boss,” Caleb replied. He turned and slowly stepped out of the office, noting the strength of the door and its security mechanisms as he exited. Even after the door closed behind him, he remained in the dark hallway for nearly another minute, memorizing the look of the office so he could relay it back to Johan through Vraxis and Penn.

He hurried away when he heard Ezra’s chair squeak, returning to the hub and crossing to the door Usef had gone through. He nearly blew right past the group as he traveled down a long corridor, stopping past the door they had entered when he heard Usef’s rough voice.

“I’m surprised Ez didn’t toss you out of the airlock,” Usef said when he entered. “Damn shame.” He looked away from Caleb, motioning to rows of equipment along the bulkheads. “We’ll be back here later for training on how to use this gear. It’s simple enough, even Creb here...” He shot his thumb at Caleb. “...might figure it out. Follow me to the barracks, mess, and head.” He crossed to where Caleb stood, just inside the door, and stopped, facing him. “I’m gonna break you, Creb. And I can’t wait.”

Caleb grinned back. “We’ll see who breaks whom.”

## CHAPTER 6

It turned out that Substation Three was barely a station at all. Given it was composed of a single deck and had no means of propulsion beyond basic maneuvering thrusters, it couldn't really be called a spacecraft either. The limited size and flat shape made sense, considering it had to tuck into the asteroid field and reach places the other stations couldn't.

In the mess, a handful of miners were in the middle of quickly downing bowls of generic slop of various shades and sizes, each one perfectly measured to provide them exactly what they needed to stay strong on the rocks. And not a single calorie more. Usef guided them through a pair of blast doors that opened into another corridor leading past the showers. A few meters down, he stopped at a door on the right side of the passageway. It beeped softly before sliding open. He entered without speaking, leaving Caleb and the others with no other option but to follow him into the barracks.

By this time, Caleb had taken to defining Substation Three as a mining platform, rather than a mining station. Not that it mattered what he or anyone else called it. With Usef having finished the tour, the only thing on Caleb's mind was how he might sneak his way back to Ezra's office to use her terminal.

*You have the directions memorized, right?* He asked Ishek.

*Of course. It's my primary function as your built-in navigation system to make sure you don't get turned around and lost somewhere.*

Caleb did his best not to crack a smile. *Your snark gets better all the time.*

*I have been working on it.*

“This is barracks C-Three-Four,” Usef said.

Longer and narrower than any of the barracks rooms onboard Gorgon, there was just enough space here for a dozen bunk beds along a cramped center aisle. Space for twenty-four miners obviously, this was just one room of many comprising the barracks. Simple dark blankets hung from rods above each bunk, creating privacy curtains for the inmates assigned to them. Since they didn’t have any belongings, there was nowhere to store anything. The only reason Caleb knew some racks were already taken was because of the wrinkled sheets that looked like they hadn’t been changed in weeks.

“Since this is the end of the tour,” Usef went on, “I’m sure you’ve realized that we didn’t pass anything resembling a gym or rec room. Outside of working on the rocks, this is where you’ll spend almost all of your time. You’ll be too exhausted after a day in the belt to want to do anything more than eat and sleep. And before you think I’ve got it easy, think again. I’ll be out there with you.” His gaze swept across the assembled newcomers. “You can claim any rack that isn’t already in use. As long as you’re smarter than Creb, you can figure out which ones those are. You have thirty minutes, and then I expect you all back in the prep room for basic training. If you’re late, or didn’t bother to make a note of where it is in relation to where you are now, you can expect laundry detail, which means you’ll spend your first night here without sleeping.” With that, he turned around and left.

“What a prick,” Mathis said once Usef was out of hearing range. He looked over at Caleb. “He’s going to give you crap the entire time you’re here.”

Caleb nodded. “If mocking my intelligence is the best he can do, I’m not impressed.”

“I’m sure he can do a lot worse,” Maggie said. “Like have you thrown out of an airlock.”



“He won’t,” Mathis replied. “He might not like it, but Creb’s a lifer. That makes him more valuable than you and I, even if none of the managers would ever admit it.” He shifted his attention to Caleb. “I’m sure that’s why Ezra pulled you aside. What did she say to you?”

“That teamwork is a no-go out here, for one. She warned me to stay out of trouble and listen to Usef.”

“And?”

“And nothing. I’m not interested in feuding with Usef. I have a more important mission.”

“Castra?” Maggie asked. Caleb nodded. If he had been in the room alone with Mathis and Maggie, he would have considered telling them more of what he wanted to accomplish. But they weren’t alone. The other newcomers were already picking out their bunks, leaving the trio with the leftovers. Fortunately, the two racks at the front of the room were both empty. Caleb and Mathis took one, while Maggie claimed the other.

“I don’t know about you two,” Caleb said. “But I’m going to take advantage of the chance to rest. I have a feeling I won’t get another anytime soon.”

“Why not? We get six hours per night,” Mathis replied.

“And you think there’s any way Usef will let me have all six hours?” Caleb answered. “Any time there’s a shortage of anyone for anything, like laundry, he’ll send me to pick up the slack. I guarantee it.”

“What, were you in the service or something?” one of the other newcomers asked, overhearing him from the last rack on the other end of the room. Small and thin, from his physique he didn’t look like he would last more than a week or two, nevermind an entire cycle.

“Why do you say that?” Caleb replied.

“Because you know how all this garbage works.”

“I take it that means you were in the service.”

“Yup. Thirty-eighth Company, Royal Marines.”

“You were a Marine?” Mathis asked disbelievingly. “You’re scrawny.”

“And you’re a skeleton,” the man replied. “I’ve been out for over twenty years. I was ground recon back then. My size helped me infiltrate places the big guys couldn’t go. Not that size matters. I bet I could knock you on your ass with both my hands bound behind my back.”

“I bet you could,” Mathis agreed, defusing the challenge.

The man returned his attention to Caleb, putting out his hand. “Corporal Buck Lewis.”

“Cayheb Creb.” He shook firmly. “I’m not in the service. It just seems like the logical next step for a rivalry.”

“You must have done something special to piss Usef off that much. He’s an asshole, but he’s not usually one to take things too personally.”

“I knocked him on his ass on the transport, and then held onto him so he wouldn’t get splattered on the bulkhead during liftoff.”

The statement drew the attention of everyone else in the barracks.

“I bet he’s more pissed you helped him than he is that you knocked him down,” Buck said.

“You seem to know Usef pretty well.”

“He’s been gang lead here for five cycles, so I’ve got a read on him.”

“How much longer is he serving?”

“He’s not a lifer like you. I think he has four or five more turns. I’ll be out before that. I have two left.” He looked at Mathis again. “You?”

“This is my last.”

“No wonder they moved you to C3. You’ll get the most dangerous digs.”

“That’s not what I want to hear.”

“It’s the truth. But don’t worry, it sounds like Cayheb will be right there with you. Anyway, it was good to meet you three. Sorry, I didn’t get your names.”

“Mathis,” he said.

“Maggie,” she replied.

“I’m going to grab what little double-r I can. We don’t want to be late to basic.”

“Agreed,” Caleb said. “I’m going to rest a little, too.”

“That sounds like a brilliant plan,” Maggie agreed.

They all retired to their respective racks. Caleb pulled his curtain closed to get a little extra privacy.

*Ish, can you patch me through to Penn?*

*I’m also quite proud of my secondary functionality as a glorified comms device. You owe me for this.*

*I’ll make it up to you.*

*You’d better.*

Caleb closed his eyes, sending his consciousness into the Relyeh Collective with the symbiote. The sounds of the pocket universe were easier to discern with them so far from any other Relyeh operatives. There were no khoron on Substation Three or anywhere near the Kallio Combine save for Ishek and Vraxis. While there was always a chance one might be dormant, or that Ezra could be infected with one of Iagorth’s moieties, Caleb doubted it. It was clear the Combine nobility didn’t care who ruled the Spiral, only that they remained profitable, and Crux clearly didn’t have time or inclination to post any Legionnaires in the sector.

The relative quiet allowed Ishek to pick out Vraxis, reaching out to him with a thin tendril of darkness that the other Advocate allowed to reach his core without resistance. It wasn’t Caleb or Ishek’s aim to seize control. Only to use the link exactly as Ishek had stated it.

A glorified comms device.

*Caleb, what's your sitrep?* Penn asked, her voice loud and clear in his mind.

*I'm supposed to ask you that,* he replied. *They transferred me to the belt. Substation Three.*

*Work group C?*

*How did you know?*

*After what Damian told me happened at the hospital, it seemed like a logical assignment.*

*You could have warned me about that ahead of time.*

*You could have listened to Ishek when he told you this was a bad plan.*

*He tells me every plan of mine is a bad plan. We're going to begin basic training on the mining gear soon, but I wanted to check in. Is everything running smoothly?*

*We made it to the setup point. We're only ten minutes out, waiting on your order to pick you up.*

*No sign of Specters or other unexpected activity?*

*Not so far. Still, I recommend doing whatever you can to find Castra so we can get the hell out of here. When this place pops, it's going to go hard and fast.*

*Copy that. I've already located a terminal. I just need an opportunity to access it. How are Ettore and Vicki?*

*A little shaken up with everything that's happened. They weren't planning to become pirates when they got out of bed yesterday. But they're happier here than they would be with you.*

*I'm happier with them there, too. Hopefully, it'll be temporary.*

*How are you holding up, Cal?*

Her use of his name told him she was speaking to him as a friend, not a member of his crew. *This is going to be harder than I thought. I got on the gang lead's bad side during the*

*shuttle trip, and I'm trying to protect a nurse from the hospital who got mixed up in this. She's terrified.*

*You're a good, caring man, Caleb Card. And a terrible pirate.*

*Caleb laughed. We're great pirates. We looted enough booty to fill one and a half cargo haulers.*

*Maybe, but you're supposed to be a mean, bloodthirsty drunkard.*

*Like Graystone?*

*He wasn't bloodthirsty either, but otherwise, yes.*

*Caleb felt a tug on his leg. I think someone's trying to get my attention. I need to go.*

*Be careful, Cal. I'm glad you fell into my life. I would like you to stay there.*

*He did his best to keep his Marine composure. I don't plan on dying today. Tell Damian to keep the captain's seat warm for me.*

*Will do.*

Caleb signaled Ishek to break the connection. The dark tendril withdrew, and Caleb returned to his body, opening his eyes. Matthis looked up at him, shaking his leg. "What's wrong?"

"Do you always fall asleep so fast? Usef is messing with us. He just announced basic starts in five minutes."

Caleb swung his legs off the bunk and jumped down. "That doesn't leave us much time to get there." The other newcomers had already streamed out the door. Only Matthis, Maggie, and Buck stayed behind. Buck's presence surprised him. He had only just met the man.

"Lucky for you," the former Royal Marine said, "I know a shortcut."

## CHAPTER 7

“You okay, Mags?” Matthis asked from his seat next to Caleb on the rock-hopper. The small dropship jerked and shuddered, constant shifts in vector and velocity making the ride as bumpy as any Caleb had ever been on.

“N...not really,” Maggie answered, her face visibly pale beneath the clear faceplate of her helmet. “I can barely breathe.”

“Just remember your training, and stick close to me,” Caleb said.

“Creb! Clam it!” Usef growled, glaring at him from his position at the front of the rock-hopper. “Fifteen seconds to touchdown. Gear check.”

Caleb checked his gear for what felt like the hundredth time since they left Substation Three. His harnesses were secure, his plasma cutter locked to his belt, the fuel line from the end of the device to the tank on his back clear. His helmet was online and linked to the other miners’, power supply showing as full. A radiating blue circle showed him where he and his work group, which included Maggie and Mathis, where to go once the hopper landed. When they arrived, the display would change to show him exactly where to dig. A second display on the right side of his helmet would show the other asteroids moving in the belt nearby, and an alarm would sound if the hopper’s sensors picked up any risk of collisions. Usef had said the first mission was always the easiest, so this time, Caleb doubted they would be in too much danger.

“Here we go,” Usef announced.

The rock-hopper shuddered one last time before settling gently onto the surface of the target asteroid. Dubbed 3C-401, it was a relatively small but dense rock, loaded with veins of platinum. They would spend the shift pulling out as much of the metal as they could before permanently abandoning the rock. Its orbit around a larger asteroid would pull it into a third rock in less than twenty-four hours, where the impact would render the entire area too dangerous to work in.

The hatch at the back of the craft opened automatically as they touched down, revealing a dark gray landscape scattered with small boulders and pebbles. It was hard for Caleb to believe this place could be so dangerous.

“Go! Go! Go!” Usef shouted into the group channel, pushing them out through the door ahead of him. Caleb ran off the hopper ahead of Matthis and Maggie, activating the grips in his boots once his feet touched the rock rather than the ramp. He continued moving away from the spacecraft to clear space for Maggie and Mathis who had been right behind him. The other members of their workgroup spread out around the ship, quickly getting into position near where they were supposed to dig.

The hatch closed behind Usef, sealing with a soft hiss as he stepped off the hopper. “Move your asses, miners!” he bellowed through the comms. “We have a heavy quota today.”

Caleb and his group’s target was the furthest from the hopper, forcing him to spend the first thirty minutes on the asteroid crossing its surface. He glanced back over his shoulder every so often, checking on Maggie, Matthis, and the other two members of his work group—Bina, who was supposed to be his group lead, and Jonathan, who was beginning his second of three cycles in the belt.

“Nobody likes a show-off, Creb,” Bina said over their group comms. She and Jonathan carried a huge covered container between them to load the platinum into.

“I’m just getting us off to a good start,” Caleb replied, unhooking his plasma cutter from his harness. He flipped the

switch to activate it, and like Usef had shown them, he checked his map before putting the nozzle near the surface and pulling the trigger. Super-heated gas spewed out in a tight beam, shattering and then melting the asteroid crust.

At first, the work seemed almost too easy. The cutter burned through the rock with little resistance, hampered only by the velocity of the plasma that was trying to push him away from the asteroid. He had to rely on his magboots to hold him fast; the action putting a constant strain on his ankles and feet. While he might not feel anything from it yet, he knew he would, at least until Ish healed the inflammation.

“You’re the first miner I’ve ever met who seems happy to be here,” Bina replied, catching up to him. Jonathan arrived just after her, and they activated their cutters, helping him dig into the crust. “You two, hurry the hell up,” she shouted at Maggie and Mathis a few seconds later. “You leave us to cover your share of the quota, and I’ll find you in the barracks. Believe me when I say, it won’t be pretty.”

“I’ve never been off Callus before,” Maggie replied. “It’s beautiful out here.”

“Yeah, the way a golfoi is beautiful,” Jonathan said, drawing laughs from the miners who knew what a golfoi was.

“You can sight-see once we’ve reached our quota,” Bina growled. “Until then, you work hard and you don’t stop.”

“What happens if we miss quota?” Maggie asked.

“Do you like sleeping?” Jonathan asked.

“Yes.”

“If we miss quota, none of us will get any sleep.” He hammered a stake into the rock with the back of his cutter before tethering the cart to it.

“We have sixteen hours to cut down to the vein and extract the ore,” Bina said. “It sounds like a lot of time, but it isn’t, especially when considering we’ll need to refuel four, maybe five times. We’ll take turns humping back to the shuttle for top-up. That gives us a chance to rest our legs. Now, circle up and follow the markers.”



Bina fired up her cutter, as did Jonathan and Maggie. The moment she activated it, the thrust from the plasma pushed her back, sending the gas from the device in an arc that nearly sliced into Mathis.

“Help!” Maggie cried, shutting off the cutter as one of her boots lost its grip, a single leg keeping her planted on the rock.

“Damn it!” Bina shouted as Caleb hurried to her rescue, grabbing her arm and pulling her back down. “Didn’t Usef teach you anything in basic?”

“You were there,” Caleb said. “He didn’t show us how to recover from a detachment.”

“It’s so easy, even you can do it, Creb. The torch is your best friend. If the downward thrust costs you your grip, then obviously the opposite is true.” She held her cutter up and squeezed the trigger for a second, showing how it pushed her down to the surface. “Got it?”

“Got it,” Maggie replied, voice quivering. “Sorry.”

“Try not to waste fuel that way.”

“It’s her first time out here,” Caleb said. “You could show a little patience and understanding.”

Bina glared at him for a moment before softening and nodding. “Yeah, you’re right. They rarely send total newbs to C3. We mostly get the last cyclers and sometimes lifers. Creb, you keep an eye on your girlfriend. All of you need to focus from here on out.”

Caleb didn’t bother arguing that Maggie wasn’t his girlfriend. He stayed with her, directing her until she got the cutting action down before returning to his spot.

An hour of digging left a cloud of pulverized rock drifting around them, pelting their helmets and making it hard to see. The strain on his legs would have tired him already if not for Ishek, and he could see Maggie doing her best to keep going despite obvious discomfort. She held out for another hour, when their torches ran out of fuel all at the same time.

“Creb, you look like you’re still enjoying yourself too much, so you take the first refuel run.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied. He quickly circled the group, removing the fuel cells from their packs and hooking them to the harness of his rocksuit before moving across the asteroid using what the miners called a drag, whereby one foot propelled him forward while the other slid along the surface. His sliding boot kept him anchored until he planted his lead foot and repeated the motion with the opposite leg. Outside of incoming debris, this was the most dangerous task for a miner, as he had no plasma left to push back down if his boots lost their grip. His experience allowed him to cross the distance easily, though he took it slow to allow the others more time to rest their legs.

Reaching the shuttle, he tossed the used cells into a shaft for collection, replacing them with new ones. Spinning around, he found Usef blocking his path.

“Excuse me, Boss,” he said. “I have fresh cells for my team.”

“Your team is behind, Creb. The rest of the sites refilled ten minutes or more ago.”

“They’re closer to the shuttle, Boss.”

“That’s not an excuse. Pick up the pace, or you’ll be cleaning cutters all night.”

“Aye, Boss.” Caleb said, holding back his anger and urge to swing on the bastard, the desire for violence emanating mostly from Ishek. Acting on it wouldn’t lead anywhere good. At least, not out here.

Usef stepped aside, and Caleb hurried back to the group, replacing their cells so they could continue working. And hopefully, pick up the pace.

Eight hours in, they had finally reached the top of the vein and started cutting out ore when the fuel ran dry again.

“Maggie, it’s your turn,” Bina said.

“Okay,” she replied, the strain in her voice obvious.

“I’ve got it,” Caleb said.

Bina laughed but didn’t argue. “Why am I not surprised? Taking care of your girlfriend, huh?”

“I’m taking care of the entire group,” he replied. “I’m not tired, and I can get to the shuttle and back faster than any of them. I’ll take all the runs from here until the end of the shift.”

Bina’s brows raised at that. “You’re not tired?”

Caleb was already collecting the cells. “Not yet.”

He retrieved fresh cells three more times, and they filled their cart with an hour to spare.

“Damn, this is the best time I’ve ever made,” Bina said, squeezing the last bit of ore into the transport. “Are you tired yet, Creb?”

“A little,” he lied.

*I can’t keep you this strong forever without feeding again,* Ishek said.

*You had a literal buffet on the way here. You should be good for a week at least.*

*Yes, but not much longer than that. Once Maggie becomes accustomed to this job, I will no longer have her fear. We will need an additional source.*

*We won’t be here more than a week.*

“What are you doing here?” Usef grumbled when they returned to the shuttle. “You still have an hour.”

“We’re full,” Bina replied, opening the cart to show him.

He huffed and scowled at Caleb, his tight expression revealing the battle going on behind his faceplate. On one hand, they had met their quota with time to spare, thanks to Caleb, making him an asset on the rocks. On the other hand, Usef hated him and wanted him to fail.

The man’s hatred won out, his glare shifting to the cart. “That one’s the wrong size.”

“What do you mean?” Jonathan complained.

“I mean that’s the wrong size cart. You grabbed the wrong one by mistake.”

“There’s no mistake,” Bina said. “That’s the one you pointed out.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Yes, it is,” she insisted.

“Are you questioning me?” Usef growled. “I’m lead, I should know which cart is the right one, and that’s not it. You screwed up, Bina. You took the wrong one. You’re short.”

“This isn’t fair,” Maggie cried out.

“Give us the cart,” Caleb said. “We still have an hour.”

Usef shook his head. “There’s not enough time. Maybe if you were still out there.”

“You son of a bitch,” Mathis snapped. “That’s the right cart and you know it.”

“Watch your mouth, miner. I can recommend you for additional cycles for insubordination.”

Mathis’ face darkened, his fury obvious, but he held his tongue. It wasn’t worth spending another hundred days in the belt. Not for any of them. Caleb could argue. He had nothing to lose. But there was no point.

“Since you didn’t meet quota, you’ll be on cleaning duty when we get back to the station. That doesn’t get you out of your next shift.”

“I can’t even feel my feet,” Maggie said. “How am I supposed to do another shift like this with no rest?”

“Lucky for you, you can sit to clean,” Usef replied. “You just can’t sleep.” He thrust his thumb toward the shuttle. “Unload your haul and strap in for the run back to the station.”

“Yes, Boss,” Caleb said. The others followed his lead, dejection layering their voices. They unloaded the carts and took their seats on the shuttle.

“This is total garbage,” Maggie said, strapping in.

Caleb put his finger to the front of his faceplate, shaking his head. He knew Usef could jump to any of the group channels and could be listening. She nodded and clammed up. None of them spoke while they waited for the rest of the miners to return. Bina and Jonathan were smart and tried to recoup some of the sleep they would lose once they returned to the station. After a few minutes, Maggie got the hint and did the same. Only Caleb remained awake as everyone else slogged back onto the shuttle, all of them just as exhausted as Maggie, Mathis, Bina and Jonathan. He would be exhausted, too, if not for Ish. The belt truly was a living hell, and while he had felt some compassion for Usef because he was trapped in it too, the man's decision to punish them purely out of spite had put an end to that.

Caleb had decided, too. He had no intention of spending another day out on the rocks.

He didn't intend for anyone else to, either.

## CHAPTER 8

When the shuttle returned to Substation Three, the rest of the miners departed, leaving Caleb and his work group alone on the ship with Usef. He gave them a quick tutorial on the arduous process of properly cleaning and maintaining a plasma cutter. It included breaking down the stock and grip to get to the electronics inside. The chips needed to be checked and either cleaned or replaced, the same with the wires and tubes that provided the flow of gas from the cells.

And the job had to be done right. If a cutter failed, it could cost a miner their life. While the nobility probably didn't care about that, whoever had cleaned the failed tool would have five cycles added to their sentence by default for negligence.

For all the abilities Maggie lacked out on the rocks, she made up for them especially well with her efficient handling of the cutters. Her small hands allowed her to get into the tightest parts of the mechanics to pull out parts, and she had an ability to focus on the repetitive task that Caleb admired. She claimed it was because she was just so happy not to be digging anymore.

Two hours in, they had cleaned nearly half of the cutters, putting them far enough ahead of pace that they had a shot at getting a couple of hours of sleep. Caleb was just screwing the stock back on his freshly maintained tool when he drew in a deep breath when Ishek cut him off.

*This is a terrible idea.*

*It's the only way*, Caleb replied silently, giving Ish no more time to argue. "I need to tell you all something," he said out loud, none of the other miners initially paying him much attention. There had been very little back-and-forth banter while they cleaned to keep from distracting each other and making mistakes that would get them into trouble.

"You love us?" Bina guessed, glancing at him with a smirk. "The feeling isn't mutual. Except maybe for Magsy."

"What?" she said, blushing instantly as she looked at Bina, and then Caleb, reddening even more when their eyes met.

*Maggie clearly has a crush on you. We can take advantage of that.*

*Normally, I would refuse on those grounds alone*, Caleb replied to Ishek. *But these are desperate times.*

*It's for her benefit as well.*

"I do care about you," Caleb replied, turning his attention to Bina, who had already resumed cleaning a cutter. "I care about everyone here who's a prisoner."

"Even Usef?" Mathis asked.

"Him, a little less. But yeah," Caleb answered. "Even Usef."

"So what's the big announcement?" Jonathan asked.

*Ish, are we alone?* he asked, having tasked the symbiote to monitor for anyone approaching the ship, Usef or otherwise.

*Nobody's spying on us, but I still recommend keeping your voice low.*

"Can I have two minutes?" he asked, just above a whisper. "We need to huddle up."

"Oh, this is going to be good," Bina said, matching his volume. She put down her cutter and shifted forward. The others did the same.

He glanced at each of them, meeting their eyes with his as he spoke. "My real name isn't Cayheb Creb. It's—"

“Caleb Card,” Mathis said softly. “The pirate who’s been giving Lord Crux fits.”

Maggie gasped. Bina and Jonathan stared at him in shock.

“You knew?” Caleb said, surprised. “Since when?”

“Since I saw you walk into the holding area. Besides, Cayheb Creb is a ridiculous name.”

“Too ridiculous to be real,” Bina said. “At least, I thought so. What’s a pirate captain doing here anyway?”

“Just how did you know it was me?” Caleb questioned Mathis. “As far as I know, there aren’t any images or feeds of me on the hypernet.”

“My brother works in Orbital Control. Your face might be anonymous. Your ship isn’t. Of course, Control knew who you were, but they weren’t about to rat you out to Kagata or any of the other nobility. Bugger them.”

“Okay, but he only had two hours at most to pass the word, and you were in holding.”

“But on my rest cycle until we boarded the transport, so I still had comms access. He called me because he was excited to see your ship here. You’ve earned quite a reputation over the last few months.”

“I can’t believe you’re a pirate,” Maggie said. “You’ve been so kind to me.”

“I’m not really a pirate,” Caleb answered. “I’m part of the resistance. I got myself arrested because I’m looking for a girl named Castra.”

“Who is she? Somebody important, I take it,” Mathis said.

“Somebody very important. She’s Empress Lo’ane’s daughter.”

That reveal shocked all of them, including Mathis. “What in the stars is she doing in the belt?” he asked.

“Who cares,” Jonathan replied. “The Empress did nothing but turn her back on the people of the Combine.” He glared at



Caleb. “If you’re fighting for the hegemony, you won’t find an ally in me, Card.”

“You’d rat him out?” Bina hissed.

“I didn’t say that. I’m not a snitch. But whatever reason you told us the truth, I’m not interested.”

“You might be,” Caleb countered. “You’re aware the Legion isn’t fully human?”

“I’ve heard rumors,” Bina said. “Some alien race called the Relyeh.”

“They gave Crux the recipe for the alloy used to build the Specters. They provided the Legion.”

“And they’re the ones who are really in control,” Mathis added.

“So what?” Jonathan said. “Whether we serve one master or another, at the end of the day, most of the people of the Combine will still be slaves.”

“You don’t have to be,” Caleb answered. “That’s my point. I was out on the rock with you. I know what you’re going through. Even before that, I promised I would see this operation either shut down or shifted to something more fair to the people.” He met Jonathan’s gaze. “And I’m reiterating that promise to you, now. But I need your help.”

“What can we do?” Maggie asked.

“I need to get to Ezra’s terminal and use it to locate Castra. Then I need to get to wherever she is and pull her out of there.”

“How does that help us?” Bina said.

“Castra is the Spiral’s rightful heir. The leaders of the resistance believe the nobility still loyal to the family will rally around her. If we can build a big enough coalition, we can defeat Lord Crux.”

“You can’t defeat a Specter,” Jonathan said.

“We can and we have,” Caleb countered. “But we need more allies and more ships. If I help the resistance overthrow

Crux, they'll force the Combine nobility to either change their approach or lose their territory."

"Like Magsy asked," Mathis said. "What can we do?"

"For starters, pick up the slack cleaning the cutters while I try to get to Ezra's office."

"You'll be sentenced to..." Bina said, before smiling. "Well, damn. They already put you in the most dangerous gang for life. What the hell else can they do to you?"

"Which means they'll punish us if they catch you," Jonathan said. "I don't want my term extended."

"Even if it means a chance at freedom for you and everyone else in the Combine?" Caleb asked.

"Only if you succeed. It's a risk. A huge risk."

"I know. It's a lot to ask. But the reward is even bigger. And I have a reputation to uphold." His mouth hinted at a grin. "I can do this. I just need your help."

"I'm in," Mathis said.

"I haven't finished telling you what I need."

"I don't care. You promised me entertainment, and this will be so worth it. I'm in."

"If I'm able to recover Castra's location, I need to take this dropship and fly it to wherever she is," Caleb continued. "Then I'll need to grab her and get her out."

"Sub Three doesn't have any guards, but Primary does," Bina said. "They won't just let you smash your way in."

"I'll have Gorgon moving in at the same time," Caleb replied. "If you come with me, you'll be out, too. Part of my crew, for the time being."

"If we don't get killed," Jonathan said.

He tipped his head into a halfway shrug. "I can't logically promise that isn't a possibility, but I've been through a lot of shit and I'm still alive."

“I don’t understand how you’re going to call in your ship,” Bina said. “Through Ezra’s terminal?”

“No. I have a comms device hidden on me. I’ve been in contact with them this entire time.”

*I hate it when you call me that,* Ishek grumbled.

“If they could fly in and free us,” Bina said, “then why get yourself captured?”

“Because I’m not the only one looking for Castra. I need to have her pinpointed before I make a lot of noise and attract a lot of attention.”

“Makes sense,” Jonathan begrudgingly agreed.

“I’m in,” Maggie said.

“Are you sure?” Caleb asked.

“I’d rather die than do another day on the rocks. Escaping to your ship sounds a lot better than both options.”

“I’m in, too,” Bina said. “Magsy is right. Beats the hell out of staying here.” She looked to Jonathan. “You’re the hold out.”

“If you’re all in, I’ll be grouped with you anyway for punishment.” He hesitated, his resolve to finish his cycles slipping away in the strain suddenly lining his forehead. He nodded. “Let’s do this.”

“Thank you all for believing in me,” Caleb said. “I won’t let you down. You don’t need to do anything right now but pick up my slack on the cutter cleaning.”

“Magsy is so fast, she’ll handle your share easy,” Bina said.

“I’ve got it,” Maggie agreed.

The boots of his rocksuit were too loud on the metal decks to move anywhere stealthily, Caleb removed them before rising to his feet. Hopefully, he wouldn’t need their maglock. “I’ll be back soon.”

“Be careful,” Mathis said.

“Don’t get caught,” Jonathan warned.

Caleb nodded, making his way to the shuttle’s open rear hatch and cautiously descending to the deck. The hangar bay contained the six dropships used for landing on the asteroids and a few large racks of spare parts, plus the equipment to keep them running. The only light in the bay came from the other dropships, where unlucky work groups had also landed the cutter cleaning assignment.

The coast clear, Caleb sprinted across the bay to the exit. If Usef was on his way in, this mission would be over before it even started.

His luck as bad as it could get, the hatch slid open ahead of him.

## CHAPTER 9

Caleb froze when he reached Ezra's door. He hadn't expected to reach it so quickly or easily. It seemed that nobody cared about security here, probably because they didn't expect anyone to try anything stupid.

And yet he was doing exactly that.

*Penn, are you there?* Caleb asked, relaying the question through Ishek, who passed it along the Vraxis, who fed it to Penn before sending her reply along the same chain.

*Aye, Captain.*

*I'm in front of the Station Manager's locked door. I need instructions.*

*Do you have the piece of wire Johan recommended?*

*I have it.* Caleb picked it out from a pocket on his rocksuit. He had lifted it from his plasma cutter. A cutter that would fail the next time it was used, but only if he wound up out on an asteroid again.

*And a screwdriver.* He'd retrieved it from another pocket, having snatched it from the shuttle. Usef had unwittingly done him a favor by assigning them to cleaning duty. In fact, now that he was in front of Ezra's door, he had a sense this would have become his plan over time if it hadn't been directly presented to him. *Standby.*

He leaned in closer to the security panel beside the door. The nobility, being so cheap, had used the same tiny screws for the doors as they had for the cutters. It probably saved

them a few coin overall, a pittance even to a regular citizen. Penny wise, pound foolish. It would cost them now. He quickly removed the face of the panel, pausing every few seconds to listen. Anyone approaching in magboots would be audible before they reached the passageway.

*Okay, the cover is off,* he told Penn, followed by a delay while she gathered instructions from Johan and passed them on to Caleb.

*Assuming it's a rudimentary access control panel, you should see a circuit board with a small CPU, a memory module and a pair of wires leading to the biometric sensor. One black wire, one red wire.*

*Yes, that's pretty much exactly what it looks like.*

*You need to short it out by using your wire to connect the source of the red and black to one another, creating a feedback loop. You'll feel the shock, but you can handle it.*

*That's it?* Caleb asked.

*Johan says he told you it was rudimentary.*

*They probably bought the cheapest panel they could get. Standby.*

Caleb bent the wire so he could touch the two ends to the bit of bare wire at the soldered base of the board. The electricity made his fingers tingle, but the shock wasn't as bad as he'd expected. The worst part was the smell of burning plastic, the spark, and the smoke as the door slid open. He was past the point of no return now, with no way to hide the evidence of what he had done.

He didn't hesitate, rushing into the room gripping the screwdriver like a weapon, ready to do whatever he must if Ezra was inside. Fortunately for both of them, she wasn't. He circled the desk and sat, tapping the terminal's control board to activate it.

*I'm at the terminal,* he said, *looking down at the board.* It had a small device beside it to accept Ezra's fingerprint, apparently made by the same company that produced the door security. *Same process for the sensor here?* he asked.

*There's a biometric sensor for the terminal?* Penn asked, surprised.

Caleb was already unscrewing the cover. *Yeah, why?*

*It costs more coin than just using a password.*

*Maybe their managers aren't smart enough to remember their passwords. Or maybe they got them for free for buying the door controls.*

*I'd bet anything they bought the whole bit of gear on the black market. The entire lot for a fixed price.*

*You mean from pirates?*

Penn's amusement transferred through the Advocates back to him. *Seems ironic, doesn't it?*

They shared the mirth while Caleb removed the cover and exposed a board nearly identical to the first. He picked his wire out again, touching both ends to the red and black wires at the bottom of the board. He didn't let go until acrid smoke spewed from beneath his hand and the terminal activated.

*I'm in. Too easy.*

*You need to pull up a command line, Penn relayed. Shift command F-key will open the search bar. Once there, type "terminal."*

*Type "terminal" on a terminal? Okay. All this time, and I still can't talk to these things.*

*You've heard me talk to Mink. It's possible, but it costs more.*

*I'm on the terminal, he said, looking at the green screen with the flashing cursor.*

*Okay, you need to—*

*Hold up, Caleb interrupted, the sound of boots on the deck reaching his ears. I've got company. Ish, boost me.*

*We don't even know—*

*Do it. We can't take any chances.*

A cold flow of chemicals and adrenaline flooded through him, enhancing all of his senses. He padded across the small room to stand out of sight beside the ruined door. The boots paused a short distance away.

*You can't hide here, whoever it is will raise an alarm.*

Knowing Ishek was right, Caleb blasted out of the door, catching Ezra with her mouth open, ready to do just as Ish had warned. She had a blaster in hand, already pointed in his general direction. She didn't hesitate, sending a round at him that barely grazed his rocksuit. He lunged at her, grabbing her by the throat and swinging her into the bulkhead. He squeezed his other hand around her wrist until she dropped the weapon.

"You were right about me," he whispered near her ear. "I am trouble."

She looked him in the eye, smiling. "You're also too late. I know who you are, Card. The Legion is almost here."

Caleb's stomach clenched. Jerking her off the bulkhead, he bounced her head off it twice, knocking her unconscious. He let her go, her body sliding limply to the deck.

*Penn, it's getting hot in here. Tell Damian to get ready to move.*

*Aye, Captain.*

His gaze whipped to the end of the corridor as a unit of station guards poured around the corner, blasters aiming at him. He grabbed Ezra's weapon off the deck and dove into her office, energy blasts sizzling past him before slamming in a shower of sparks into the doorframe behind him. Scrambling back to his feet, he eyed the terminal. Thirty seconds. That's all he needed.

He leaned through the doorway, returning fire and hitting a guard kneeling in the front. He exchanged another volley with the guards, shooting blindly now. It was only a matter of time before reinforcements arrived and he was overwhelmed.

*Penn, I need the instructions for the terminal. Give them to me all at once. Ish, help me memorize them.*



*Do I have to do everything for you?* Ish replied.

*Right now, yes. Unless you'd rather die.*

Caleb fired back at the guards while Penn relayed Johan's instructions.

*I have them, Ishek said. Let me take over.*

Caleb didn't hesitate, retreating into his subconscious so Ishek could seize his body. He moved out a little too far into the passageway for Caleb's liking, taking out another guard before retreating to the terminal. They would have fifteen seconds, maybe less, before the guards regrouped enough to move in and take him out.

Ishek quickly entered each of the commands as he had memorized them. A list of names ran down the screen, along with locations and assignments, including their berthing spaces. It was more information than Caleb had expected, but it wouldn't mean anything if they didn't find *Castra* in time. They both hunted for the name, pausing as the first guard reached the doorway. Ishek sent a trio of blasts into his chest, sending him tumbling back from the door.

The calm before the storm.

A fresh barrage tore into the room as the guards stormed it, energy blasts ripping apart Ezra's chair and blasting holes in the bulkhead to the side of it as Ishek ducked under her desk. He returned fire from beneath it, cutting the legs out from under three of the guards. He scrambled forward, one turning his blaster toward him as they fell. Ishek shot him point-blank in the temple, the blast going through the guard's inferior helmet. Another guard rushed up to him, intending to slam his rifle butt into the side of Caleb's head. Ishek grabbed his head, quickly twisting and breaking his neck. The next one, clearly terrified, backed away as he threw up his hands.

*Leave him,* Caleb said.

*Not this time,* Ishek replied, shooting the scared man in the face.

*Damn it, Ish!*

*There is no place for pity right now, Cal. Unless you'd rather die.*

Momentarily clear of opposition, he cast aside his differences with Caleb and returned to the terminal. Already, he could hear more boots at the end of the corridor. Another guard reached the door, and he swung his blaster up to shoot.

*Wait!* Caleb shouted, stopping him just in time.

“Creb?” Buck said, eyeing the carnage. “What the hell is going on here?”

“Get in here and help me,” Ishek replied. “We’re going to burn this place to ash.”

Buck moved in, sweeping low to grab a blaster, his eyes darting to the downed guards. “How did you—”

“It doesn’t matter. Keep us covered.”

The former Royal Marine grabbed a second blaster and moved back to the door, unleashing a volley that sent the reinforcements scrambling. With Buck’s help, Ishek slowed the scan through the list of names enough for Caleb to spot Castra’s name.

*There. Primary, Collection Arm Four, Group G. Berth G8. Penn, we have the location. I’m heading for a shuttle now.*

*Copy, Cap. We’re fired up and ready for extraction.*

*Ish, my turn.*

He thought Ishek might resist, given the attitude he had already displayed, but the symbiote didn’t argue, returning control to him in a show of the growing strength of their bond.

“We need to get back to the hangar,” Caleb said.

Buck smiled. “I know a shortcut.”

“I figured you would.”

## CHAPTER 10

“What the hell is going on, Creb?” Buck asked for the second time.

He had led Caleb into a small service corridor that squeezed between two of the primary passageways. It was so tight they had to stand sideways and move laterally to fit into the crevice.

“My name isn’t Creb. It’s Card. Caleb Card.”

“The pirate?” Buck asked, stopping in the corridor to stare at him, his jaw dropping.

“Resistance fighter first, pirate second,” Caleb corrected. “I’m here for Lo’ane’s daughter. I know where she is; now I need to go get her.”

“You’re part of the resistance?”

“I’m in contact with General Haas and Duke Draco. We’re working together to strengthen the rebellion. The Legion will be here any minute. We need to move, not talk.”

Buck regained his motion, sliding along the thin aisle.

“How did you know about this passage?” Caleb asked.

“My ex was a station engineer. She told me about the hidden access grids and how to locate them. It was just talk at the time. I never thought the intel would come in handy until I ended up here. I regret ever coming to the Combine, but after we lost the war...” He quieted for a moment, some dark memory flashing through his head. “Maybe this is my chance for redemption.”

They needed nearly five minutes to cross the access grid, but when they emerged, they were already halfway back to the hangar, with no guards nearby. Buck guided Caleb to the next part of the grid, and when they came out a second time, he was surprised by where they were.

Not the hangar.

An armory.

“If you’re going to rescue the Empress’ daughter, you’re going to need guns,” Buck said. “Lots of guns.”

Caleb stared at the racks of rifles, pistols, combat armor, and helmets. Having already seen the armor in action, he avoided it completely, quickly grabbing weapons that carried stun rounds, which confused the other man. Buck had started collecting plasma rifles and blasters. Now he paused.

“What are you doing, Card?”

“Speaking from experience, it’s a lot easier to fight when you don’t have to worry about killing the wrong person,” he replied. “And I don’t need to kill the guards to free Castra. They’re victims of the nobility, just like you are.”

“I saw the guards back at Ezra’s office. You didn’t have any trouble killing them.”

“That was my symbiote, not me,” Caleb said.

“Huh?” Buck asked, confused.

“I’ll explain later,” he promised. “We need to get to the hangar before they can cut us off.”

“This way.”

Buck navigated back into an access space, switching to an adjacent passage before bringing Caleb out a few dozen meters from the hangar’s entrance, currently unguarded.

“Nice w—”

Caleb was cut off as a heavy fist slammed him in the kidneys, pushing him to the bulkhead and sending waves of pain through his body. His vision blurred, leaving him to identify Usef solely by his bulldog shape.

“Usef, wait!” Buck said, just before the strongman grabbed him and flung him into the bulkhead.

“Are you newbs trying to get me executed?” Usef roared, turning back on Caleb. “I’ll be airlocked for this dereliction, you bastards. Especially you, Creb,” he growled through clenched teeth, reaching for Caleb while he remained stunned. Dragging him to his feet, Usef reared back, ready to deliver a knockout blow.

A unit of guards came around the corner behind them. They didn’t wait to take in the scene, opening fire without regard for which prisoner was good or bad. Caleb took a round in the arm, the hit somewhat absorbed by the thick harness over his rocksuit.

Usef was hit in the hip, and he growled in pain as he threw himself to the floor, reaching for a discarded rifle. “I’m on your side, you sons of bitches!” he screamed.

Caleb brought his stun pistol around, wildly squeezing off rounds that caught two of the guards in the open. The shocks through their armor were enough to stop them from shooting, even if it would take multiple hits to knock them out. Usef struck two more, his aim surprisingly good. The last guard dove back around the corner, unwilling to face them alone.

“This is your fault, Creb,” Usef hissed, turning his weapon on Caleb, who did the same to Usef.

“It’s Card,” Buck wheezed, still fighting to regain his breath. “Caleb Card.”

Usef’s eyes widened. “What?” He lowered the rifle away from Caleb. “You...you’re Card?”

“Caleb Card,” he answered. “If you aren’t going to shoot me, we should run.”

Usef nodded, retreating backward, firing a few more rounds into the already stunned guards to keep them that way while Caleb helped Buck back to his feet. They made their way to the hangar, the blast doors closing behind them, giving them a few seconds of protection as they crossed to the dropship.

“Wait,” Usef said, pausing in the center of the hangar. “Listen up, miners!” he bellowed, no doubt drawing the instant attention of everyone still cleaning plasma cutters. “I want you out on the deck asap!” He lowered his voice, turning to Buck. “Cover the door.”

Buck nodded, leveling his rifle toward the closed hatch, ready to shoot whoever opened it. The inmates poured from the dropships, unaware of what was happening outside their ships. When Maggie emerged and saw Caleb with Usef, her face paled, and she fell against Mathis, who looked just as stricken, thinking Caleb had been caught.

Usef raised his voice again. “You have two choices! Stay here and let the bastards who run this place shoot you, or escape with me and Caleb Card.”

A collective murmur went up from the group, all eyes turning to Caleb.

“Everyone on that dropship,” Caleb ordered, pointing toward Maggie and the others. “Hurry!” They all took off for the dropship, Usef among them. Caleb turned around. “Buck, let’s go!”

Buck nodded, his eyes going to the doors as they slid aside, revealing two fresh units of guards on the other side. Caleb didn’t know where so many had come from. He hadn’t seen this many on the station before.

“Get out of here, Card!” Buck shouted, opening fire.

*Ezra knows who we are. She called for the Legion, and probably reinforcements to come after us in the meantime.*

Caleb didn’t answer. He watched Buck shudder, hit with several plasma bolts even as he knocked down his own target with his stunner. Momentarily tempted to stay, to not leave the former Royal Marine behind, he knew the man was as good as dead. Whirling around, he sprinted toward the dropship with Ishek-enhanced speed, taking glancing hits in the back and the thigh before reaching the open hatch. Jonathan hit the controls to close the hatch as Caleb pushed through everyone, headed for the flight deck.

Usef was already there, sitting in the only seat at the front of the dropship. There were no controls to be seen. Only a terminal and the control board he was already furiously typing on. He glanced back at Caleb's entry. "You don't pilot a rock hopper, Card," he said. "You program it. Where are we headed?"

"Primary," Caleb replied, one hand on the seatback, the other braced on the terminal as he leaned over Usef's shoulder.

Usef laughed. "We'll die if we go to Primary."

"Maybe, but it's where we need to go."

"I've heard about you, Card. I wouldn't have hated you so much if I knew it was you before now."

Caleb didn't pretend to understand what Usef meant. "Can you get us to Primary?"

"I can program the target. The computer—"

The ship shuddered suddenly, a loud bang reverberating through the station, shaking the dropship.

"What the hell was that?" Caleb asked as klaxons flashed and an alarm blared.

"Hull breach," Usef replied. "Something hit us hard."

"Asteroid?"

"Station's programmed to avoid anything big enough to do that."

Caleb braced himself as the station shuddered again, a second bang echoing from closer to the hangar.

*Not asteroids. The Legion is here.*

Ishek's observation sent a chill down Caleb's spine.

## CHAPTER 11

“The station’s under attack,” Caleb declared, wishing he had his magboots to lock himself to the dropship’s flight deck. The last thing he needed with his wounds still tender was to get tossed around like a rag doll once the ship started dodging asteroids. “Can you keep us on course inside the belt?”

“I need to set the target destination now and then deviate as we encounter asteroids and the attacking ships. The system can’t tell a starship from a rock, and it looks dense out there.”

“Do that, then. Just get us out of here.”

Usef opened the bay doors to space, just in time for Caleb to see a Nightmare streak past the station.

*Ish, can you do something about those starfighters?* He expected Ishek to respond, but the symbiote had faded from his consciousness, letting Caleb know he was in the Collective, fighting the khoron at the controls of the Nightmares.

When the dropship’s thrusters fired, it nearly knocked him off his feet. As Usef lifted off and turned toward their way out of the death trap the station had become, Caleb’s eyes locked on the sensor display and the dozens of asteroids it showed all around them. While the system couldn’t discern between asteroids and Nightmares, it knew how to identify the substation, which had been pushed off course by the Legion attack. It drifted toward one of the larger rocks, a collision imminent.



“That rock’ll breach Three in no time. Thank the stars we got out of there in time.”

While Usef thought about himself, Caleb’s mind turned to the prisoners who hadn’t escaped. His presence had brought the Legion down on the station, and he knew there would be a lot more victims of the Legion’s attack than survivors. He had known the risk of his actions and taken the opportunity to escape, anyway. It made him wonder if he was any less selfish than Usef. He knew they needed him in the fight, but how could he think his life was more important than any of those left behind on the station?

The dropship shot out of the hangar bay and shifted hard to port., throwing Caleb hard into the bulkhead. He grimaced, his wounds still tender. Ish hadn’t been able to finish healing him before having to enter the Collective to fight the enemy. Bracing himself against the deck and ceiling, Caleb was too engaged in his own survival to join Ishek in the fight.

“Caleb,” Mathis said. “You look like you could use these.”

Caleb looked over his shoulder, relief relaxing the taut look on his face as Mathis stuck a pair of magboots to the deck in front of him. “You’re a lifesaver,” he said as he stepped into them and Mathis helped tighten them to his feet.

And just in time. The dropship jerked hard, the boots’ magnetic grip the only thing that kept him from once again being flung into the bulkhead. “We’re taking fire,” Usef said, watching the screen.

“How long until we reach Primary?”

“We can cut the distance moving in a straight line through the belt instead of following the curve. Twenty minutes at the set speed.”

“You can’t control the speed?”

“To an extent. The ship’s velocity is preset. I can’t change it. We’re all pretty much passengers until we reach the first destination marker.”

“Not all of us,” Caleb replied. “Mathis, keep an eye on me. If you need me, punch me in the face.”

“What?”

“Just do it,” Caleb said, closing his eyes.

Sliding his consciousness into the Collective, he found Ishek on the defensive; the Advocate struggling to keep a mass of other Relyeh from overpowering him. So far, it had prevented him from attacking any of the Nightmares. Since the best defense was a good offense, the enemy had clearly determined that vastly superior numbers was the best way to keep him neutralized on this new battlefield.

Caleb added his energy to Ishek’s white core, immediately helping him push back his attackers, the two of them together handling the assault with much improved focus and efficiency. Their tutelage of Penn and Vraxis had proven significant benefit to him as it had to Penn, honing his skills while exponentially increasing their combined strength in the Collective. The time when Caleb had first confronted Gareshk while Jack was in the brig was long past. He had been a baby then, still crawling.

Now, he could run.

He pushed back against the massed Relyeh, drawing their attention from Ishek to keep them from attacking them both at once. It worked perfectly, leaving Ish free to attack the Nightmares. It didn’t take long for Ishek to overpower the khoron controlling it, and while Caleb couldn’t see the outcome, he could imagine what had happened. Considering the environment, Ish had no doubt guided the Nightmare off-target, sending it spiraling out of control toward an asteroid. Even Crux’s special alloy couldn’t survive a collision with an asteroid.

Caleb struggled hard against the onslaught, fighting in cerebral mud as the enemy tried to overwhelm him. He had never come this close to them before, or faced such an intense challenge. If he failed now, it wouldn’t just mean his and Ishek’s defeat. It meant Castra’s capture or death, which would no doubt crush rebel spirits.

As if expecting his newfound skill and confidence to be only temporary, the enemy doubled its focus on him.

Swarming around him like angry bees, they stung him with so many dark tendrils it threatened to break his concentration. He fought back against the assault, pushing hard enough to force some of them away. The rest continued to attack, trying to invade his mental armor.

This time, it was Ishek who ultimately saved him, joining him in the fight with a fury he had never sensed from the Advocate before. Together, they cast off the attacking Relyeh like a wet dog shaking off bathwater, clearing their minds. When they returned, they went after Ishek, seeing him now as the bigger threat.

*I'll hold them off, Ishek said. It's your turn.*

The last Relyeh that Caleb tried to overpower had turned out to be controlled by Iagorth, and without Ishek's help, the Ancient would have destroyed him, or rather, enslaved him. Iagorth had wanted something from him, though he still had no idea what. He wasn't sure he would ever know. Identifying a khoron close enough to be a Nightmare pilot, he hesitated before going on the attack, apprehensive about the same fate befalling him again. What were the odds that a khoron pilot would carry a moiety?

Decision made, he confronted the khoron, sending his consciousness against the enemy, his focus and concentration as good as it had ever been. The khoron pushed back his first few probing tendrils before its defenses shattered beneath his force, allowing Caleb in.

He sensed the khoron in the periphery as he wrested control of the creature's consciousness. Suddenly, he could see through the eyes of the khoron's human host. He had access to the Nightmare's flight controls, though the sensation of the ship differed from Spirit's neural interface. Requiring more of his mental energy, he sent the ship into a wobbling, unstable drift, nearly losing the Nightmare within seconds by slamming it into an asteroid. A quick recovery sent the Nightmare skirting around the obstacle, skipping off the small gravity well. It came in behind the Nightmare that was directly behind his fleeing mining dropship, trying to get a bead on it as it danced around the small chunks of rock in its path.

Unlike the first Nightmare he and Ish had flown, this one's fire control system was unlocked and ready for use. It complained when he marked the Nightmare ahead of him as a target but didn't disallow the action. He locked on and triggered the attack, the automated system spewing energy into the rear thrusters. They blew, sending the enemy ship into a large asteroid.

There was no time to celebrate. Caleb marked a second Nightmare, repeating the process while the enemy remained confused. His attack sent that ship off-course to suffer the same fate as the prior two ships.

Wising up to him, a pair of Nightmares swooped in from his flanks, opening fire. Rather than evade, Caleb dropped the Nightmare's shields just before fleeing the khoron's mind and returning to the Collective to help Ishek fight off their attackers. Only Ish already had help. Penn and Vraxis had located them and joined the fight, freeing Caleb up to continue his assault.

He went after another Nightmare pilot. This khoron put up more resistance than the others, making him work for control before finally breaking through its defenses. He marked another target, but the enemy had learned not to fly straight or trust any of their own ships, and it evaded him. Giving chase, Caleb took a moment to absorb the scene in the sensor projection. Three more Nightmares remained on the dropship's tail, while a Specter tried to keep pace from outside the belt. Their flight path left the warship behind, but Caleb was certain the craft's captain was under Iagorth's control. It would risk the Specter's survivability any other way.

Failing to get a target lock on the Nightmare he was chasing, he sent his ship into a wild spin toward an asteroid that would crush it like an eggshell on impact and abandoned the khoron to die.

*Three left, Caleb announced to Ishek.*

*Penelope has one.*

*She doesn't know how to fly a Nightmare.*

*She doesn't need to know how to fly it, only how to crash it.*

Caleb's amusement was tempered by the sudden pain that shot into his consciousness, undoubtedly from a hard blow to the jaw.

## CHAPTER 12

Caleb's eyes snapped open, jaw throbbing as Mathis shook the hand he'd hit him with.

"What the heck is your jaw made of, Card?" he asked. "Cement?"

"You're just a wimp," Usef answered for him. "Caleb, I reset the target to Primary, but we've taken some damage. One thruster is done for, and our shields are falling apart."

"I took care of the ships attacking us," Caleb answered.

"I'm not even going to try to figure out how," Mathis said.

"That's all well and good," Usef interjected, "but without full thrust, the chance of us getting through the rest of the belt alive is all on the whim of the stars."

As if to emphasize the statement, the dropship bounced violently off course as it took a glancing blow off an asteroid. The computer quickly cut the thrust and fired vectoring thrusters, slipping around another rock before accelerating again, more slowly than before.

"How far to Primary?" Caleb asked.

"Five more minutes on one thruster."

"We're close."

"It sounds close, but it's a long way in this mess."

"We don't have any other options."

“That’s why I said it’s all up to the stars. Ain’t much we can do to change the outcome.” Usef sighed. “And I thought maybe my personal luck had finally shifted. Getting shot notwithstanding.”

“You sure seemed to enjoy being gang lead well enough,” Mathis said. “You especially enjoyed lying about the quota and screwing us over.”

“Yeah, well, that’s how the game is played. Nobody else has been looking out for my ass the last eight years, and I been put through the ringer myself more than once. It’s every miner for themselves out here.” He turned his attention to Caleb, looking back at him over his shoulder. “What were you doing, anyway? You were grumbling like my stomach after a day on the rocks.”

“I don’t have time to—” Caleb’s breath caught, his gaze finding the sensor display. A pair of asteroids had moved into range ahead of them, angling toward one another and an imminent collision. The dropship’s computer didn’t seem to see the problem, racing toward the impact zone without raising an alert or changing course. “Usef!” he cried, as if the other man could do anything about it.

“So much for the damn stars,” Usef grumbled. “Ship’s computer still thinks it has two thrusters and can outrun it.” Even if they somehow avoided being pancaked between the two large asteroids, the resulting debris would pepper them with dozens of smaller strikes that were likely more than the drained shields could take.

“We need to stop it.”

“I told you, Card. We’re all passengers.”

They continued closing on the asteroids, the ship’s systems oblivious to the predicament. They needed to think of something fast, or they would be dead inside of a minute.

“Usef, can you cut the other thruster?” Caleb asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Power the dropship down.”

“We’ll be drifting. How long do you think we’ll survive out here like that?”

“Maybe a little longer than we’ll survive if we sit back and wait to die,” he snapped back.

Usef clamped his mouth shut and turned back to the control board, his fingers flying over it as if his life depended on speed, because it did. He slammed down hard on the board, casting a tense, frightened glance at Caleb. “Done.”

Killing the engines wouldn’t slow their velocity, but with two large asteroids approaching, they were bound to be caught in the gravity well of one or both. There was no telling right now how that would affect their heading. The possibility remained they would still be dragged into the meat grinder between the two rocks regardless of Usef’s effort.

Caleb’s eyes remained glued to the sensors, watching as they neared the two asteroids. The rocks had yet to collide, though they were close enough there was no question that they would. The dropship shuddered and bounced, pelted with small debris while being affected by the opposing gravity wells pulling the two huge bodies together. Their velocity increased as they curved around one asteroid, caught by the bigger rock and pulled along, driven ever faster toward the impact zone.

“It’s not working!” Usef cried. They had no view ports to see the two asteroids, but that was probably for the best. Whatever happened, it was going to be close.

“Restart the thrusters, top speed,” Caleb ordered, letting his instinct guide him.

“Gladly,” Usef replied, hitting the control board. The main thruster kicked in at full blast, the change in inertia noticeable. Like surfing the opposing force with a jetpack, the dropship skipped along between the rocks, squeezing out through the other side with seconds to spare.

Gravity kicked them forward a little harder, propelling them away from the impact and toward the edge of the belt.



“We’re going too fast!” Mathis cried, still standing beside Caleb. With one remaining thruster and too much velocity, the otherwise innocuous field of smaller asteroids ahead suddenly became a threat as great as the one they had just pulled through by the skin of their teeth.

“We’ll make it,” Usef growled. “We have to.”

Caleb didn’t speak. He watched the asteroids approach. This time the dropship’s computer identified them as the threat they were, warning tones ringing in the spacecraft as if there was something they could do about it. The shuttle dipped roughly before vectoring hard right, its calculation to avoid the first rock bringing it more in line with the second, the damaged thruster making another escape impossible.

“This is it,” Usef said, his voice a mix of resignation, anger, and a hint of relief.

A third asteroid appeared on the screen, much smaller than the one they were about to hit. It angled toward the larger rock ahead of it, quickly changing direction as it swung beneath the dropship. A spew of smaller debris scattered from it even though it hadn’t collided with anything, the smaller rocks spreading out and increasing velocity.

“What the—?” Mathis said.

“That’s not an asteroid,” Caleb replied, a smile forming and lengthening across his face as the smaller objects impacted the asteroid ahead of them. The entire thing broke apart bursting out in every direction, missiles having broken them to bits. They couldn’t avoid all of them, but the smaller sizes allowed the shields to compensate. The secondary asteroids banged off the dropship, the shields knocking the rocks harmlessly around like fishing boats in rough seas.

“Yessss!” Mathis cried, pounding a fist on the bulkhead. “We made it!”

Caleb could imagine their confusion in response to Mathis’ reaction. Even as they cleared the last of the asteroids at the outer edge of the belt, the others onboard the dropship didn’t know how close they had come to dying.

*Orin says you're welcome,* Ishek said, finally returning from the Collective.

“Primary is dead ahead,” Usef said. He tapped the screen. “But this flashing light tells me the hangar bay doors are still closed.”

*Ish, I need one more favor from Orin,* Caleb said. *And thank him for me.*

## CHAPTER 13

A fresh round of missiles blew open the hangar bay doors ahead of the dropship's arrival at Primary Station, the mining facility all but defenseless from external attacks. The Combine barely drew attention in the best of times, leaving little reason for the coin-pinching nobility to invest in gun batteries or starfighters.

Not that they would remain defenseless for long. The Specter that Crux had dispatched to deal with Caleb was on its way, its longer path around the belt offering ten minutes for him to get onto the station, find the princess, and get the hell out. He also had to get everyone from the dropship to a ship that had more than a snowball's chance in hell of making it to the safety of Gorgon's hangar bay.

It was a tall order, but he wasn't dead yet. "How do we land this thing?" Caleb asked, the dropship having already flipped itself over, its single thruster pushing hard to slow their approach to Primary.

"It'll land itself, but in this case," Usef answered, "the computer still thinks we have two thrusters. I'll be thankful if we can walk away from a crash landing."

They had sped up too much passing through the belt, and now there was no way the single rocket engine could slow enough to bring them in smoothly. Not that they had time for that, anyway.

"Mathis, tell the others to brace for impact," Caleb said.

“On it,” Mathis replied, retreating to the rear of the dropship. “Strap in tight, miners. We’re coming in hard!” He dropped into his own seat and buckled his straps.

“You need to strap in too, Card,” Usef said. “You might be strong, you aren’t that strong.”

“Stronger than you think,” Caleb answered, still competitive with his former gang lead.

*Not that strong*, Ishek confirmed.

“You’ve got thirty seconds,” Usef growled.

Caleb glanced around the rear compartment. They had packed so many people onto the ship there were no empty seats, with most of those left standing having no way to do little more than brace themselves. Like the transport during liftoff, he feared some of them wouldn’t escape unscathed.

“Maglock in!” he shouted back at them. “Hands and feet if you can! If you’re seated and have gloves, pass them on to a fellow miner who needs them. Four anchors on the deck, stay low!”

A flurry of activity erupted in the rear as gloves changed hands. Packed in like cattle, the miners dropped to their hands and knees. The electromagnets in the gloves weren’t as strong as those in the boots, but it might prevent some broken ankles. Caleb didn’t have gloves, so he pushed hard against the overhead, muscles flexing to hold himself in place with pure pressure.

The dropship approached Primary, closing fast. They reached the edge of the large marker on the display in no time, passing through a rendered barrier as they screamed into the hangar bay. Caleb tensed, teeth clenched, waiting for them to hit the deck.

The dropship’s magnetic locking landers tried in vain to grab hold on impact, momentarily slowing the ship before snapping and sending them skidding across the deck. They collided with something in its path, the sudden blow turning the ship over in a tumbling roll. Caleb’s biceps burned with the effort to keep firm pressure on the overhead, while the outcries

he heard coming from the back told him some miners were hurt. But alive.

The dropship slammed into what Caleb assumed was the rear bulkhead and came to rest on its side; the fuselage partially collapsed. Caleb released the lock from his boots and dropped to his feet.

“Usef, are you okay?” he asked.

The big man dangled from his restraints, clearly stunned. He offered an anemic thumbs-up.

“I need you to find the nearest transport and lead the others there. Don’t leave anyone behind.”

Usef undid his restraints, falling to the overhead, now the new floor and looking up at Caleb standing over him. “How am I supposed to do that?”

“You have guns, plasma cutters, and a loud mouth,” Caleb answered. “If anyone tries to stop you, make them move out of your way. You’re good at that.”

Usef grinned. “I can’t believe we’re still alive.”

“We won’t be if we don’t move fast.”

“Card, I don’t know how to fly a transport. Only dropships.”

Caleb froze, having already turned away from Usef. *Ish, is Orin still out there?*

It took a few seconds for Ishek to relay the question to Penn, and Penn to contact the Jiba-ki.

*He is.*

*I need him in here.*

*He’s on his way.*

“I have a pilot incoming,” he told Usef before making his way to the back. A few dozen miners still hung from their seats, while dozens more were in the stages of dropping out of their seats or picking themselves up off the deck. A few

remained down, and from the looks of most of them, probably wouldn't get up again.

"Usef and my friend Orin will lead you to another transport," Caleb said. "Grab your plasma cutters and be ready to use them if needed. Pair up and help the injured." He turned his attention to Mathis. "They stationed you on Primary before, right?"

"Yeah."

"I need your help."

"I never thought you'd ask. I'm right behind you."

He and Caleb maneuvered through the miners to get to the rear hatch, hoping it would open despite the buckled fuselage.

"Caleb?" Maggie said, her hand touching his shoulder giving him pause.

He looked up to where she hung from her seat. She had apparently hit her head on the bulkhead, blood running from a gash above her ear and dripping off her chin. She smiled warmly at him. "Good luck."

"Thank you," he replied, reaching up to help her down.

"Get going, Card. I've got her." The man next to her stepped up to unclasp her harness. Caleb acknowledged him with a nod before continuing forward.

"Captain Card, you'll need this," Bina said, holding out one of the stunner pistols she had taken earlier.

He accepted the weapon with a nod. "Free anyone else you can."

*Caleb*, Penn said through Ishek as he hit the door control. Thankfully, the back ramp had the power to combat the friction and opened enough to allow him to exit. *The Specter is launching transports. You have incoming.*

*So Crux decided he wants to capture me?*

*I imagine he wants to capture Castra. Do the words unwilling bride mean anything to you?*

*How close are you to the station?*

*We'll be there in eight minutes. The jump dropped us further out than we would have liked. Those transports will be there in two.*

*Keep me posted.*

*Aye, Captain.*

Caleb and Mathis dropped to the hangar deck. Immediately, plasma bolts sizzled past the dropship. He rushed toward the dropship sitting between him and the hangar's entrance hatch, Mathis close on his heels. They dropped the guards at the open hatch with a trio of rounds to their chests and then charged toward the hatch.

*Vraxis thinks we should go after the Specters, Penn said.*

*Negative. It's too dangerous. It took them three extra days to get out here. They were probably hardening the bridge crew against our attacks.*

*They're attacking me even now, Ishek confirmed, in great enough numbers that I cannot hold out forever, even with this feast of fear.*

*Because this isn't already complicated enough,* Caleb replied. He paused when he heard thrusters approaching, turning his head in time to watch Katana shoot into the hangar, make a hard one-eighty, and somehow slow enough to land smoothly. Orin was a hell of a pilot. The side hatch was already opening, and Orin emerged from the ship within a few seconds.

“Captain Cayheb!” he shouted, waving at Caleb with one hand, while his other drew his blaster and swung it toward Caleb. He ducked as the energy blasts shot over his head and into another guard who had come out from behind the cover of the parked dropship, nearly sneaking up on Caleb. “You’re welcome again. It is true!”

“Get the miners to safety!” Caleb said. “I’ll pick up Katana on my way out.”

“You had better, or you will owe me again.” Orin crossed to the crashed dropship. “Let us hurry, humans. We do not want to die today.”



## CHAPTER 14

“Mathis, Castra’s assigned to Collection Arm Four. Group G8. Will we find her there?”

Mathis nodded. “You hear those alarms? The entire station’s going into lockdown. All workers will be sent to their barracks to wait it out. If that’s where she’s assigned, then that’s where we’ll find her. But we’ve got a way to go. We’re above the arms right now.”

“You know how to get us there, right?”

“Sure do. I spent my first three cycles on Primary.”

Caleb and Mathis left the hangar, moving out into the passageways of Primary station. Larger and more open than the crowded corridors of Substation Three, dull gray metal bulkheads and grated decking still surrounded them. Just as boring, only less claustrophobic.

“This passageway leads to a lift we can ride down to Sorting,” Mathis explained as they jogged along the corridor. “We’ll have to pass through Processing to reach Collection. All the arms are accessible through there.”

“Lead the way, as fast as you can. The Legion will be here any minute. We need to beat them to Castra.”

“I guess you aren’t Crazy Creb anymore. You’re Crazy Card now.” He paused momentarily to chuckle. “Wild Card.”

“Not original.”

“I’m going with it.”

They hurried through the passageways, quickly reaching the banks of elevators that traversed the center of the station. A group of two dozen miners waited there, a unit of guards with them to ensure they returned to their barracks. The guards looked at Caleb and Mathis when they entered the area, their eyes revealing they saw them, dressed as they were, in their rocksuits as just another pair of inmates. By the time they noticed both carried weapons, it was too late. Mathis and Caleb stunned the entire group, leaving them shuddering on the floor.

“Grab their batons and head for the nearest docking arm with a transport,” Mathis barked at them. “The Legion is about to board the station.”

“They told us there was a decompression accident in the hangar,” a miner replied.

“And you believe that?” Mathis replied. “Forget the elevator, get to the docking arm.”

“Why aren’t you going to the docking arm?”

“I’m here for Castra,” Caleb said. “Do you know her?”

The miner spat at Caleb’s feet. “Don’t waste your time on the likes of her. You’d be better off saving the Station Manager than that troublemaker.”

The cab going down arrived before Caleb could ask what the miner meant. As he boarded the elevator, he suddenly wondered if the entire trip to the Combine had been a huge mistake.

“Just because she got under the skin of one random miner, that doesn’t mean she’s no good,” Mathis said as if reading his mind. “She’s Lo’ane’s daughter. She can’t be all bad.”

“I don’t know about that. Lo’ane let the nobility here treat you the way they do. She used this place while abandoning the people. And the first time I saw the Empress, she was there to enjoy watching two people hallucinate while they tried to kill one another. If she’s anything like her mother, she may not be what we need.”

Mathis frowned at Caleb. “You didn’t get yourself arrested to give up on her so soon.”

“No, I didn’t.” Caleb agreed. “Let’s go.”

They descended quickly; the cab dropping them off at Sorting, where they immediately encountered a group of workers waiting for an elevator that was going up. The miners appeared to be unguarded, though the gang lead at their head looked meaner and uglier than Usef. He scowled at Caleb and Mathis when the cab doors opened.

“All miners are ordered back to their barracks,” he growled.

“That’s where we’re headed, Boss,” Mathis answered.

*Captain, the Legion transports have reached the station, Penn reported. They’re docking now.*

*Which arms?*

*One, three, and five.*

“What are you doing so far from your work area?” the gang lead demanded, finally noticing both men were armed.

“We don’t have time for this,” Caleb said, sticking the stunner against the man’s chest. “You need to get out of here.”

“Deck fifty,” Mathis said, giving directions. “Docking arm four.”

“What are you talking about?” The gang lead looked at Caleb and then Mathis.

“We need to move,” Caleb said, trying to push past the lead. When the big man reached for the stunner, Caleb pulled the trigger, knocking him to the deck. “If the rest of you are smarter than him, get to Arm Four.”

They hurried away from the elevator, into Sorting, where robot arms lined conveyor belts, picking different bits of metal off the belt and placing them in different bins. There were no workers left in the area, the rest of the operation automated. Caleb and Mathis ran alongside one of the belts, making it halfway down it when Caleb noticed a dark chunk of ore.

Pausing, he picked it up, the action immediately setting off an alarm and stopping the entire system. He ignored both.

The ore had a strong resemblance to the metal used for the outer hulls of the Nightmares and Specters. Damian had told him the material came from Crux's territories. Was he wrong? Was the metal actually coming from the Combine's asteroid belt?

"Wild Card, we need to keep moving," Mathis reminded him. Caleb tucked the ore into a pocket and followed Mathis at a run, into Processing, where enormous machines broke apart the collected chunks of asteroid, pulverizing the stone around the metals and separating the two. He noticed some chunks of rock held the dark metal, further suggesting it had come from here in the belt.

"I have a feeling the Combine is more involved in producing the metal for the hulls of their ships than anyone knew," he said as they crossed the area.

"It wouldn't surprise me," Mathis replied. "The nobility will do anything for coin."

"What if Crux promised them more than that?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know."

"I don't think they care about anything more than coin. If they were working for Crux, it seems to me there would have been Specters around before now. The Legion would have shown themselves."

"Why would they need to? Seeing Crux's ships around would only make people more nervous."

"True. Why didn't they warn the nobility about you?"

"Maybe they did. But Kagata and the others have been so busy patting each other on the back and counting their coin they didn't know I was here. Not until Ezra told them, anyway."

They exited Processing, entering Collection. This was the first area of the station Caleb had been in with view ports

outside. From them, he could see two of the large rings that held the asteroids while the miners cut into them. He assumed one arm was Collection Arm Four. The other one, Three or Five.

The collection area itself was composed of carts similar to the one he had used out in the belt. Here, they were emptied into bins that carried the minerals directly to Processing. Some carts still had ore in them, the operation ceasing when the station went into lockdown. Caleb didn't immediately see any of the darker metal ore in any of the carts, but he didn't spend any time searching for it.

"Barracks are this way," Mathis said, directing him to a door on the right side of the room.

*Caleb, Orin and the miners have commandeered a transport, Penn reported. They'll be departing soon.*

*Have them wait another minute if they can, I sent more miners up to them.*

*Aye, Captain. I'm sure Orin will try, but the station is crawling with Legion.*

*Ish, can you sense them?*

*The khoron on the Specter are doing their best to interfere. It is all I can do to hold them back from overpowering us. You're on your own this time.*

*Penn, can Vraxis get any positioning on the Legion who entered the station?*

*We're focused on the Specter right now, Captain. We can redeploy our resources if you want.*

*No, do whatever you can to slow the Specter down. I'll handle it.*

*Aye, Captain.*

"Barracks are this way," Mathis said, hurrying through the hatch. "Which one are we looking for, again?"

"G8," Caleb answered, following Mathis down a long, narrow corridor that doubled-back toward the interior of the

station.

“All the work group sections are the same. I was in B group on Collection Arm One my first cycle, but if we make a right here, and head this way, we should—”

They turned the corner, suddenly coming face-to-face with a pair of armed station guards, both startled by their sudden appearance. Caleb wasn't surprised to see them. He stunned them both before they could react. “Grab their guns,” he said, running down the corridor ahead of him, passing the pocket door to G1, heading for G8.

Mathis grabbed the guns at a dead run, keeping up with Caleb. When they reached G8, the door failed to slide open on its own or when Caleb tapped on the controls.

He didn't have time to pull the panel apart and mess with the wiring. For as distracted as Ishek was, he still had enough awareness to fill Caleb with adrenaline, keeping him boosted and strong. He tucked his stunner beneath one of his rocksuit harnesses and pressed his shoulder against the door.

“What are you doing?” Mathis asked.

“Unless you have clearance, there's only one way to open this door quickly,” Caleb replied, straining against it.

“Nobody in the galaxy is strong enough to...” Mathis voice faded as the door parted just enough for Caleb to slip his fingers into the crack. Once he had leverage, he was able to overcome the resistance of the motors and push the door panels open. “I stand corrected,” Mathis said as they stepped through. The miners' eyes shifted to Caleb as he wedged his stunner into the opening so the door wouldn't close behind them.

Caleb's gaze swept across the room. “Castra? I'm looking for Castra. Are you here? “

A woman stepped into the open at the back of the room. “I'm Castra,” she said, studying him acutely.

She looked nothing like the girl the orphans had described. Caleb expected lean muscle and a sunken face typical of a miner. He didn't expect half her face to be horribly disfigured

from what looked to have been third-degree burns. Her left ear was gone, along with that eye. Her skin on that side of her head was tight and mottled, her hair growing only in uneven patches. She glared at him with her remaining eye, as if challenging him to retreat at the sight of her.

“Who are you?” she snarled, giving him a long appraising look. “And what do you want with me?”

## CHAPTER 15

Caleb stared at Castra for only a moment before recovering his composure. He didn't want to think the woman's appearance was the reason Lo'ane hadn't wanted her anywhere near the throne, but he could definitely believe the Empress had factored it in.

"My name is Caleb Card." He bowed his head and kept it bowed as he spoke. "The resistance needs your help, Your Highness." When she said nothing, he looked up.

The other miners had gasped with surprise at his news, but not Castra. She stood there, still as stone, glaring at him. "What did you just call me?"

"You're Empress Lo'ane's daughter. The heir to the Empire. And your subjects need you on the throne. It's vital you come with me."

"Vital?" She laughed bitterly. "I can't help anyone. Just leave me here. This is where I belong."

"Why? Because you're scarred?" Caleb asked. "I've seen worse."

"I just told you, I can't help anyone. I don't want to help anyone. Leave me alone."

"Castra, millions of people are counting on you."

"Then they're going to be disappointed. I tried to help someone once. This..." She swiped her hand past her scarred face. "...is what it got me. Along with a month in a hospital, followed by life in the belt." She tapped the badge on her



rocksuit; it matched his. “I had the audacity to try to save a fellow miner. She died, and I should have too. It would have been better for everyone if I had.”

“That isn’t true.”

“What do you know? You say I’m the Empress’ daughter? If that’s so, why would she abandon me on Callus? I was left there to rot. No one ever came for me. When I wasn’t adopted, they sent here me to earn my way to so-called freedom with the general population. This place is Hell itself.” Her eyes narrowed, her lower jaw quivering. Tears of anger and sadness formed in her good eye. “Just leave me here to die.” She turned and threw herself back on her bunk, facing away from him.

Caleb stared at her. As angry and sad as Castra had shown herself to be, she wasn’t wrong. Ashamed of having a child outside the norms of the ruling class, desperate to forget the girl had ever happened at all, Lo’ane had abandoned her here. He wondered why she had carried Castra to term at all, but right now, he was glad she had. He needed her, and he knew with uncanny certainty that she needed him.

“Castra, let’s go,” he said.

“Are you stupid?” she replied, rolling back over to look at him. “I told you to leave me alone.”

“I’m not leaving without you. And you don’t really want me to.”

She hissed out a sudden gasp of breath. “Yes, I do.”

”Look, you risked your life to save a fellow miner. That didn’t work out, but you proved your worth in that one courageous act. I know a kindred spirit when I see one. You don’t know me, but one thing I can tell you is that I’m here because I want to free and protect innocent people, and that means everyone in this room, including you.”

“So take them with you,” Castra snapped, turning away.

*This isn’t working, and we’re running out of time.*

“Wild Card,” Mathis said, echoing Ishek. “We need to go.”

“Castra, I have one more thing I need to tell you,” Caleb said.

“What?” she exhaled angrily, not even bothering this time to roll over and face him.

“Your mother is dead,” he said, again drawing murmurs and more gasps of surprise from the other miners.

“And I care because...?”

“Because she didn’t want you to be the next Empress. She didn’t want you to inherit the crown. She chose someone else to rule the Empire after she was gone. I came for you, anyway, because that throne is your birthright, no matter what. And now that I’ve met you, I’m even more convinced you’re exactly what the Empire needs.”

Castra sat up, staring at him. “Why didn’t she want me to be Empress?” she asked.

“She did her best to hide you from everyone, because she was ashamed of her affair with a common soldier. Your father. She quit on you, but I’m not a quitter, and I don’t think you are, either. Come with me and prove her wrong.”

She bit her lower lip and gave him a mischievous smile, though only the undamaged half her face moved. She slid off the bed and stood, her chin lifted in defiance. “If she didn’t want me to be Empress, then maybe I have a sudden, burning desire to be a better Empress than she ever was.”

Caleb grinned back at her. “I had a feeling you might say that.”

“All right.” She nodded, crossing the room and stopping just in front of him. “I’ll go with you, Caleb Card, but I’m a monstrous thing. What if people won’t accept me?”

Caleb shook his head, reaching out and gently caressing the burned side of her face. “I’m almost three hundred years old. I’ve seen a lot of monsters in my life. I’m confident you aren’t one of them.”

Her eyes widened, but she didn’t ask how he could be that old. “Thank you for coming for me,” she said instead.

“Don’t thank me yet. We have a lot more monsters to slay before we get out of here, and a lot more to deal with before the Spiral is safe.”

“Then why are we still standing here?” she shouted, her entire demeanor shifting as she looked back at the other miners. “Why are you all just standing there? We need to go. Now!”

The others rose from their bunks without hesitation, rushing for the door behind Castra, Caleb and Mathis already out the door ahead of her. They had all just cleared the compartment into the passageway when the station rocked, knocking everyone but Caleb off their feet. He grabbed Castra’s arm before she hit the deck and helped her regain her balance. She smiled again, nodding her appreciation.

“Are they attacking the station?” Mathis asked.

“I don’t know,” Caleb replied. *Ish, are you there? I need to know what’s happening.* Still dealing with the khoron pilots through the Collective, the Advocate didn’t acknowledge him, and Caleb knew better than to push him right now.

A pair of guards entered the passageway from the adjoining corridor, weapons already leveled and ready to fire. Mathis shot one of them before either could react, the second taking aim before Caleb fired three rounds into his chest, dropping him. A third guard entered right behind the other two. He dispatched that one, too, thankful they weren’t Legionnaires. Not yet, anyway.

“Grab their weapons,” Caleb barked to the miners. “Open the other barracks doors if you can, get the people out of here.”

The other miners sprang into action, responding to his orders as though he was gang lead.

*The Specter fired on Orin’s transport, Ishek informed him. It missed, and hit the station. The upper docking arm is destroyed, as is the hangar bay, Kitana with it. You need to find another way out. Fighting to keep them both safe from the*

kharon on the Collective, it was all the symbiote said before vanishing from Caleb's consciousness.

"Which way?" Castra asked, seemingly unphased by the quick burst of violence.

"The Legion will arrive from the lifts in the center of the station," Mathis said. "We need to clear Collection and get back to Processing. We can circle to Docking Arm Seven from there."

"Is there a transport on Seven?" Caleb asked.

"I don't know, man. We came together, remember?"

"There's a transport on Nine," a miner said. "I was helping unload it just before they pulled us off duty for lockdown."

"Are you sure it hasn't launched?" Castra asked.

"I didn't see the pilot anywhere. I think he went up top for some Reserve attention."

The comment reminded Caleb of Reesa. There was no way he could locate or reach her in time. "Mathis, which way to—"

"This way," Castra said. "Through Processing and out the starboard hatch. It's sealed off, but I assume you can open it?"

Caleb nodded. "Follow me."

He took point, Castra and Mathis flanking him, the other freshly armed miners with them while the rest trailed behind, their numbers swelling as they released more inmates. They reached Collection encountering no opposition, although Caleb knew that wouldn't last.

Moving from Collection toward Processing, they found the Legionnaires closing in. A group of them advanced among the machinery, wearing full battle armor and armed with plasma rifles. They fired on Caleb's group as soon as they turned the corner into the room. An eruption of plasma bolts slammed into the bulkhead and deck plates around him, one of the armed miners felled by a blast.

"Retreat!" the other miner screamed, turning away in the face of danger.

“No!” Caleb screamed, the retreating miner taking a plasma blast to the back for his cowardice. “Charge!”.

He rushed forward, firing his stunner more for show than because it would do any damage to the armored fighters. He knew the Legion would kill or enslave anyone who ran, and while there were nearly two units of Legionnaires in Processing, there were at least ten times that number of miners behind him. If they all fought, they would lose some. But they could win by sheer numbers.

The miners seemed to realize that too. They rallied in response to his cry, shouting and joining him as he rushed forward. Castra scooped up the dead miner’s stunner and fired into the mass of Legionnaires, helping to throw off their aim.

Plasma bolts sizzled all around Caleb and Castra, though it was obvious the enemy was being careful not to hit any of the female miners. They wanted Castra alive. They just didn’t know which prisoner she was.

It was a limitation Caleb wouldn’t waste. He charged the Legionnaire who dropped to a knee, his plasma rifle aimed to shoot him point-blank. Discarding his stunner, Caleb ripped the rifle out of the man’s hands. Without missing a beat, he swung the butt into the Legionnaire’s faceplate, shattering it and his nose behind it. He dropped unconscious to the deck.

Whirling around to face the next Legionnaire coming at him, he fired the plasma rifle into her arm. At such close range, the bolt pierced the Legionnaire’s dark armor, disrupting her aim before she could target Castra. Reacting quickly, Castra shoved her stunner up against the woman’s faceplate and fired. The energy pulse punched through the transparency. The Legionnaire went into violent convulsions and collapsed.

Caleb turned to find Mathis and three other miners grappling with a moose of a man. All four miners had wrapped their arms around him, pinning his arms to his sides, but it wasn’t enough. He roared as he tossed them aside, getting a hand free and swinging at Mathis. Caleb blocked the Legionnaire’s punch with his rifle before kicking a leg out

from under him. He went down on his back, meeting a quick end as Caleb sent a blast through his faceplate, angling the shot to where he knew the khoron clung to his neck. The Legionnaire died instantly.

By that time, the miners had learned that the faceplates were the weakest point in the Legionnaire armor. They had snatched their rifles from the remaining enemy and quickly dispatched them. As the last one fell, the armed inmates thrust the rifles upward and cheered, but Caleb could see how their ranks had thinned. Nearly a third of them would never leave Processing.

“That hatch is there,” Castra said, pointing to a blast door separating two of the collection arms.

Caleb vaulted one of the conveyor belts, quickly reaching the door, and like before, his enhanced strength was enough to shove the door aside. He stepped through the opening, grateful to find the adjacent processing compartment empty.

“Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go!” he shouted, moving out of the way. Castra and Mathis were first into the area, the others streaming in behind them. Some had holes burned through their rocksuits, a few of them cradling wounded arms or limping. “Move! Move! Move!”

There were still nearly a dozen miners left to go through the open blast door when a fresh group of Legionnaires rushed in from Sorting. Rifles swinging toward Caleb and the miners, Caleb was forced to shift his grip on his captured rifle, slowing his response time and forcing him to dive out of the way as plasma sizzled past his ear. Beating him to the punch, Castra took out the shooter before he could get off another shot.

Caleb scrambled up, leading the advance as they returned fire, their sheer numbers pushing the Legionnaires back. Even so, half of the miners went down in a hurry.

Caleb ducked low and reached out, nearly taking a bolt in the chest as he grabbed the last miner still standing. Falling back, he landed on his back with the woman on top of him.

Mathis closed and latched the blast door behind them. “Wild Card, this isn’t the time,” he joked, grinning down at them. He stretched out a hand, pulling the miner to her feet.

She spared Mathis a fleeting nod of thanks before turning back to Caleb. “Thank you for saving me.”

Caleb nodded before drawing up his knees and kicking out, his core strength enabling him to land on his feet. He ignored the woman’s continued admiration, his concern on the plasma bolts sinking into the other side of the door in great enough volume to burn through it in no time. Already, it was becoming distorted by the heat. He turned toward the princess. “Which way?”

“There,” she replied, pointing to a hatch on the opposite bulkhead. “That’s a shortcut to a transfer corridor leading out to Arm Nine.”

“So there might be Legionnaires out there,” Mathis said.

“There might be,” she confirmed.

“Are we all supposed to die trying to escape?” another female miner asked. “If I had stayed in the barracks, I would still be safe. If Lio had stayed in the barracks, he would still be alive.”

Caleb’s gaze flashed to the woman. “Do you know what happened to Substation Three?”

She looked confused for a moment. “No.”

“It’s part of the belt now. It’s the largest piece, about the size of a medium asteroid.”

The prisoner’s face paled. “Okay, I get it. I don’t want to die here.”

“You might, Lorna,” Castra said before Caleb could answer. “That’s a fact and Card would be lying if he said otherwise. I know you’re scared. We all are, but you can’t let your fear rule you. Our fear let nobles like Kagata treat us this way. It’s held us back. Look at me. I have every reason to fear. Every reason to give up. And I almost did. But Lo’ane is gone, and if Card is telling the truth about me being her daughter,

then I can change things. *We* can change things together, but only if we're not afraid."

Caleb stared at Castra, impressed with her impassioned, impromptu speech. Glancing at the miners, he could see their heads bobbing in agreement. Satisfied, he hurried over to the next hatch and opened it, revealing a thankfully empty transfer corridor.

"Let's go!" he shouted, holding the door open and motioning the miners through into the corridor, Castra and Mathis in the lead. The passageway had blast doors at either end, one leading back toward the elevators, the other no doubt to the waiting transport they needed to escape.

A hover cart rested on its side in that direction, hastily abandoned. Several crates had spilled across the deck, one of them popped open. The arm to a suit of Legionnaire armor had fallen out.

"Son of a bitch," Caleb whispered at the sight of it. The Combine nobility weren't just mining Crux's ore. They were manufacturing the Legion's armor. Right under the nose of the rightful heir to the Empire. Or rather, she had been sitting right under their noses this entire time.

He almost laughed out loud at the irony.

"We're almost there," Castra said. "The transport is just through that door." She started toward it, freezing when she heard the latch on the hatch behind them clank open.

Caleb spun around, rifle leveled. The hatch opened and two units of Legionnaires raced through the open door into the passageway, ready for a fight. Yet, they didn't immediately start shooting. Maybe they didn't want to risk hitting Castra. Or because...

He whirled the other way as the hatch leading to the transport opened. Two more units of Legionnaires poured through the opening, a satisfied smirk spreading across their commander's face.

"Not this time, Card," Fitz said.. "This time you're mine."



## CHAPTER 16

Caleb stared at Fitz and then shifted to his Legionnaires. He couldn't take on four units, nearly two dozen fighters, alone. Even with Ishek's help, it was an impossible task. At the same time, he wasn't about to let Castra be captured or killed. Not after everything he'd gone through to find her. Not after everything she'd been through her entire life.

Fitz stepped out ahead of the other Legionnaires, his weapon held casually at his side as though they were old friends meeting for lunch instead of enemies meeting face to face. Only they were more than simply enemies. Fitz had earned his trust and betrayed it. As far as Caleb was concerned, he was the worst kind of scum.

"What are you going to do now, Card?" the traitor asked with a smirk. "You took me by surprise once. As you can see, I'm not taking any chances this time." He paused as if trying to figure out what Caleb was thinking. "I will admit, I enjoyed the time I spent on Gorgon. Penelope never wanted what I desired to give her, but there were others who were smarter about things."

"Do you have a point, Fitz? Or do you just like to hear yourself speak?"

Fitz chuckled. "That's the one thing I always liked about you, Card. You don't take crap or mince words." He laughed again. "But I guess that's two things I like about you, isn't it? A pity my orders are to bring you and Lo'ane's heir back to Lord Crux. I'd like nothing more than to shoot you where you stand."

Caleb's visage remained passive, as if set in stone. "You're a monstrous excuse for a human being, Fitz. You make me sick."

"Come on, Card. I'm not a monster. Not like that thing standing beside you." He screwed up his face as he glanced at Castra, immediately dismissing her because of her scars. Obviously, he didn't know which of the women with him was Castra. "Look, I don't need to kill these people. Well, I might kill her," he said, flicking his finger at Castra. "She's too ugly to live, but if you cooperate, I'll let the rest of these miners go free." He paused, chuckling before adding. "Well, maybe not all of them. Thanks to you, I have a few new open spots on my team."

Caleb stared back at him defiantly. He knew what would happen if Fitz got his hands on Castra. And he knew Iagorth wanted him for nothing good. Yet, it would be suicide to pick a fight here and now. His only real option was to surrender both himself and Castra. He just didn't want to admit it.

"I see your wheels turning, Card," Fitz said. "You aren't stupid enough to think you have any choice here. It isn't like last time when I underestimated you. You're outnumbered and surrounded, and you don't have your little worm to help you this time."

Caleb kept staring while Ishek remained silent. He was stalling as long as he could, hoping that whatever time he bought might give him a way out of this mess. Fitz had outplayed him once on Atlas, and again here. And like he had said, there was no cavalry to rescue him. Not this time. So why couldn't he bring himself to surrender?

"You don't know when to give up," Fitz said. "I respect that, but you're only prolonging the inevitable. This is your last chance, Card. You have ten seconds to surrender, and then these miners die, starting with her." He motioned to Castra, still oblivious to her true identity.

Caleb finally looked at Castra. She stared at him with her good eye, tears glistening in it. Then she nodded slightly, giving him permission to do whatever he thought best.

It was all the confirmation he needed.

He reached out, grabbing Lorna by the arm. “This is Lo’ane’s daughter,” he said.

“What?” Lorna cried, her eyes wide as she looked back and forth between Caleb and Fitz. “I am not. She thrust a finger toward Castra. “She is!”

“Obviously, she’s lying,” Caleb said, not liking himself for taking this track, but he had no choice. “She’s just trying to save herself. I accept your terms, Fitz. Me and Castra in exchange for the lives of the miners. *All* the miners on this station. Not just the ones standing with me here.”

Fitz grinned. “Those weren’t the terms, but seeing as I’m in a good mood, I’ll honor your request.”

“But I’m not Castra!” Lorna screamed, anger flaring in her clear blue eyes. “My name is Lorna Boyle. I’m from Callus. I’m an accountant. That’s Castra... Her arm swung toward the real Castra, her finger pointing directly at her. “...I swear it!”

“It’ll be okay, Castra,” Caleb said. “Trust me.”

“I don’t even know you,” she hissed, trying to pry herself loose, to no avail.

“She certainly has her mother’s fighting spirit,” Fitz said, smiling at Caleb before waving at the remaining miners. “Go on. Get out of here. You’re all free to go.”

Caleb glanced at Mathis, who nodded almost imperceptibly. He wasn’t a soldier, but he understood Wild Card would provide him with a show if he played along. None of the other miners spoke up either. They all understood that, in the belt, it was every man for himself, and thinking any differently got you killed. They were willing to sacrifice Lorna for their own safety.

The remaining group retreated into the station, even as the Legionnaires they had run from finally made it through the side door from Processing, leaving Caleb and Lorna surrounded by Fitz and another thirty Legionnaires.

“Now what?” he asked Fitz.

“Now I take you back to Atlas,” Fitz answered. “To meet Lord Crux and his advisor.”

“Iagorth, I assume.”

“One of them,” Fitz confirmed. “My ship is back this way.”

He turned his back on Caleb, leading him and his Legionnaires back to his ship. Caleb and Lorna followed, surrounded by the enemy, Lorna clinging to him. “But I’m not the princess,” Lorna sobbed, tears streaming down her face as she grabbed onto Caleb’s arm. “Please, tell them the truth.”

“Right now, you’re *Castra*,” he whispered back. “Trust me.” He looked back at Fitz. He was asking Lorna for trust, but he didn’t know what he was going to do next. He was making it all up as he went along.

No plan this time. Ish would be proud.

They passed through the blast door to the docking arm, where the clear tube allowed him to see the transport that had come to pick up the Legion armor, as well as Fitz’s transport. Scanning the darkness, there was no sign of Gorgon or the Specter, which had to be less than two minutes out by now.

Damian had hidden Gorgon before. Caleb was banking on the odds that the wily pirate had more tricks up his sleeve.

They passed the first transport, moving to the end of the docking arm where Fitz’s ship waited. Fitz stopped at the entrance, turning and smiling at Lorna. “You’re not as pretty as your mother, but I’m sure Lord Crux won’t be disappointed.” He shifted his attention to Caleb. “It’s not as bad as you might think, Card. Iagorth has plans for you.”

“Yeah. What kind of plans?”

“I don’t know. But he wouldn’t let me kill you, so they must be something special.” He motioned toward the interlock. “Shall we?”

*Cal...*

Ishék’s attention was barely more than a meek sensation, the symbiote’s energy fading fast now that the fear

surrounding Caleb had dissipated. Still, it was enough to offer a simple warning.

*...Incoming.*

Caleb noticed the flash of light in his peripheral vision, the ignition of the projectile's thruster unmistakable. Grabbing Lorna, he didn't just board the transport. He threw himself into it, falling past the airlock hatch just as the missile hit the docking arm and exploded.

## CHAPTER 17

During the explosion, Caleb turned in midair, hitting the deck with Lorna on top of him, breaking her fall. He rolled over as soon as he hit, putting his back to the still-open hatch as heat and debris from the disintegrating station poured through the opening. It quickly reversed, sucked out by the vacuum of space as it caught up to the blast, stealing the oxygen at the same time the transport began spinning and rolling away from the blast.

Letting go of Lorna, Caleb rolled back the other way, intent on closing the hatch. He froze as he shifted to his knees. A hand was already on the door controls, the hatch sliding shut. Fitz glared back at him, an open wound on his cheek spilling blood down his neck and an obvious burn on his forehead. His Legion uniform was torn and scorched, his face twisted in rage.

He didn't waste time before throwing himself at Caleb. The tackle sent them both tumbling until Caleb tossed Fitz over his head. Lorna screamed, her pitch tempered by the reduced volume of air pumping back into the interior. The traitor crashed to the deck beside her. Her face a mask of terror, she scrambled away from him.

"Card, look out!" she cried when the transport's pilot emerged from the flight deck, blaster in hand.

Caleb shoved Fitz into the bulkhead and went for the gun. The pilot got a single shot off, hitting Caleb in the thigh. He grunted but didn't slow, knocking the weapon from the pilot's hand, his shoulder catching him full-bore in the gut. The pilot

doubled-over, the air knocked out of him just as Fitz grabbed him from behind.

The traitor locked a leg around Caleb's ankle and pulled his leg out from under him. Fitz went down with him, the pair jostling for the upper hand. Fitz rolled over, grabbing Caleb's arm in a tight lock. The hold might have worked against anyone else, but not Caleb. He gritted his teeth, lifting Fitz off the deck with just his extended arm and slamming him down on his back. Fitz's acutely pained reaction told Caleb his back had been injured in the blast. He rolled away from Caleb, going for the dropped blaster. The pilot dived for it at the same time.

Caleb scrambled to his feet, knocking the blaster away from both of them right before the pair collided. Knocking each other on their backs. Their blunder gave Caleb the opening he needed to knock Fitz into the bulkhead and then throw a right hook to the pilot's temple, taking him out of the fight.

Caleb knew he was in trouble as exhaustion flooded through him, his movements slowing, growing ungainly, inept as his strength drained away like air from a leaky balloon. He'd taken too long to resolve the fight, and now Ishek's ability to defend them both through the Collective was waning. Fast.

"You're ruining everything! Again!" Fitz screamed, seizing the offensive. He kicked Caleb in the chin, following it up with a whirling kick to the head. Caleb rolled away, getting to his feet, but Fitz stayed on him. "I had it all planned out, down to the last detail. He drew his fist back and gave Caleb a hard shot to the ribs. "No more pretending. No more lying. No more subservience," he gasped, slamming his fist into Caleb's face, breaking his nose. "No Empire yoke around my neck!" His punch to Caleb's sternum deflated his lungs, dropping him to his knees. "I deserve to be in control of my destiny. Powerful, rich, feared across the Galaxy! And I'm not letting you take it from me!"

A crazed look on his face, Fitz went for the kill, landing blow after blow, crushing Caleb's left eye socket and right

cheek bone. He drew his leg back and kicked him hard in the ribs, and knocking him on his rear. The back of his head cracked hard against the bulkhead.

He only let up when Caleb started laughing.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Fitz cried. “I’m going to kill you, and you think it’s funny?”

Breathing heavily, Caleb continued to chuckle, lifting his head up and spitting out a wad of blood. “What’s funny,” he forced out between heaving breaths, “is that you think... helping the Relyeh will somehow...set you free. It’s like you’ve learned absolutely nothing...from everything...I told you about them. Everyone knows you’re arrogant. But your sheer stupidity...is so surprising, it’s hilarious.”

Fitz’s face twisted again, his fury redoubled. “Goodbye, Card. I can’t say I’ll miss you, but it has been interesting.” Chuckling, he angled his hips off center and drew his foot back, bringing it down with enough force to crush Caleb’s trachea.

Caleb was waiting for it.

He caught Fitz’s foot in both hands and twisted it, bringing the bastard down. Rolling onto him, he shoved his thumb into the open wound of Fitz’s cheek, drawing a scream before wrapping his hands around Fitz’s throat. As hurt as he was and without Ishek at full strength to heal him, he knew he had to end it here and now.

His eyes wild, Fitz grabbed Caleb’s wrists, straining to pry him loose. They struggled, one against the other, their positions nearly static as all their strength poured into their efforts. Caleb’s muscles shook with fatigue. *Don’t quit on me now, Ish. Knuckle up. We can do this.* Ishek’s only reply was a slight infusion of adrenaline that oozed through Caleb’s bloodstream.

It was all he could do to continue choking Fitz out. The man’s eyes remained fixed on Caleb’s, his mouth opening repeatedly like a fish. A sucking, sporadic rasp was the only



sound he could make as he desperately fought to draw in breath.

Caleb would never know who would have won in the end. A single energy blast burned into Fitz's head, instantly stealing the life from him and drawing Caleb's attention to Lorna as she swung the blaster in his direction. "I should kill you too, you bastard," she seethed, her eyes flashing with anger.

"You'd have every right...to pull that trigger," Caleb replied. "But do you know how to fly...this ship?"

The anger quickly drained from her as she lowered the weapon. "No. I told you...I'm just an accountant."

He half grinned, "An accountant...who may have just...saved the galaxy." Holding his ribs, he pushed himself to his feet. Staggering, he leaned back against the bulkhead to keep his knees from buckling under him.

*Ish, can you hear me? Come on, buddy. I need you.*

When Ishek didn't respond, nausea roiled through Caleb's gut.

"You don't look so good," Lorna said.

"I don't feel so good," Caleb replied. "I'll be right back."

"What does that mean?"

He barely heard the question as his eyes closed and he shifted his consciousness to the Collective, where Ishek remained under intense assault. Rather than helping push the attackers away, Caleb sought out Vraxis and Penn, hoping to enlist their help. He found them similarly engaged with a different khoron, doing their best to hinder the approach of a Specter without directly confronting the ship's commander. He couldn't afford to pull them away from the effort. What good would it do to save himself only to have the Specter blast his transport out of space?

He needed help, and while he wasn't sure where to find it, he knew who to ask.

## CHAPTER 18

*Jack, can you hear me?*

Caleb sent the question out into the Collective. It was a risky maneuver. There was a chance he could draw the attention of a more powerful Relyeh. Perhaps even Shub’Nigu himself. If that happened, he was as good as dead. But he was as good as dead anyway if he didn’t do something.

*Jack. Gareshk. Can you hear me?*

He didn’t know how or where to look for them. He could only hope they would pick up on his call before the enemy did.

*Caleb Card.*

The voice echoed in his senses, reaching out through the Collective much too close to be Jack or his Advocate. Much too powerful for there to be any question who it belonged to.

*Iagorth*, Caleb replied, the Ancient no doubt projecting to him through the Advocate on the Specter. *We need to stop meeting like this.*

*This can all end right now. Surrender yourself and the princess. We do not need to be enemies. We both want the same thing.*

*Except, we don’t. Not at all.*

*My brother Shub’Nigu is your enemy, as he is mine. And the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Was it not a human who said that?*

*That's because they never met the Relyeh. Caleb paused. That's what you want? he asked, the answer to Iagorth's desire becoming clear. You're trying to recruit me?*

*Finally, you begin to understand. Perhaps it required removal of your Advocate from the equation for you to see the true problem, and its solution. Your symbiote remains loyal to his creator, even if it is subconsciously so.*

*Ishek figured out your motives before I did. The Spiral isn't an end, is it? It's the means.*

*Continue your elaboration.*

*A legion of khoron under your control. A fleet of ships. The resources of an entire galaxy manipulated to provide a war machine against Shub'Nigu.*

*Very good. But that is not all.*

*Caleb paused, considering the extension to his and Ishek's original theory, which the Ancient had just confirmed. Firepower isn't enough to beat him, is it? Your moieties launched from Earth with Pathfinder. You ignored the orders to change course and directed the ship to the wormhole. You brought the passengers here with the goal of building your armies. Humans to attack his physical defenses, khoron to assault him through the Collective.*

*Now you know why I would prefer not to kill you, Caleb Card.*

*But you also need to reach him. The wormhole serves two purposes. Only you don't know how to navigate it. Benning unwittingly fixed your math the first time, but she didn't teach you to fish. Fitz stole her notes, but even she only had half the equation. She could only go in one direction. Which means, for all the time and energy you sank into this, you're stuck here. And I thought what Fitz said was funny.*

*There is nothing amusing about it. While time is immaterial to me, my patience is not infinite. The time to move against my brother is approaching. Your arrival here is, on one hand a bother, and on the other, a boon. You have something I need. And I have something you need.*

*There's nothing you have that I need.*

*Incorrect. The security of your home world is in my grip. As is the future of this galaxy. What will happen to both when Shub'Nigu is defeated, I wonder?*

If that happened, Caleb didn't question that the Ancient known as the Destroyer would obliterate all life in the Spiral. Earth, however? *You can't do anything to Earth. The Relyeh there were all destroyed.*

*The Relyeh accessible through the Collective, Iagorth corrected. Which I am not, except through one of my brother's creations. I have existed on your planet for longer than your kind. Even now, my influence spreads. But you can prevent Earth's destruction. You can save humankind from my will, no matter where in the universe your species is found. You, Caleb Card, have the fate of their existence in your hands. Surrender yourself and the princess. End this futile attempt to stop me. It will gain you nothing. Command my Legion in my war against Shub'Nigu, and help me reach him through the wormhole. When he is destroyed, the Spiral will be yours to do with as you please, as will both Earth and Proxima. You have my word.*

*A word I can't trust, that can easily die when I do.*

*It will not be so. Agree to my terms, and I will forge a more lasting covenant.*

Caleb didn't reply, giving the offer more serious consideration than he ever would have thought he might. Safety for all of humankind, plus no more Shub'Nigu, and by extension, a greatly weakened Relyeh. On the surface, it was too good to be true.

*Are your people not worth saving? Is this galaxy unworthy of protection from me? There are always casualties in war, Caleb Card. You have seen how easily my brother and I can destroy worlds and entire civilizations. In the future, the universe will end up as nothing more than dust and debris regardless of what you or I do. Only those who serve will survive, but for how long? Nothing survives forever. While I*

*am immortal, even I do not believe I will exist beyond the end of time. Even I will have an end.*

On the surface, Caleb might have agreed immediately, but weakening Shub’Nigu would mean strengthening Iagorth. And nothing the Ancient said would change his very nature. Shub’Nigu desired to control the universe. He aimed to destroy it. Still, that destruction would take millions of years. Plenty of time for humanity to run its course. To have its blink of existence in the near infinity of time. And he couldn’t deny the temptation to bring the fight to the Relyeh whose offspring had invaded Earth.

*Decide now, Caleb Card. I will not give you another opportunity.*

*I have decided,* Caleb replied.

*Then what is your answer?*

*I’ve decided humans need a new saying. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, except when that enemy is a Relyeh. Even if I believed you, I could never help you. Your kind has taken too much from us, and you’ll always want more. I’d rather fight you and die, and I’m sure all the humans I know would say the same. You might control the Spiral today, but don’t get too comfortable. No deal. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not ever.*

It was Iagorth’s turn to laugh, a rumbling chuckle that rippled across Caleb’s consciousness. *Then you will die.*

Caleb expected the Ancient to attack, but he didn’t. Instead, he retreated from Caleb’s consciousness. He could only guess that Iagorth didn’t believe himself strong enough at the moment to defeat him over the Collective. He had overpowered his Advocate before, after all. Not that it mattered. He had called out for help and received the wrong reply. Ishek was exhausted and on the verge of failure. Caleb could barely stand. The Specter had to be less than a minute away if not already at the station, and Castra remained on the platform, drifting further away with every passing second.

All because he hadn’t been able to bring himself to say yes to Shubby. He didn’t regret it.

Even if it cost everything.

*Caleb?* A younger, gentler voice echoed in his being.  
*There you are.*

*Jack,* Caleb replied, relief flooding through him. *I need your help, buddy.*

*Of course. What can I do?*

## CHAPTER 19

Caleb's eyes snapped open, a burst of fresh energy flooding his body, giving him the strength to straighten up, his gaze whipping to Lorna so quickly she jumped and cried out in surprise. "How long was I out?"

"I... uh... a minute? Maybe a little more. Wha... what were you doing?"

"It doesn't matter," he answered, not wanting to explain. "We need to circle back for Castra."

"I thought I was Castra," Lorna mocked. "You used me."

"I had to. I'm sorry." He pushed himself off the bulkhead and turned away from her. Making his way to the flight deck, he dropped into the pilot's seat. *Ish, my entire face still hurts and my ribs feel like an Abrams tank ran me down.*

*I'm not ready to fix the rest of you yet. I'm still working on me.*

*Ladies first, then?*

*Not your best effort.*

*I'll try harder next time,* Caleb answered, pleased to have his partner back. With their combined strength, Jack and Gareshk had not only pushed back the khoron attacking Ishek, they had overpowered the enemy completely, leaving a few dozen dead Legionnaires scattered across the Specter's corridors and compartments.

*Partner?* Ishek mentioned, seizing on the thought. *Not parasitic worm or forced passenger? Or even Slugalong*

*Cassidy?*

*Ham called you that, not me.*

*Then I guess we're evolving together.*

*I suppose we are. Partner.* Caleb smiled, and his lip started to bleed again.

Lorna followed him to the flight deck, settling at the co-pilot station. "What are you grinning about?"

He shrugged. "I'm alive, and that's more than I can say for Fitz." He glanced at her with his one good eye. The other one was entirely swollen shut.

"Your entire face is puffed up like a blowadder's belly. I hope you can see to fly."

"I'm not much of a pilot, but I'm good enough, even with one eye," he answered, his lone eye locking onto the viewscreen. The transport continued tumbling through space, though with the gravity plates active, he could hardly feel it. Primary Station sat in the distance behind the debris that had followed the transport away from the detonation. Other than the docking arm Medusa had blasted, the station remained in good shape.

He shifted his attention to the sensor grid, quickly finding Gorgon, the first mining transport riding piggyback. Closer in, Medusa came alongside and followed his limping ship, ready to intervene in an emergency. Further away, the Specter that had unleashed the Nightmares on Primary had just breached the edge of the short range grid. Good. He looked down at the transport's controls, needing a few seconds to figure out how to activate the comms. The controls were like Katana's, only in English instead of Jibaki. "Gorgon, this is Card. Do you copy?"

"Aye, Captain," Damian replied. "I copy. I can't believe this crazy stunt of yours might just work out."

"Penn filled you in?"

"Aye. We're ready when you are."

"It's not up to me. I'm here to watch the fireworks, too."



“What do you mean?” Lorna asked.

“You’ll see,” Caleb replied.

*Caleb, I’ve located Castra, Jack announced, in control of one of the Legionnaires on the station. She and the other miners are all okay.*

*Copy that. Which is the nearest docking arm?*

*Seven, according to Castra. We’re on our way there now.*

*Then so am I.*

Caleb worked the transport’s controls, igniting the thrusters and leveling off the craft. Flipping it back toward Primary, he opened the throttle, returning his attention to the sensor grid. The Specter continued to advance despite the damage Penn, Jack, and their Advocates had done to the vessel’s crew. Only a few of the Legionnaires on board remained alive, including the captain. While Jack wanted to try his luck against Iagorth, Caleb had rejected the notion as a risk that didn’t need to be taken. Thankfully, the kid still listened to him.

Gorgon started moving as well, gaining velocity as it angled across space on a course to intercept the Specter before it reached the station. As expected, the enemy ship opened fire, sending beams of energy lancing out at Gorgon. The shields absorbed the initial salvo. Gorgon shot back, guns spewing mostly harmless pulses of energy at the warship.

It was all for show, anyway. The goal was to distract the Specter. And it took the bait, altering course and speed in response to Gorgon’s attack while Caleb continued closing on Castra’s location. He could see the docking arm now, an interlock extended and waiting for his arrival. The miners stood behind the extension, their rocksuits visible against the clear tube.

“Don’t approach too quickly,” Damian said over the comms. “You’ll overshoot and miss it.”

“Miss what?” Lorna asked again.

“You’ll see.”

“Cap, I’m in position,” Atrice said, from onboard Medusa. Once Gorgon engaged the Specter, Atrice guided the shuttle in a wide loop away from the scene, going unnoticed by the enemy. Caleb found the ship on the sensor grid, vectoring toward the warship from the starboard side.

*Ish, give the order.*

*Gladly.*

“Keep your eyes on the Specter,” Caleb said to Lorna. “This is going to be good.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Just watch.” Caleb zoomed the viewscreen in to watch a pair of doors part toward the warship’s stern, revealing the light inside the rear hangar bay. A tiny figure—a Legionnaire Penn had used to hack the door controls—stood in the light, barely visible as a speck. On the sensor grid, Medusa gained velocity and adjusted course, shooting toward the opening doors at breakneck speed. If the ship maintained its heading and speed, it would pass through the open portal and crash spectacularly, but that wasn’t the idea.

The Specter’s captain finally noticed Medusa, likely because the hangar doors had opened without permission. Its gun batteries swiveled, trying to get a bead on Medusa as the smaller craft’s changing angle of attack slightly lifted its nose. The captain, if he was worth his salt, undoubtedly recognized too late that his eagerness to please his master had made him easy to deceive.

“Bombs away,” Atrice said as a small cylinder ejected from the craft’s belly. It tumbled end over end toward the open bay doors, maintaining heading and velocity. The cylinder vanished into the Specter’s open hangar as Medusa rocketed away, gaining as much distance as it could as quickly as possible.

“What was that?” Lorna asked.

“A football punted into the end zone,” Caleb replied.

“What?”

At first, nothing happened, and it appeared the cylinder had failed in its task. Then, a fireball blew out from the open hangar door, instantly vaporizing the Legionnaire standing there. It extinguished a moment later, the explosion seemingly ineffective.

“I’m not impressed,” Lorna remarked.

*Perhaps we were wrong*, Ishek suggested.

Caleb stared at the Specter for what felt like forever, even though only a few seconds passed. Then, the entire hull shattered, exploding outward in a familiar cloud of dust and leaving only the twisted and melting superstructure behind.

*Or perhaps not*, Ish corrected.

“Oh, my stars,” Lorna gasped as the cloud spread and dissipated. “Specters are...I thought they were invincible.”

“Not anymore,” Caleb replied, shifting his attention back to the docking arm. The miners were all looking up through the transparent tube at the result of the Specter’s detonation, clapping and cheering. When we meet Crux, I’ll be sure to thank him for the nuke.

“Why did the hangar doors open like that?” Lorna asked. “Nothing even came out.”

“That’s a longer story. You’ll have to stick around if you want to hear it.”

She slumped in the co-pilot seat. “I just want to go home.”

“You will.”

“Captain, that was incredible,” Damian laughed over the comms. “I never thought I would see the day a Specter fell apart so easily.”

“That’s two theories confirmed today,” Caleb answered. “I’ll meet you on board the station. Atrice, nice aim.”

“Aye, Captain,” Damian answered.

“Thank you, sir,” Atrice replied.

Caleb eased the transport up to the dock and activated the automated systems to complete docking. He and Lorna were waiting at the hatch when the interlock sealed, a green light appearing on the door controls. Caleb opened the hatch, welcomed by a beaming Mathis and an obviously relieved Castra.

“Wild Card! Man, you look like hell!” the miner exclaimed with a hearty laugh. “But you’re a sight for sore eyes. I didn’t think there was any way we were getting out of that one. You weren’t kidding when you said hanging with you would be entertaining.”

“Caleb, I’m glad you’re okay,” Castra said. “You too, Lorna. I didn’t mean for—”

“I know,” Lorna interrupted. “Forget about it. We’re all alive, and even better, we’re free.”

A Legionnaire moved past the miners, nodding to Caleb. “Captain Card,” Jack said through him. “How’d I do?”

Caleb grinned. “You did great, Jack. I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Do me a favor. Inform General Haas and Duke Draco that I’ve located Lo’ane’s daughter, and she’s safe.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Jack,” Castra said, getting his attention. Obviously, he had already explained to her who he was, and how he had seized control of a Legionnaire. “Tell them that if they’re loyal to the Empire, I expect them to join us here as soon as possible.”

Jack seemed shocked by the statement, and he glanced at Caleb in search of confirmation. So did Castra, seeking his approval of her command.

“She’s the rightful heir to the Empire,” Caleb said with a grin.

“Aye, Captain. I’ll relay the message. The entire message. And I’ll see you in person soon.” Jack left the Legionnaire, who collapsed lifelessly to the deck.

“I suppose this means things are going to change around here,” Mathis said.

“You’re damn right they are,” both Caleb and Castra answered.

“And sooner than you think,” Caleb added.

## CHAPTER 20

The transport shifted beneath Caleb's boots, settling on its landing skids outside the Transfer Processing Center in Acala. The additional transports carrying the rest of the freed miners from the belt landed behind it, nearly sixty guards waiting to confront them after Callus Control had denied his request to land. He and the others had, of course, landed anyway.

Caleb tapped the door controls to extend the exit ramp and open the hatch. He stepped out and immediately, nearly five dozen stunners swung in his direction. The sudden change in the defenders' body language as they processed the meaning of his Legionnaire armor was impossible to miss. The rifles wavered, heads swiveling in search of someone to tell them what to do next.

It didn't surprise him when Prime Recruiter Bellet emerged from the side door of the building, the same door he had been sent through to load onto a transport to the Belt a few days earlier. The man crossed the tarmac fully composed, his back so straight he might as well have had a ramrod stuck down his shirt. The guards stepped aside to allow him through. His angular face devoid of emotion, he stopped at the base of the ramp and squinted up at Caleb. Obviously, he was trying to see through the faceplate of Caleb's armor to identify him. The glare of the lights surrounding them made that impossible.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked. "Your permission to land was clearly denied, and the nobility has an agreement with your master that Callus and the planets of the Combine

are off-limits to you. Freedom, autonomy, and payment for services rendered in exchange for a vital resource.”

Caleb stared down at Bellet. He hadn't expected the Prime Recruiter to know so much about the nobility's dealings with the Legion. Then again, he appeared to be in charge of the entire recruitment effort. Outside of the so-called rules of the Combine, was there anyone with more power?

“Well,” Bellet said impatiently. “I expect you to explain yourself. Why are you here?”

Caleb stepped down the ramp, followed by Penn and Castra. The guards lined up behind Bellet hesitated, their fear obvious as they again leveled their rifles at Caleb. He breathed in the pheromones produced by their fear, helping Ishek recoup from his fight within the Collective.

Bellet glared at Caleb, uncowed by his presence as he reached the foot of the ramp and stopped there, a short distance from Bellet. “You don't belong here,” the Prime Recruiter said, a bead of sweat on his forehead suggesting his inner demeanor wasn't as calm as his outward appearance. “If you break the deal, you lose your output. No more ore. No more armor. Is that what your master desires?”

“No,” Caleb finally answered, reaching up with both hands and pulling his helmet off. Bellet's eyes rounded at the sight of him. “But it's what I desire.”

“Creb?” he hissed. “How...?”

“His name's not Creb. It's Card,” Castra said, coming down the ramp to stand beside him. “Caleb Card.” She lifted her helmet off as well, glaring at him. “Do you remember me?”

“What is this? Treason?” Bellet continued, eyes narrowing. It was obvious to Caleb that he recognized the princess, though he had no idea who she really was. “I sentenced you to the belt in reparation for your indiscretions, under the laws of the Kallio Combine. You have no right to—”

“I have every right,” Castra snapped back, raising her voice. “My name is Castra Lo'ane, blood daughter to the

Empress and heir to the Empire. As it is with every territory in the Spiral, the Kallio Combine belongs to me, and I am within my rights to decide how it is run and by whom.”

*She nailed it*, Ishek commented in response to the statement Damian and Elena had helped craft for her, which she had practiced on Caleb dozens of times. None of them had sounded as good, or as sincere.

*Having an army at your back makes bold statements easier*, Caleb replied.

Bellet’s mouth curled into a mocking smirk. “You’re no princess. You’re an orphan who wound up in the belt because nobody wanted you. And it’s easy to see why.”

“We’ve run a blood test,” Caleb said, loudly enough the gathered guards could hear. “And we’ve already uploaded the results to the hypernet for everyone in the Spiral to see. Along with the records we located from Acala Primary—”

“You mean stole from Acala Primary,” Bellet spat.

“The proof is indisputable,” Caleb finished.

“My first decree will be to abolish recruitment across the Combine,” Castra said. “The mining facilities will be temporarily shut down, and when they reopen, we will staff them with miners compensated fairly for the difficulty and danger of their labor. The days of punitive punishment will be over for good. The days of the nobility hoarding everything for themselves will be over.” She raised her eyes to the guards standing behind Bellet. “If you believe in freedom and fairness for every citizen of the Combine, lay down your arms.”

“I dispute this,” Bellet screamed, sensing his power slipping away from him. “All of this. You’re nothing more than miscreants who raided a wardrobe that doesn’t belong to you. I order you to surrender at once, before you’re all sentenced to life in the belt.”

None of the miners at the top of the ramp behind Caleb moved a muscle.

“How do you propose to enforce that order?” Caleb asked.



“I am the Prime Recruiter,” Bellet answered. “All the planetary defense forces on Callus are at my disposal.”

“Are you sure about that?” He pointed to the guards behind Bellet, who had all begun placing their rifles on the tarmac.

Bellet looked over his shoulder, his face reddening in anger. “Traitors!” he cried. “You’ll all be sent to the belt for this. Twenty cycles each if you don’t pick up your guns and arrest these people right now!”

“You don’t get it, do you, Bellet?” Castra said. “These people may work for the nobility, but they have family members who have been sent to the belt, too.”

“Only fear kept them in line,” Caleb added. “And now they know they don’t need to be afraid of you anymore.”

*A pity*, Ishek said.

Bellet, in fact, looked like he was ready to explode. His face beet red, he scanned from one section of assembled guards to the next, furious at their surrender. “Baroness Kagata will hear about this!”

“She will,” Caleb agreed. “But not from you. Guards, seize him.”

The guards closest to Bellet grabbed him, holding him by the arms as he struggled to get loose. He relented a moment later, falling still. “Okay.” He looked up at Caleb. “I give up. You win.” He looked at Castra. “You win, Your Highness.”

Castra looked away, embarrassed to be referred to that way. “I still remember after the accident, when I came out of the hospital to find my sentence had been extended by five cycles.” Her one eyebrow rose, and her words took on an even sharper edge. “The request had *your* signature on it.”

Bellet didn’t respond. He did, however, look like he was about to lose his breakfast.

“You sent me to the belt because I wasn’t adopted. You took my bad situation and made it a hundred times worse. And

then, when I tried to help a fellow miner, a fellow human being, you compounded it again. I should have you executed!”

“Castra—” Caleb started, visions of Ham and Marley drugged and fighting jumping into his thoughts.

“But I won’t,” she finished. “There are bigger and worse monsters than you for us to worry about. There’s a place for everyone to start fresh in my Empire, Bellet. Even you. I need all the help I can get.”

Bellet stared at her, clearly shocked by her offer. He knew he didn’t deserve her forgiveness or a second chance. “Your Highness,” he said, bowing his head to her. “I...I don’t know what to say. This is all so sudden, and I feel so ashamed.” He lifted his head. “If this is the way the stars turn the fates, then who am I to argue? I am your humble servant.” He tried to drop to a knee, unable to with the guards holding him, at least until they joined him on the tarmac, all on one knee, their heads bowed.

Overwhelmed by the display, Castra grabbed onto Caleb’s forearm, tears streaming from her good eye. “I... I can’t do this,” she sobbed.

“Yes, you can,” Caleb answered. “You’re doing great.”

She held him for a moment longer before wiping her tears and recomposing herself. “Bellet, I need you to assemble the nobles, but don’t tell them anything about what’s happened here.”

“The nobles are already assembled, Your Highness,” Bellet replied. “Baroness Kagata is hosting a party at her estate. They’re all sure to be there.”

Castra smiled, glancing up at Caleb. “Then so will we.”

## CHAPTER 21

Baroness Kagata's retreat sat at the top of a bluff overlooking what the people of Callus called the wildlands, the area beyond the natural borders that protected the residents from the aggressive wildlife. Impossible to reach without a licensed and authenticated transport, it provided a haven for the noble and her family, and a prime entertainment venue where she could host the other rulers of the Kallio Combine on a semi-regular basis.

It was purely by chance that the baroness was hosting a party the same day that Caleb, his crew, and the miners of the belt had overcome the Legion and seized control of the mining facilities. Because of the imminent high-class function, none of the nobility had any inkling of the events in the belt. From what Caleb had gleaned from Bellet, it was business as usual for the upper crust, who according to Ettore, threw some kind of party nearly every night.

"We're approaching the estate now, Captain," Atrice said over Medusa's general comms. Of course, the transports Caleb and the others had escaped the belt in were much too large to land on the retreat's tarmac. At least, that was his initial impression. As the estate, and most visibly, the tarmac came into view through Medusa's forward camera feed, Caleb wasn't so sure about his first impression. Push aside or crush the assorted transports of the wealthy nobility, and even he probably could have brought one of the larger craft in for a landing.

The rest of the retreat was harder to make out from above. A thick canopy hung over the bulk of the grounds, not only to offer privacy but also to block the daylight sun. Whatever wasn't obscured by trees was carved into the rock, partially buried as both living space and shelter against wild animal attacks. Ettore had explained on the way how the retreat only had sensors and an early warning system when it was first constructed, forcing anyone on the property to evacuate to the main house when the wildlife crossed their paths. These days, tall energy barriers prevented the different creatures from interrupting tea time.

"I haven't heard a peep from the guard station," Atrice announced. "I'm bringing her in."

Caleb glanced over at Bellet. The man had been helpful since he'd bent his knee to Castra, even more so once Damian and Gillroy had shown him a printout confirming a genetic match between the sample of the Empress' blood Haas had given them and Castra's. While the revelation had surprised Bellet, his reaction had paled compared to Castra's when she was first shown the proof back on Primary Station. While she had been relatively quick to accept the possibility part of that willingness had come from her desperation to escape the harshness of life as she had known it. Who in their mind wouldn't dream of being a long-lost princess? To realize that dream was a reality had brought her to tears.

"I cleared everything through the official channels," Bellet said. "No need to tense up."

Caleb watched through Medusa's feed as Atrice guided the ship in, passing low over the other craft on the tarmac. The shuttle was a rusted jalopy compared to the luxury transports already on the ground. He imagined it stood out like a sore thumb when it settled gently on its landers.

"Knuckle up, people." Caleb released his restraints and left his seat. "It's showtime." He offered a hand to Castra as she undid her restraints. She smiled up at him, the burned half of her face and missing hair hidden by a partial white face mask that reminded him of the *Phantom of the Opera*. He'd tried to talk her out of wearing it, but she'd convinced him that,

similar to Fitz, the nobles wouldn't initially take her seriously with her disfigurement visible.

Besides, the mask blended well with the white pants and jacket she wore over a red blouse, a combat underlayer beneath it. Her miner's physique cut a lean, mean figure in the attire, somewhat closing the gap between her chic appearance and Lo'ane's more rugged military look the first time Caleb had seen her in her uniform. In counterpoint, the four members of Razor's Edge behind her were armed and outfitted in Legionnaire armor. Their presence alone was probably enough to make anyone take them seriously.

Caleb shifted the collar of his matching black jacket, his shirt beneath it identical in color to Castra's blouse. Meanwhile, Bellet adjusted his uniform, his Recruiter formalwear giving him the appearance of a dapper undertaker. His tight expression revealed the fraying nerves Caleb understood well. After all, Bellet couldn't join one side without becoming a traitor to the other. It was a rough position to be in.

"Locked and loaded, Captain," Penn said, informing him that the Edge was ready to move out.

"We must look harder for a fresh set of armor," Orin said. "This one is too small and chafes and pulls at me in all the wrong places. It is true."

"We haven't gone through half the crates we found yet," Penn said. "Just deal with it for now."

"At your command."

Goldie and Sparkles, who had replaced Fitz on the Edge, chuckled before falling silent as Caleb guided them to Medusa's side hatch. He paused there to look at Castra. "Are you ready?"

"My heart's pounding like a rock splitter and my stomach's tied in knots," she replied. "I don't know if I can do this."

"They may have fancy titles, but they're still just people. They're still part of your Empire. Plus, we've got your back."

She nodded, exhaling some of her nervousness. “I wanted out of the belt. Now that I’m out and we’re here. I don’t know if I want to be the Empress either.”

“You’re doing great,” Caleb answered. “The people out there, they caused all the pain you went through on Primary. Now you have a chance to make things right. To make them better than your mother ever did.” He smiled when he noticed how the remark seemed to light a fire in her resolve.

“I’m ready,” she said.

“Then let’s do this.” Caleb tapped the door controls, opening the side hatch. He stepped out first, offering his hand to Castra, her fingers clasping tightly around his as she exited behind him. Glancing toward a fancy mosaic path that led deeper into the estate, he noticed a pair of guards watching them with intense interest and a bit of confusion. When Bellet stepped out of Medusa, they stiffened to an even more formal attention.

When Penn emerged in her Legionnaire armor, Caleb thought they might piss themselves.

The guards remained in place as Caleb and the retinue approached. Bellet stepped out in front of Caleb, facing the guards. “Take the rest of the evening off, gentlemen.”

Still obviously confused, they looked at one another, at Bellet, then at Castra and Caleb, and finally back at Bellet. They nodded sharply and stepped aside, allowing Bellet and the others to pass.

He led them down the twisting mosaic path that cut through the center of dense foliage, all of it landscaped to look totally natural, but way too perfectly manicured to be wild growth. Large flowers in an assortment of colors hung in dense groupings from sunflower-like stalks. Orange and red leaves poured out from a tree so huge the canopy hung like an umbrella over most of the front grounds.

“It’s beautiful here,” Castra said, smiling at the rainbow-colored bird that shot across the path in front of them.

“All at your expense and that of countless innocents across the Combine,” Caleb reminded her.

“Not for much longer,” Castra avowed.

The path opened up after a hundred meters, the foliage giving way to an open iron gate leading to a large courtyard. An ornate fountain occupied the center of the space, bursts of water arcing into a surrounding pool where a handful of children noisily splashed. Nearby, several nannies were gathered in a circle of chairs, chatting while keeping a lax eye on their charges. The women fell silent, their mouths agape as Caleb and the others stepped into the courtyard. Sensing the sudden change in the relaxed atmosphere, the children needed only a few seconds to stop their activity and become quiet as well.

Bellet ignored them all, continuing past the pool to an open iron gate and the pair of large wooden doors leading into the main house. A massive stone crag extended over the doorway like the tip of a spear, forming a roof of sorts, the mountainside sloping sharply upward behind it. Another pair of guards stood watch beside the doors, closing ranks in front of them as the group approached.

“Gentlemen,” Bellet said, looking at each in turn. “Your services are no longer required this evening. We’ll take it from here.”

The guards reacted similarly to the first pair, until the one to Bellet’s left spoke. “Sir...” Caleb could see his eyes through his faceplate, shifting on Castra. “... with all due respect, who are these people?”

“You aren’t paid to ask questions,” Bellet snapped back. “You’re dismissed for the evening, soldier.”

“Yes, sir,” the guard replied. His gaze lingered for a few more seconds before he and his companion headed off toward the path and undoubtedly the guardhouse Caleb assumed was between the main house and the tarmac.

Bellet stepped up to the doors, pausing there while a laser scanned his face. The doors swung inward, and the recruiter

guided everyone into an open foyer fronted by the compound's original outer walls. A relic of the compound's original defenses against the Callus wildlife, two rows of thin slits designed to shoot through—one at shoulder height, the other at squatting level—ran diagonally across the mortared stones. Ahead of Bellet, a steel door opened, ushering the group into a long corridor lined with scenic artwork and deep red carpeting. Music emanated from the open archway at the end of the passageway.

“That’s a Faliu,” Penn whispered, pointing at one painting.

“And a Kardoan,” Orin added. “Incredible.”

“I didn’t know you were an art aficionado, Orin,” Penn commented.

“I appreciate skills of all kinds. It is true.”

“Button it up,” Caleb snapped beneath his breath, silencing the Edgers.

They were halfway down the corridor when an older man in a crisp tuxedo stepped into the archway. His face paled at the sight of the armed escort, his mouth opening to shout out a warning that froze in his throat when his eyes landed on Bellet.

“Damn it, Pierre,” he huffed. “You should send yourself to the belt for sneaking up on me like that.”

“My apologies, Baron Kagata,” Bellet replied. “Perhaps I should wear a bell next time?”

The baron’s face split in a grin. “That might not be a bad idea.” His gaze shifted to Caleb and Castra before snapping back to Bellet, His jovial grin turning menacing. “You know the rules, Pierre. We don’t allow outsiders to our retreat functions. Perhaps you should wear chains instead of a bell.”

“My guests are here to address the nobility, sir,” Bellet responded, maintaining his composure as if he was accustomed to such condescending treatment.

“This isn’t the way to go about it.” His attention shifted to Caleb and then Castra, lingering a few moments on her odd



appearance. “Who are you? Another corporation making outlandish promises for access to our riches?”

“Something like that,” Caleb answered, barely maintaining his calm.

“Well, you aren’t wanted here. Not tonight. Not ever. Whatever you paid Bellet, he’ll return to you on your way back out the door.” The baron eyed Bellet again. “Never do this again, Pierre, or you will end up in C-3.” With that, he spun away from them, returning to the party.

“What an asshole,” Castra said once he was out of earshot.

“I’m afraid so,” Bellet agreed. “The other nobles aren’t any better behaved, unfortunately.”

“And these are the people you defended?” Caleb asked.

“I benefited greatly from my position as Prime Recruiter. It was worth it to deal with their barbs. Until it wasn’t.”

Of course, Bellet had only sided with Castra because he understood the winds of change had shifted. He could either tack with them or risk losing everything.

“Let’s go knock some manners into that snotty buffoon,” Sparkles suggested.

“Just what I had in mind,” Caleb said, stepping into the adjoining ballroom.

## CHAPTER 22

“Bellet!” Baron Kagata barked, more incensed than before, his loud voice turning the heads of the other nobles in the ballroom his way as he strode up to Bellet. “I told you to take these interlopers and leave. Do I need to call the guards on you?”

Caleb continued looking past Kagata, taking in the scene over the man’s shoulder. There had to be close to a hundred nobles of various ages inside, all dressed in gowns and tuxedos, sipping champagne as they gathered and gossiped. Nearly an equivalent number of servants in simpler suits and skirts attended them, while an entire orchestra played what Caleb recognized as Chopin from a short riser at the back of the room.

The room itself was massive, the ceiling not nearly as high as he would have expected for a ballroom, preventing the chandeliers from being too lavish. More paintings covered the walls between ornate lengths of molding, and the floor appeared to be made of crystal that created a prismatic swirl of colors under the lights. The effect transformed the room from something out of an old English castle to a blend of classic and ultra-modern.

“My pardon, Baron Kagata,” Bellet replied. “But as you can see, the guards are already here.”

The baron looked at the Edgers again. “These are not my guards.”

“Is there a problem here?” A woman in a deep blue gown moved into view. Her long dark hair pinned over her head, a glimmering tiara over it, she had a long face with deep-set, serious eyes. “Recruiter Bellet, I don’t recall inviting you to this affair.”

“No, my Lady,” Bellet replied. “I wasn’t invited.”

“Then what are you doing here?” her gaze shifted to Caleb. “And who are these...” She froze when her eyes landed on Castra.

*The plot thickens*, Ishek commented.

Caleb saw it, too. Baroness Kagata knew exactly who Castra was. And by her reaction, she had quickly guessed why they were there.

“I don’t know what you think you’re trying to accomplish,” Baroness Kagata said, her verbal recovery pointed directly at Castra.

“I’m here to claim what’s mine,” Castra replied.

“You’re an orphan, dear. A nobody. Nothing is yours.”

“Everything is mine!” Castra shouted back, bringing the music, chatter, and all motion to a halt.

Kagata looked stricken. Her face paled, and she backed up a step, eyes darting back and forth, looking for her guards.

“Step aside,” Caleb said to the Baroness. “Or my people will *make* you step aside.”

Both the Baroness and her husband shook with a mixture of fear and anger. “I know you,” the Baroness hissed at Caleb. “You’re a pirate. A traitor to the Empire. And now you’re trying to prop up some deranged cast off as something she clearly is not?”

“You know exactly who she is,” Caleb answered. “It’s written all over your face. I have a feeling you’ve always known. Seeing you now, I don’t believe it was a coincidence that Castra was never adopted. Was it?”

Kagata's flinch confirmed it for him, and hopefully for Castra, too. From the moment Lo'ane had given birth on Callus, her daughter had become a threat to the nobility's power. The only question left for Caleb was whether the Empress, the princess at the time, had known her offspring would never be allowed to prosper.

He had a horrible feeling that she had known.

"You all need to leave immediately," Baron Kagata growled. "Bellet, you'll be in the belt by morning."

"I've got news for you," Castra said. "The belt doesn't belong to you anymore. Captain Card liberated your facilities earlier today."

"What?" the Baroness hissed. Other nobles behind them heard the statement, murmurs spreading across the attendance. "This is a declaration of war."

"It might be," Caleb answered. "You're welcome to send your military to take it back. If you can get any of your commanders to comply."

"Is this a coup, as well?" Baron Kagata demanded.

"How can it be a coup?" Bellet asked, his voice increasing to reach everyone in the ballroom. "When it was done at the behest of Princess Castra, heir to the Empire and rightful successor to the throne?"

The announcement sent the gathered nobles into fits. They complained to one another like a room full of clucking hens.

"You have no proof that this orphan, this outcast miner, this...freak behind a mask, is Lo'ane's daughter," Baroness Kagata whined.

"But we do have proof," Caleb replied. "Not only is the late Empress' genetic code public knowledge, General Haas has provided us with a DNA sample. The match is undeniable. But you already know it's true. You've always known. It would be better for you to follow Bellet's lead and accept that change is here."

"I will do no such thing," she spat back defiantly.

“Fine with me. But you will step aside.” Caleb motioned for Orin and Penn to deal with the Kagatas. They each took one by an arm, dragging them out of the doorway and clearing a path for Bellet, Caleb, and Castra to enter the ballroom. Castra hand wrapped around Caleb’s arm at the elbow, gripping him tightly for support. Sparkles and Goldie took up guard positions at the door, the other nobles falling silent.

*They’re terrified. It is delicious.*

Reaching the back of the ballroom, Bellet claimed a microphone from the band on the riser and passed it to Castra. She looked at Caleb, who smiled and nodded in support.

“My name is Castra Lo’ane,” she said. “The last of the Lo’ane bloodline and heir to the Empire. While you’ve been here, living a life of comfort in ignorance of the pain and suffering you’ve caused countless numbers of people, I’ve been in contact with your military leaders and fleet commanders. I’ve already claimed your mining facilities in the belt. Let me rephrase that. I’ve been in contact with my military leaders and reclaimed my mining facilities. And now I’m here to take back my territories. My Kallio Combine. All the planets in the Spiral belong to the Empire, which means everything you have—your planets, your titles, your wealth, this very room—is mine. Entrusted to the nobility for governance, but still mine. Under my mother’s rule and the rule of my family before her, you all ignored that. My guards wear Legionnaire armor and carry Legionnaire weapons, which were discovered on Primary Station, as was the ore used to create the armor and the hulls of Lord Crux’s warships. In fact, his entire war machine originated from the belt, making every one of you traitors to the Empire. I’m within my rights to have you all executed where you stand.”

*She’s a natural!*

*It’s in her blood,* Caleb answered, his body tingling in reaction to Ishek’s glee as the level of fear in the room spiked. Ish had never felt so much raw terror in one place at the same time. Even if Castra spared the nobles, which he already knew she would, everyone gathered in the room, save for the band, was about to lose everything they enjoyed over the years.“I

don't intend to be the ruler who lops off heads," Castra said. "But I also can't let your treason go unpunished. Right now, all of your assets are being frozen and seized. You'll have twenty-four hours to leave the Kallio Combine."

The murmurs and gasps came more slowly and more quietly. Baron Kagata was first to speak.

"Where are we supposed to go?"

"You seem in good graces with Lord Crux," Castra replied. "Why don't you go to Atlas? You may survive the fallout when my reorganized fleets arrive there to reclaim what is rightfully mine. Or you may not."

One noble in attendance laughed at that. "You have no chance against Lord Crux and his Specters. He'll destroy you and undo anything you do to us as soon as he sends your ashes drifting across the galaxy."

"I've already left the ashes of eight Specters drifting across the galaxy," Caleb said. "And I'm prepared to make it hundreds more to support the Princess and the Empire."

"Please," one woman in the gathering said. "Please don't take everything from my family. I'm only a Patrician. A minor noble. I have no control over the decisions of the barons or the others."

"I'm a knight of the Combine," another man said. "A business owner, but not connected to the belt. I never used labor from the recruiters."

"Bellet handled all of recruitment," someone else cried. "Why is he at your side? Please, show mercy."

"Bellet swore his fealty to me," Castra said. "All those who do the same will be treated with fairness."

The Patrician fell to her knee. "If you will have me, then I am yours, Your Highness."

Many other nobles followed her lead, leaving about a dozen on their feet, no doubt the barons of the Combine remaining defiant. They looked at one another, at the other nobles on their knees, at the Edgers in their Legionnaire armor.

They eyed Caleb, Bellet, and Castra with disdain, none wanting to be the first to give in.

“I’ve ruled Callus for over thirty years,” Baroness Kagata said. “I was in Acala Primary when Empress Lo’ane gave birth to her daughter. I accompanied her to the Nexus Orphanage, where she surrendered the child for adoption. And yes, under the Empress’ command, I did everything in my power to keep Castra’s existence a secret, both for my sake and hers.” She pointed her finger at Castra. “Let it be known by my witness that Castra is the late Empress’ daughter.” She lowered her head, falling to one knee. “I have acted in service to the Empire, Your Highness. I know that may be difficult for you to understand, but it is the truth.”

*Half the truth.*

*If that,* Caleb agreed.

“Caleb, what should I do?” Castra whispered as the rest of the nobles dropped to their knees, admitting defeat and grasping onto the last advantage they had left.

“They may have information we can use, and letting them stay in charge will prevent chaos we don’t need right now. But it’s your call.”

Castra looked over the assembly. “Your treason is unconscionable. Considering the greater troubles in my galaxy, I’m inclined to show mercy. Swear your fealty and you will remain in your positions as my vassals. However, it is no longer business as usual in the Combine. I shut the mines down for the foreseeable future. Additionally, I expect you to provide a full accounting of your assets. Whatever I deem excessive will be redistributed to those who were forced into unlawful labor in the belt and their families. Furthermore, the recruiters will be reorganized to aid in this effort. Bellet, you will lead this endeavor.”

“Of course, Your Highness,” Bellet agreed.

“Any of you who don’t want to take part in my new government, are free to go. I will accept your presence as a

silent promise of loyalty. I will meet anyone who breaks that promise with swift and violent justice.”

Not a single noble moved from their place on the floor.

“Very well. On your feet. We have a war to win.”



## CHAPTER 23

Caleb knew with Fitz's defeat that Crux might send additional warships to the Combine. Immediately following the meeting with the nobles, he and Bellet worked with the head of the Combine's small military to position their fleet around Primary Station. While Bellet had originally expected Castra to remain on Callus, the planet was too poorly defended to risk keeping her there. They could probably handle two or three Specters with Jack and Amali's help, but anything more and they would need to run, first into the belt and then into hiding elsewhere. Thankfully, their ability to communicate through the Collective allowed them to update Haas and the resistance in real-time despite the distances involved. If they did need to leave the Combine, Castra and the rebel ships could move almost immediately.

Maybe Crux and Iagorth would understand how difficult it would be for them to take him by surprise and catch Castra. Perhaps they might choose to wait for a better opportunity to challenge her rule. It was no secret she would eventually move on Atlas. They could sit back and wait her out, bolstering the planet's defenses in anticipation of her attack.

Whatever the reason, the Combine remained free of the Legion five days later, allowing both Caleb and Ishek time to fully recover from their exhaustion and injuries. Castra as well had had time to settle into her role as heir to the Empire, which she did quickly and fervently. While Haas had originally suggested she might be useful as a figurehead for the Spiral to rally around, she had already proven herself to be much more valuable than that. Within a day, she had made good on

returning all the belt miners to their respective planets and reassigning all the Combine's recruiters to making better use of the resources the nobility had long hoarded. She was a natural leader, not only because her experiences in the belt had made her both strong and compassionate, but because she realized what she didn't know and wasn't afraid to lean heavily on those with more experience.

She leaned most heavily on Caleb, but he didn't mind. From the moment he met Castra, he'd felt a protective kinship to her, like that of an older brother or even a father. The feeling seemed mutual. They spoke as comfortably as he had with anyone else he'd ever known, including his best friend, John Washington. She was inquisitive, intelligent, and most importantly, her own person. The damage to her face had given her a thick skin and an ability to ignore negative attention, and she didn't feel any pressure to be the type of Empress her mother had been. In fact, she outright rejected it, remaining determined to do things her way, and Caleb appreciated that.

"So, let me get this straight," Castra said. "You and Abraham are Centurion Space Force Marines, which is like the Royal Guard, but on Proxima Centauri, in what you call the Milky Way Galaxy."

"That's right," Caleb answered.

"He and another Marine named Jii Kwon were with you, looking for Pathfinder when you crashed into a wormhole and traveled through spacetime."

"We didn't crash. We flew into it intentionally."

"Right. And Pathfinder is the ship the Spiral's founders arrived in. Only nobody knows it because an Ancient Relyeh named Iagorth arrived with the ship, along with the khoron who became the first members of the Legion. He worked to erase the history of humankind's travel from Earth. Your homeworld."

"You have an impressive memory," Caleb said. "I still have trouble keeping all that straight."

“That’s because you’re almost three hundred years old. You’re pretty ancient yourself.”

Caleb laughed. “I sure am.”

A light shudder drew their attention from their conversation to the doors leading to Primary Station’s Docking Arm Three. They could see the front of the freshly docked shuttle from here, and further in the distance, the outline of the warship Lo’ane.

“I’m excited to meet Ham,” Castra said, her constantly tapping foot confirming her eager anxiety.

“I’m excited to see Marley,” Caleb replied. “I haven’t spoken to her since—”

“The Guardian Corps captured you on Galatin.”

“I didn’t think you were listening when I told you that story.”

“Are you kidding? And miss the exploits of the greatest hero in the Universe?”

“I’ve never claimed *that* title.”

“If you aren’t in the running, I don’t know who is.”

“That’s because you never met Sheriff Duke. I’ve never seen a man do more with less with greater tenacity, myself included.”

“Maybe I’ll get to meet him one day, too.”

“Considering he hasn’t been born yet, that might be difficult, but you never know.”

They both straightened as the door leading further down the arm opened, revealing the retinue from Lo’ane behind it. General Haas fronted the group, Amali and Jack just behind him, along with Istari, Ham, and Marley, whose face split into a huge grin the moment she saw Caleb.

Castra had dressed in the same simple white uniform she’d worn to confront the nobles, only this time she left the face mask behind, her disfigurement in full view, daring Haas and the others to react. The General barely batted an eye, taking a

single step forward before dropping to a knee and bowing his head.

“Your Highness,” he said as he and his retinue reached the Princess and Caleb. “General Emerson Haas, your loyal and humble servant.” Everyone behind him, including Ham, followed his lead.

“Rise, General,” Castra said. “Rise everyone. Welcome to Primary Station.”

“Your Highness,” Haas said as he rose, everyone behind him following suit. “I’ve served the Lo’ane family faithfully for nearly forty years. I’m honored to continue my service.”

“Thank you, General. Caleb’s told me a lot about you.”

“Only good things, I hope.”

“No, but a man without flaws is a hard man to trust.”

Haas smiled. “And what flaws does Captain Card possess?”

“As much as we need him to win this war against Crux, he is far too willing to throw his life away for others.”

“I’d hardly call that a flaw, considering the outcome in your case.”

“That remains to be seen.”

Haas looked to Caleb, offering his hand. “It’s good to see you again, Captain.”

“You too, General,” Caleb replied, shaking his hand.

“Princess Castra,” Istari said, the next to approach. She bowed her head as well. “I’m Istari Draco, Duke Draco’s daughter. It’s a true honor to meet you.”

“You as well,” Castra answered. “Where is your daughter?”

“Oh, I left her back on Lo’ane. She’s a bit too rambunctious for a place like this.”

“A mining station is certainly no place for a child. Caleb tells me that my mother chose you to be her successor as

Empress.”

The curveball froze Istari in place, face turning beet red. “I...its...we didn’t know about you. And, I rejected the request. I don’t want to be Empress.”

“Neither do I,” Castra answered, surprising her again, along with Haas this time. “But someone must. The Relyeh can’t be allowed to thrive here.”

“I don’t envy the job ahead of you, Your Highness,” Istari answered, looking away.

“I’m sorry,” Castra said. “I can be a little too direct sometimes. It comes from having to fight for everything I have.”

“Except the crown,” Istari snapped before freezing. “Oh, I shouldn’t have said—”

Castra cracked up. “It’s good to see you can give as good as you get. We’ll get along just fine.”

Istari smiled and nodded, greeting Caleb as Amali and Jack introduced themselves, exchanging brief pleasantries before giving way to Ham and Marley.

“Caleb!” Marley said excitedly, throwing her arms around him and kissing his cheek.

“Marley, it’s good to see you.” He glanced at Castra and Ham, a little flustered, quickly breaking the embrace. “I’m sorry for all the trouble I caused you,” he said, smiling warmly down at her.

“Are you kidding?” she replied. “You’re the reason we’re all here. Helping you was a hard decision to make, but it was the right one.”

“You bet, it was.” Grinning, Ham grabbed the hand of his fellow CSF Marine and tugged him into a hearty embrace that ended with him pounding Caleb on the back. “It’s good to see you, Cap.”

“Good to see you, too. I can see the rebel life is being good to you.” Caleb’s eyes ran up and down Ham’s muscular torso. “You’re even more buff than the last time I saw you.”

“Well, you know how it is. Gotta keep at it. You know how I like to eat.”

“*Like* is an understatement.” He tugged Ham over in front of the Princess. “Castra has been wanting to meet you.”

“Really?” He looked a bit taken aback as his eyes landed on her.

“Princess, I’d like you to meet my good friend and arguably the best pilot in the Universe, Sergeant Abraham Cortez.”

Ham blushed as he bowed his head. “It’s a pleasure, Princess Castra.”

“Ham...” Giving him her lopsided smile, she grabbed his hand and vigorously shook it. “...it’s so good to meet you, too. I’ve heard so much about you.”

“If it’s good, it’s all true. If not, Cal’s lying.”

Both Castra and Caleb laughed. Castra released Ham’s hand and turned to Marley so the Guardian could introduce herself. Caleb clapped Ham on the shoulder, leaning in close to whisper in his ear. “Tae solved Benning’s algorithm. He knows how to get us home.”

Ham stared at Caleb in shock. “You’re kidding?”

“I wouldn’t kid about that.”

“This day just got so much better.”

“Keep it between us, okay? I don’t completely know who we can trust yet.”

“You got it, Cap.”

Caleb turned to Castra. “Princess, since we have a lot to discuss, we should probably get to it.

“Agreed,” Castra said, looking at Ham again. “I’m afraid we don’t have much of a menu to offer on Primary, but I’ve arranged for a small meal service while we discuss the future of the Empire and how we’re going to put an end to the Relyeh threat.”

“General Haas, I had thought Duke Draco would be here,” Caleb said.

“He sends his regards,” Haas replied, turning to Castra. “Especially to you, Your Highness. He’s en route to the Thelian territories to speak in person with Duke Thelmos. The Duke remains loyal to the Empire, but has been non-committal. With any luck, your emergence will convince him to commit his military might to our cause.”

“If it would help, I can visit him myself,” Castra offered.

“There’s really not enough time for that,” Haas answered. “But your willingness to meet with him speaks volumes. To be honest, I expected Captain Card to have located an obituary, or a broken soul when I was informed he had found you in the belt.”

“So you knew about the belt,” Castra said. “And how the nobles populated the workforce out here?”

Haas’ expression tightened. He nodded. “I did.”

“And did you ever try to convince my mother to put an end to it?”

“No, Your Highness,” he answered without hesitation.

“Why not?”

“It wasn’t my place to question. Only to serve as best I could.”

“Was that your rule, or hers?”

The corner of Haas’ mouth curled in a wry smile. “Hers, Your Highness. She didn’t appreciate words of advice from her generals that didn’t involve military doctrine.”

“Never hesitate to share your opinions with me, General. Agreed?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Haas answered. “Gladly.”

“Now that we’ve settled that,” Caleb said. “I suggest we head to the mess hall. We have a lot to talk about, and time isn’t on our side.”

## CHAPTER 24

Caleb sat at the table next to Castra while the rest of the group found seats around the tables arranged in a rectangle in the center of the mess hall. It ensured everyone present could see one another when they spoke. Besides Haas and his party, Damian, Penn, Johan, and Naya had arrived from Gorgon, while Bellet and Baroness Kagata, of all people, had ridden up from Callus for the event. The mess was the smaller and cleaner of the two on Primary that the freed miners had normally frequented. It wasn't nearly as nice as the rooms where the nobility would gather back on Callus. Nor was it as nice as the manager's mess hall closer to Primary's center, but to Caleb it was more comfortable than any opulent space could have been.

Atrice and a second cook prepared plates at the open kitchen in the back of the mess, putting together dishes that created scents this part of the station had likely never experienced before. With the first course ready, volunteer servers brought over individual plates to each of the guests at the table. Maggie leaned in between Caleb and Castra to deliver both their plates—gingered vegetables, he knew, was one of Cookie's specialties.

"Thank you, Maggie," Caleb said, returning her smile. Like Mathis, Usef, and Reesa, she had remained on Primary station to support Castra's planned ascent to the throne. "Your Highness," she added, nodding to Castra.

"Thank you," Castra said, smiling as best she could. She lifted her napkin to wipe away some spittle that formed on the



damaged side of her mouth.

Reesa delivered plates to Haas and Istari, while Lorna and Mathis took care of the others. The gathering had yet to get down to business; the participants having taken some time to get to know one another before starting the wider conversation. After savoring a few delicious bites of Atrice's cooking, Castra stood up, prompting Caleb, Haas and Bellet to rise too, the only ones who knew the proper protocol.

"Please, remain seated," Castra said, putting a hand on Caleb's shoulder to urge him back down. "I would prefer to keep things as informal as possible. Right now, I'm Empress of nothing."

"Not true, Your Highness," Haas said, dropping back into his seat. "You have the loyalty of the resistance, including the Draconian Duchy, and soon enough the Thalmos Territories. They will be the first of many, I'm sure."

Caleb glanced at Baroness Kagata. The noblewoman sat stiffly beside Bellet, her expression hard. She had tried to hide her not wanting to be there, but it was painfully obvious her loyalty to Castra extended only as far as how it might benefit her.

"The Kallio Combine is on your side as well," the Baroness said after an uncomfortable pause, her tone bordering on venomous.

"Thank you," Castra said. "Be that as it may, I prefer to keep things casual and open between us. You've each been called to this table for a reason. I spent my childhood in an orphanage and the last four years mining asteroids. While I read as much as I could about the galaxy, I haven't experienced any of it firsthand. I'm counting on you to fill in the many gaps in my knowledge."

"We're here because we believe in the Empire," Haas replied. "And in you, Castra." Her name flowed awkwardly from his lips, making it clear he wanted to address her formally while also complying with her request.

“I appreciate your support,” Castra continued. “With that in mind, let’s discuss what comes next while we enjoy Atrice’s incredible food.”

She turned around and waved to him. He smiled and waved back, clearly enjoying himself.

She turned back and sat, picking up her fork. “First, I want to address our greatest challenge head-on. No matter how many nobles flock to restore the Empire to what it should be, the Relyeh Ancient Iagorth; and Lord Crux, with their exceptionally well-armed and prepared military, have spent the last six years burning through the Spiral, taking over autonomous planets. As it is, it will probably take a long time to restore the Combine to what it was. The Combine fleet, as well as Gorgon and Lo’ane, are on high alert while we sit here eating. The potential for a massive attack on this station cannot be overstated.” She signaled she was done speaking by sticking a twisting purple root with her fork and taking a bite.

“According to Klim, the latest count of Specters in the Spiral is one hundred thirty-seven,” Haas said. “That’s barely enough to keep two in each territory.”

“And more than enough to keep those territories subdued,” Kagata said. “Nothing you have can defeat the raylium alloy. I should know, as I helped Crux locate it in the belt, mine it for him, and smelt it into a usable form.”

“That’s nothing to be proud of,” Jack said. “You helped that bastard kill my father.”

“Do you know how much Crux paid for the raylium?” Kagata answered, as if that reasoning would make sense to the kid.

“Coin isn’t as important as loyalty,” Jack answered, staring her down.

“Technically, coin is just numbers on a screen,” Naya agreed, adding to his defense. “It only exists and has value because we all agree it does.”

“And yet, you made it more important than people.” Maggie added, unable to bite back her own opinion of the

baroness' treachery. "So many of your subjects died for those numbers on a screen."

"Do you expect me to feel sorry for them?" Kagata answered. "I don't." She shifted in her chair to stand. "I came to take part in a discussion on how to return Castra to her rightful place, not to be verbally attacked." She tossed down her napkin and shoved her chair back.

"Baroness, wait," Castra said. "All of you, please. If we're to stand any chance of defeating Crux, we need to put our old grudges, mistrust, and hatred aside. For the sake of the Empire."

"My apologies, Baroness," Jack said, clearly reticent but resigned to circumstances. "Castra is right. We won't get anywhere attacking one another."

Kagata froze, her lips thinning. She returned to her seat. "Apology accepted," she bit out.

"The raylium alloy isn't impenetrable," Caleb said, preventing any more outward dissension. "Enough hits to a Legionnaire will still take them out of the fight, and the faceplate is a weak point if your aim is good. The fighters may have khoron guiding them, but they still need to see."

"I'm surprised they didn't put cameras on the outside of a solid raylium helmet," Johan said. "It would probably look funny, but a camera lens would be a pinpoint, making it almost impossible to hit, and it would remove a glaring weakness."

Everyone who had been eating froze, all eyes turning to Johan.

"What?" Caleb, his mouth open in shocked realization.

"That's brilliant," Marley said. "Bonkers, but brilliant."

"How quickly could you design a helmet like that?" Ham asked.

"Huh?" Johan said. "I was only speculating. I don't know if—"

"Johan, I need you to find out if it can be done," Castra said.

His face reddened from her attention, clearly in awe of her position. “Sure, Your Maj...Castra.”

“The alloy also has a weakness,” Haas said. “Thanks to the sample provided by Captain Card, our scientists could experiment on the material. They discovered that—”

“The alloy loses cohesion when the inner side of it gets too hot, too quickly,” Caleb finished.

“You already knew?” Haas asked.

“We tested the theory out on the Specter that came for Castra.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call that a weakness,” Bellet said. “How can you overheat something from the inside?”

“Hard to do with a Legionnaire,” Penn admitted. “But Specters still require a crew, and you don’t need to blast a hole in the armor when you can persuade one of that crew to open a hatch for you. Then all you need is a nuke.”

“Persuade the crew?” Kagata said. “I don’t understand.”

“I’ll try to explain,” Jack said, getting to his feet and taking the next ten minutes to go over the bond between he and Gareshk, and how they could overpower other khoron through the Collective. Kagata and Bellet listened with rapt attention while the others finished the first course, just in time for the servers to deliver the next one. Some kind of meat Caleb hadn’t encountered before—it smelled incredible—accompanied by a vegetable stew.

“I understand now how you did so well in your raids against Crux,” Haas said. “Yours is probably the best fed pirate crew in the galaxy.”

“Agreed,” Caleb answered, grinning. “Atrice is an excellent pilot, but he’s an even better cook.”

“The Specters are only part of the equation,” Damian said, bringing the conversation back on point. “Defeating them won’t clear out the thousands of Legionnaires stationed on the planets Crux already controls. He was willing to bombard cities from space. I’m sure we aren’t willing to do the same.”

“Never,” Castra agreed.

“We can even the odds somewhat,” Caleb said. “There were nearly four thousand units of completed armor being prepped for transport when we took over this station. More armor than we have fighters, at the moment. And while the facility is currently shut down, I think we can drum up enough support from the people of the Combine to make it operational again.”

“Especially when we pay them twice the highest wage on Callus,” Castra added.

“Twice the highest wage?” Kagata shrieked as if she’d been stabbed. “That will drain the Combine’s accounts in no time.”

“You mean, it’ll drain your accounts,” Castra said. “Defending the Empire is one of the key tenets of your pledge of allegiance, in return for your control over the Combine. If you don’t intend to honor it, I can find another Baroness.”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t honor it,” Kagata answered, looking down at her plate, her face growing as red as a bloodstain.

“I’ll go out into the belt myself if we need more ore,” Castra added. “I just need to know which rocks to find it in.”

“I’ll be there with you,” Caleb said.

“I know,” she replied, glancing at him with a slim smile

“This all sounds promising,” Ham said, speaking up for the first time. “The creativity. The positivity. The willingness to get your hands dirty. But what we’re discussing will take months, if not years. I want to help the Empire. I really do. But I also have a family of my own back in my galaxy. I want to see my little girl grow up.”

“We can find a way to send you home,” Caleb replied, stopping short of telling them that Tae had figured out reverse travel through the wormhole. Not when he knew how badly Iagorth wanted that solution. Not when he didn’t fully trust everyone in the room.

“What about you, Cap?” Ham asked. “I thought you wanted to get back, too?”

“Not as much as I did when we first got here,” Caleb admitted. “But even if I was in your shoes, Iagorth is here, Ham. He’s also on Earth.”

“What?” Ham hissed. “Then we really need to get back.”

“No. We need to stop him wherever he is. We can’t let him cement his grip on the Spiral. If he wins...” Caleb shook his head. “...Earth will be next, if only just to spite me before he uses the Legion to attack his brother.”

“Shubby?” Ham said. “Iagorth can’t beat him, right?”

“With the army he’s built? I don’t know.”

“Damn.”

“I have to admit, I’m lost again,” Kagata said.

“We don’t need to explain that one,” Ham replied. “Iagorth knocking out Shub’Nigu would be bad.”

“Cap, one of your goals was to locate the place where Iagorth is duplicating khoron and sanctifying some of them,” Damian said. “That seems like a logical next step for us while the gears of war start spinning up.”

“Except we don’t know where to look,” Caleb replied. “Unless we get a break, that’s a dead end for now.”

“You know who probably knows where the nursery is?” Jack asked.

“Who?” Istari asked, taking the bait.

“Good ol’ Crux.”

Haas had just taken a sip of water. He spat it out now, spraying it across the table in front of him. “Are you suggesting we launch a direct attack against Atlas?”

Jack shrugged. “Yeah, why not?”

“I can give you plenty of reasons, starting with the forty Specters orbiting the planet. Not to mention the thousands of Legionnaires on the ground.”

“It’s difficult to target the khoron through the Collective,” Caleb added. “There’s too much noise to easily pick any single one out. Even if we had the ships and the nukes, getting them to open up would be nearly impossible.”

“We might be able to procure enough nuclear warheads,” Istari said. “They aren’t common, but most territories keep a small stockpile, just in case. I can work with my father to see what we can gather.”

“Please do,” Castra said. “That would be very helpful.”

“That still doesn’t solve the problem of opening the gates to get the nukes in,” Ham said.

“What if we don’t need to destroy the Specters?” Penn asked.

“We slipped onto Atlas once,” Caleb replied. “I don’t see that we’d be able to do it again.”

The group fell silent, most of them losing their appetites as they tried to work their way through the quandary. Going straight for Crux was out of the question. They had no choice but to plan to take back territory one planet at a time, which also seemed like a herculean task. Of course, there was no way Caleb would give up or admit defeat.

*I have a plan,* Ishek announced.

## CHAPTER 25

*I thought you fell asleep, Caleb replied.*

*No, I've been coming up with a plan. It's too devious for you to think of on your own. Even with the bond, you're still too much of a goodie-goodie.*

*Sounds like I'll hate it, but what is it?*

*Don't you think it strange that Baroness Kagata and the other nobles would pledge fealty to Castra so easily?*

*You know I did, but she also admitted Castra really is Empress Lo'ane's daughter.*

*She has more to gain by siding with Crux. She will betray us.*

*Both Bellet and Klim claim she hasn't tried to contact Crux since she joined Castra. Khoron checks and blood tests of the nobility all came back clean. Not to mention, she's been transparent about her dealings with Crux and her finances. Everything. She isn't happy about it, but she knows there's only one way forward, and that's with Castra. She wouldn't be here, otherwise.*

*I remain confident in my assessment.*

*And smug about it. What makes you so sure?*

*What is the human saying? It takes one to know one.*

*Let's assume you're right. What do you suggest?*

*Confront her.*



*Now? Without proof?*

*She will break. She believes she's clever and has earned your trust. And if not for me, perhaps that would be true. But I see right through her.*

*Why do you and not Gareshk or Vraxis?*

*Their minds are strong, a benefit of their creation in Jagorth's replication chambers. But they lack experience.*

*The grizzled old worm theory, is that it?*

*Yes. Confront her. She will crack.*

Caleb turned to consider Kagata. Along with Ham and General Haas, she was one of the few who hadn't lost their appetite at the idea of a hopeless situation. He could imagine Haas had been through too much to become overly bothered by their predicament. Ham just loved to eat, and wouldn't let a stressful moment stop him. But the baroness? Maybe Ishek was right.

*Let me take over, Ishek requested.*

*Now?*

*This is exactly the type of diplomacy I was made for. Trust me.*

*I can't believe I'm saying this, but I do trust you. Okay.*

*You will not regret it.*

Caleb allowed his consciousness to retreat as Ishek's overshadowed his. Immediately, he lowered his fork such that it clattered on his plate, breaking the uncomfortable silence and leading Castra, Marley, and Jack to flinch and look at him.

"Baroness Kagata," Ishek said, keeping Caleb's voice calm.

"Yes, Captain Card?" she replied, lowering her fork.

"I've been thinking. I believe you might be able to help us with our problem."

"I'll do whatever I can to help, but I don't know how I might be of service in this arena. I'm hardly a tactician."

“Aren’t you?” Ishek asked. “You aided Crux for years in his plans to destroy the Lo’ane family and overthrow the Empire without anyone knowing. You helped the Empress hide Castra from the galaxy and kept her ignorant of her birthright, and no one was the wiser. Now you’re playing the role of the loyal subject. At least you made no secret of the fact that it’s because your coin is involved. Though to me, that hint of truth among the lies only raises my suspicions, rather than allaying them.”

Kagata’s face instantly darkened. “Are you accusing me of something, Captain Card?”

“Caleb?” Castra said. “What are you doing? I thought we agreed to put past grievances aside for now?”

The baroness slammed her cutlery onto the table and stood up. “I’m trying to be helpful, Your Highness, but it seems no one at this table will accept my perspective on this whole affair. I didn’t know Crux planned to attack the Empire. The first alloy we produced went to armor that he gifted to the Emperor and his family. He claimed he would sell it to the territories and make us all wealthy beyond our imagination. And I remained silent about Castra because of her mother’s request. If you can’t set aside our past differences, then this rebellion will fail.” She turned to Castra. “I’ve had enough insults for the evening, Your Highness. I beg your pardon.”

Castra glared at Caleb. “You should apologize.”

“No,” Ishek replied.

“What is wrong with you?” she hissed.

*Ish, whatever you’re going to do, can you do it before Castra loses faith in us?*

“She’s still working for Crux,” Ishek said. “She intends to tell him everything we discuss, and if we come up with a plan, she’ll pass it on to him, and he’ll set a trap for us. “

“Captain, those are serious allegations,” Haas said.

“I’ve had enough,” Kagata cried. “I’m leaving.”

“You aren’t going anywhere,” Ishek said. “Bellet, stop her.”

“Ignore that order, Bellet,” Castra countered. “Caleb, I thought you were on my side.”

“I am,” Ishek answered as Kagata headed for the door. Bellet listened to Castra and remained static. “Ham, a little help?” He hesitated, looking at Haas. “You’re still a Centurion Space Force Marine under my command,” Ishek barked. “Look alive and stop her.”

That got him moving. He hurried after Kagata, taking hold of her upper arm and waylaying her before she could leave the mess hall.

“Let go of me!” she shouted, trying to pull herself free of Ham’s grip.

“Now what?” Ham asked Caleb.

“Check her jewelry,” Ishek said. “An item on her person is a recording device.”

“How do you know that?” Castra fumed. “You’re embarrassing me, Cal.”

Ham hesitated. “I’ll do it,” Marley said, getting up. *Ish, I really hope you’re right about this.*

“Keep your hands off me,” Kagata said as Marley approached. “Your Highness, I’ve acted in good faith. You have a responsibility to do the same.”

“Marley, stand down!” Haas cried.

“Caleb was right the last time he seemed crazy,” Marley said, looking back at Haas. “You sentenced me to death once already. I’m not afraid of that punishment.”

Recalling their fate under Empress Lo’ane’s rule, Ham broke out of his uncertain freeze. He held Kagata’s other arm, keeping her restrained while Marley examined her earrings, rings, and finally her necklace.

She looked back at Caleb, frowning. “It all looks normal to me.”

*Ish?* Caleb questioned, getting nervous.

*She's bugged. I'm sure of it.*

*Tell Marley to try her hair comb. It's made of metal. I saw one much like it in a movie once.*

“Pull out her hair comb and check it,” Ishek said.

“Don't touch my hair!” Kagata cried, her hand flattening over the decorative floral hair comb at the back of her head.

Marley reached up, removed her hand, and pulled the comb out. The Guardian examined it. When she looked at Caleb again, she wore a triumphant grin. Holding it up, she pulled it apart, revealing a tiny circuit board tucked inside.

“Johan, Naya, can you please examine that?” Ishek requested.

“Your Highness, it's a massage device,” Kagata said. “To ease the tension. You can understand how stressful it is for me to be here. Especially now, in this capacity.”

Johan accepted the interior electronics of the pin from Marley, looking at it with Naya.

“Captain,” she said after a moment. “There's a microphone on the tip. And a data chip here on the board.” She put her finger to it.

“And no sign of anything that would vibrate to facilitate a massage,” Johan added.

Castra's face twisted in anger. “I was ready to forgive you for everything, Baroness. In the name of peace and unity so we could focus our energy on the true enemy of the Spiral. But you refuse to accept me.”

Kagata slumped in Ham's hold. “You're already taking everything away from me.”

“No. All I've taken are large numbers on a screen and made them a little smaller. Your greed makes me sick. Bellet, find somewhere to lock her away until I decide what to do with her.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” he replied.

“Caleb, I’m sorry I doubted you,” she added, looking at him. “I won’t make that mistake again.”

“Good. Because I don’t want you to lock up the Baroness.”

“You don’t?”

“No. If she values her life, then she’ll complete this meeting with her true motives undetected.

“Ishek?” Penn guessed, breaking into a circumspect smile.

Ishek’s grin split Caleb’s face. “In the flesh. After all, it takes a worm to expose a worm.”

## CHAPTER 26

According to Baroness Kagata, she had planned to return to her penthouse apartment in Acala before the end of the evening. Instead, she called her husband and told him she was exhausted and would remain on Primary Station to sleep. Her words were partially true. She slept on Primary. But before that, Castra, Caleb, Haas and Bellet spent two hours interrogating her and learning her plan of betrayal. Six hours later, she returned to the planet in her shuttle, carrying more passengers than she had left with.

They had returned the hair comb to her with most of the data on it still intact, though Naya and Johan had also added a transmitter that would allow them to send whatever the microphone picked up to a storage device they'd given to Caleb. The transmitter would also provide Caleb with a way to locate the device as long as it remained within a few kilometers of him.

The shuttle touched down on the rooftop of her building, which towered nearly two kilometers over downtown Acala. It was so tall that most of the city below was partially shrouded by a scattered cloud cover. The hatch opened, and Baroness Kagata stepped out, followed down the ramp by Caleb, Penn, and Bellet. She didn't wait for them to keep up as she crossed the covered tarmac to the elevator near the center, forcing Caleb to cough to get her to slow down. He had already made it clear that failure to comply with his directions would find her in a rocksuit, an exception to Castra's decree not to send anyone to the mines as a prisoner.

She entered the elevator first, turning around when they joined her. Her face remained expressionless while she waited for the doors to close before speaking. “This isn’t going to work.”

“You’d better hope it does,” Penn replied.

The elevator descended less than ten meters to bring Kagata to her suite. The doors opened to a huge foyer decorated similarly to her retreat in the mountains. Rich, red rugs. Walls lined with paintings that made Penn’s eyes bulge. The furniture was gaudy gold and glossy, the layout enormous. Floor-to-ceiling windows surrounded the apartment, offering incredible views in every direction.

Penn immediately broke away from Caleb, drawing her blaster and quickly searching the place.

“My husband isn’t here,” Kagata said. “He had business on Kallum.”

“Is that the truth?” Caleb asked.

“When would I have tipped him off? You listened to our conversation. You know I didn’t sell you out. And then you took my communicator.”

“Maybe your overnight stay made him suspicious.”

“He’s not smart enough to think that way.”

“That’s a terrible thing to say about your husband.”

She shrugged. “The truth is the truth. What does it say about me that I love him anyway?” Caleb didn’t answer her question, so she continued speaking. “The courier will be here in an hour.”

“And you’re sure they’ll take the recording device directly to Crux?”

“I can’t be sure of anything. When I informed Crux of my invitation to dinner, he arranged for the listening device to be delivered, and told me to contact the courier once I had something for him. You were there as well when I spoke to the courier. He never said he would take the data to Crux. You may be focusing your energy in the wrong place.”

Caleb smiled. “You don’t need to worry about where we focus our energy. All you have to do is follow instructions.”

Penn returned from her search, holstering her weapon. “We’re clear, Cap.”

*Ish, do you concur?*

*There are no Relyeh nearby.*

*You’re certain?*

*As certain as I can be. Vraxis agrees.*

“I guess there’s nothing else to do but wait,” Caleb said.

“Would you like a drink in the meantime, Captain Card?” Kagata asked.

“No, thank you,” Caleb replied.

“Penn? Pierre?” Kagata offered.

Penn shook her head. Bellet looked like he wanted to say yes, but a glance at Caleb had him declining..

“Well, let no one ever accuse me of being a poor host. We can wait in the study, if you’d like.” She looked at Penn. “I noticed you admiring the artwork. I have a Nealand in there you really should see.”

“The study is as good as anywhere else,” Caleb said to Penn’s obvious delight. They crossed the open area of the apartment to a large door on the right that opened on their approach, revealing the study. It surprised him to find the walls lined with shelves of printed books, with a break in the center where a detailed painting of a horde of xenotrife hung over a false fireplace.

“It’s called *Terror In The Night*,” Kagata said. “It is horrible, isn’t it?”

“It’s amazing,” Penn said, crossing the room to get a closer look.

“We called them xenotrife,” Caleb said, staring at the demons, hopeful he would only ever see them again in



paintings like this one. “Those are the creatures that conquered Earth. My homeworld.”

Penn looked back at him with wide eyes. “You’re saying these things are real?”

Caleb nodded. “Unfortunately. Someone in Nealand’s family line must have told him about them, or showed him a picture of them.” He turned away from the painting, looking at Kagata. “I’ve been wondering. Be honest with me, now that Castra isn’t here. Did her mother really ask you to prevent her adoption?”

“People believe what they want to hear, regardless of the truth. Castra wanted to believe that I’m a decent person at heart. You want to believe I’m a scoundrel.”

“And the truth is somewhere in between,” Penn said.

“Wisely stated. None of us are all good or all bad. And the truth of Castra’s upbringing is inconsequential. It won’t change her childhood or restore her face. And I’d venture to say that the time she spent in the belt made her better suited as a leader than any other life in the Combine would have afforded her.”

Caleb wanted to argue. Unfortunately, he agreed with the assessment. “I suppose you’re right. Your perspective on truth...does that mean your husband is smarter than you give him credit for?”

Kagata burst out laughing. “I wish.”

“Do you have any other Nealands?” Penn asked.

“Just the one. They’re hard to come by. Especially his Terror series.”

“Captain, what were the xenotrife like?”

“Individually, they look nastier than they are. But they attacked in hordes we called slicks because they looked like pools of oil, and they reproduced so quickly that we could kill ten thousand in a night and ten thousand more would replace them within a week. We lost primarily because we ran out of ammunition.”

Penn swallowed the lump in her throat. “I can’t even—”

She cut off when a tone sounded from the apartment’s elevator entry.

Caleb’s attention swung to Kagata. “Expecting someone else?”

“No,” Kagata replied. “Perhaps the courier is early.”

“Penn and I will wait here. Bellet, you know what to do.”

“Yes, sir,” he answered.

Caleb dug into his pocket, retrieving a sealed envelope with the listening device inside and handing it to the Baroness. “Go on. And be smarter than your husband about this. My last name may be Card, but I don’t bluff.”

She paled slightly, leaving the study with Bellet on her heels.

“Do you think the courier might carry a moiety?” Penn asked.

“This would be a lot easier if we could be sure he isn’t. I wish we knew how many pieces of Iagorth are out there.”

“Any number more than one is too many.”

Caleb tapped on a patch behind his left ear, activating the receiver for the listening device. He heard Kagata invite the caller up. Several seconds later, the elevator door slid open, and he moved to peek through the study doorway to see what would happen with the transfer of the package that was in Bellet’s coat pocket.

“Baroness Kagata, it’s an honor to meet you. I’m here for a pickup?”

“You’re early,” Bellet said.

The courier’s voice wavered. “I thought you disbanded the recruiters.”

“Relax. The department is reassigned,” Kagata said. “But you *are* early.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I have so many deliveries to make today, and I was already in the area. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Who do you work for?” Bellet demanded in his stern voice.

“Quickship Limited,” the courier answered, tapping the logo on the left side of his chest.

“And where are you delivering the item?” Kagata asked.

“Ma’am?” the courier answered in surprise.

“I thought the courier would be one of Crux’s people,” Penn whispered. “Not an actual courier.”

“Clever,” Caleb replied. “He’s as suspicious of Kagata as we are. He’s expecting a double-cross.”

“What do we do?”

Caleb activated the patch behind his other ear. “Bellet, give him the package. We’ll track him.” The other man couldn’t afford to respond, but Caleb was sure he would follow the order. “Nevermind,” Bellet replied to the courier’s questioning response. “Since you arrived early, will you deliver the package early?”

“No, sir. I have other stops.”

“This is sensitive material,” Kagata said. “I don’t want it riding around in your cart unattended for the next hour.”

“Oh, well, the cart is locked, and nobody expects anything important to be inside. No one’s ever broken into it.”

“I don’t think—”

“It’s fine,” Bellet interrupted. “I recommend giving him the package, Baroness.” He removed it from his inside coat pocket.

“Very well. Be careful with it.”

“I will,” the courier replied. “I just need to have you sign I picked it up. Let me get my pad.”

There was nothing Caleb could do to stop what happened next.

“W-what is this?” Kagata cried, her voice suddenly tight with fear when he pulled out a blaster instead of a pad. Bellet went for his own weapon, but he didn’t have a chance. The courier’s blaster whine-thumped and Bellet hit the floor before he could wrap his hand around the butt of the gun in his underarm holster.

The courier’s gaze shifted to the Baroness. He sneered at her, keeping his aim on her as he squatted to pick up the package “I’m afraid you’ve come to the end of your usefulness, Baroness.”

“No. You can’t.” Her lower lip trembled.

Penn moved toward the door as he stood back up. Caleb grabbed her arm. “He’s going to kill her,” she hissed softly, her eyes pleading with him.

*If he sees us, we will never locate the replication facility, or the sanctifier.*

“That’s Iagorth,” Caleb said, holding her back, his eyes never leaving the Baroness. “We can’t risk everything to save her.”

Penn’s jaw clenched, but she stopped trying to go to Kagata’s rescue. It was already too late, anyway. A second whine-thump and her body jarred the floor.

A moment later, Iagorth the courier was gone.

## CHAPTER 27

Caleb and Penn stood over the bodies of Kagata and Bellet where they laid on the floor just in front of the apartment's entrance. Wisps of smoke still rose from the holes Iagorth masquerading as a simple courier had put in their chests.

"Track him," Caleb said softly, wanting to make sure Iagorth hadn't remained to search the apartment.

Penn pulled out her pad. A projection rose over the screen, showing Kagata's listening device was on the move. "We're clear."

Caleb had seen enough dead bodies in his long life to know Bellet was dead, but he dropped to a knee next to the man and felt for a pulse, just to make sure. Penn did the same for Kagata. They looked at one another, both shaking their heads. They were indeed gone.

"We wouldn't have had time to reach them before Iagorth killed them, even if we had tried," Penn said, trying to ease the guilt written all over Caleb's face over his decision to withhold their help..

"I know," he agreed, standing. "It doesn't mean I don't regret their deaths."

She laid her hand on his forearm. "I'd probably be dead, too, if you hadn't stopped me. Thank you, Caleb."

He finally raised his eyes from Bellet's body. "I wasn't about to lose you, too."

Uncomfortable with what she saw in his eyes, she dropped her hand and looked away. “At least Iagorth has the device as planned.”

“We can track him to wherever he takes it, but we need to stay out of sight.”

“He has to be going to the spaceport. If we can get ahead of him; that’ll give us an advantage.”

“What if he doesn’t go to the spaceport?” Caleb wondered out loud.

“I say we play the odds,” Penn said, a thoughtful look on her face. “If he heads somewhere else, there won’t be much we can do about it without him noticing.”

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

“We can take Kagata’s shuttle across town. It’ll get us there well before him,” Penn said. He nodded as he tapped on the call button. Iagorth had ridden it down to the street rather than up to the landing pad, and they had to wait for it to ascend.

Krishax and LariCaleb and Penn entered the lift when the doors opened. He hit the control inside, returning them to the roof. The attendant there looked as if he wanted to stop them from boarding the baroness’ shuttle without her being with them, but a hard look from Caleb kept him at bay. The shuttle pilot remained on board, on call for whenever Kagata needed him.

“Tom, we need to go to the spaceport,” Caleb said, dropping into the co-pilot seat beside the shuttle pilot. The man had been dozing off, but he straightened now, looking at Caleb. “Where’s the Baroness?”

“In her apartment,” Caleb replied. “We’re meeting someone at the spaceport. She said you would fly us there.”

“Sure, sure,” Tom said, leaning forward to activate the shuttle. “Is everything okay? You look worried.”

“Cap, he’s out of range,” Penn said from the rear of the shuttle.

“I’m a little worried,” Caleb admitted. “But I’ll feel a lot better once we’re at the spaceport.”

“Then away we go,” Tom said with a smile, lifting the shuttle off the deck and turning it to face the way out. They launched from the top of the skyscraper, turning toward Acala spaceport. “We’ll be there in a jiff.”

*Captain, Jack said through Gareshk’s connection to Ishek. We have contacts entering the system. A dozen Specters.*

Caleb tensed in his seat. *Distance?*

*Most are at least twenty minutes out. One is between Primary and Callus. Another, five minutes away. Lo’ane is moving to engage the nearest Specter while we evacuate Castra in Gorgon. Damian says you need to get up here, Captain. Or we’ll have to leave you behind.*

*We’re tracking the package. We can’t leave now. Get Castra out of here.*

*Are you sure?*

*One hundred percent. Do it.*

*Aye, Captain. Good luck.*

*You too, Jack.*

“Captain,” Penn said, leaning onto the flight deck.

“I know,” Caleb replied, shifting forward and looking skyward, where he spotted the newly arrived Specter.

“Oh, damn,” Tom said, looking up, too. “I kept wondering when the Legion would show up here. Things were just looking up for us, too.”

“Get us to the spaceport. They don’t control Callus yet.”

“Yes, sir,” Tom agreed.

*Ish, we can’t risk being discovered by the Legion.*

*There’s only so much I can do to hide myself from them.*

*What about hibernating?*

Ishek hesitated before answering. *I am not in favor. It will weaken our bond, which will weaken you. And, we will lose contact with Jack and subsequently, Castra. And, I do not want to miss all the action.*

*It's not ideal, but we can't afford to have Iagorth know we're following him. He obviously planned to retrieve the device just ahead of the Legion's arrival. I'll bet you anything he's going to grab a shuttle at the spaceport to get to that Specter.*

*And we're still following him because, why?*

*Because that Specter will take us where we want to go. That's why we came. You were in favor of this plan, remember?*

*That was before a fleet of Specters showed up.*

*Go to sleep, Ish. I'll wake you when it's safe. Before you zone out, tell Vraxis to do the same.*

*I hate this.*

*I know.*

*Don't die on me.*

*I'll do my best.*

Caleb's awareness of Ishek faded as the shuttle began descending toward the spaceport. Tom was on the comms with control, convincing them to let him touch down despite the Specter looming overhead. There wouldn't be any scheduled launches until the threat had passed.

Unscheduled launches, on the other hand...

Caleb knew Iagorth would find transport up to the Specter. Somehow.

Above them, Lo'ane had faced off with Crux's warship in full view of everyone on the surface, their energy beams invisible from the ground. To Caleb, it was as if they were circling in some kind of strange mating ritual.

He lowered his head, a sudden drowsiness slowly seeping into him in response to Ishek's hibernation. A glance back at



Penn showed her eyes were getting heavier too as she suffered a similar effect.

“I’m telling you, Bruce,” Tom complained beside him. “I’m landing this sucker, and you won’t stop me.” He paused, listening to the controller. “Just because you can’t be sent to the mines don’t mean you can do whatever you want. Oh, yeah? And if it does, then it means I can do what I want, too.” He pounded the control screen with his fist, disconnecting the comms. “Wanker.” Looking at Caleb, he smiled. “We’ll be down in two shakes.”

“Once we’re on the tarmac, get out of here,” Caleb said. “If they decide to bombard the surface, the spaceport will be the first thing they hit.”

Tom blanched. “Maybe I shouldn’t even set you down.”

“We need to get there. It’s vital to the security of the planet.” Caleb said, unstrapping and leaving his seat.

“Your funeral,” Tom said as Caleb slipped past him, heading for the hatch, Penn trailing behind him.

“How do you feel?” he asked her.

“Like I just swallowed a handful of tranquilizers. You?”

“Same. But I’ve been exhausted before. I won’t quit until I’m dead.”

“Then neither will I. Look.” Penn lifted her pad. The tracker had gone active again, meaning Iagorth was closing on the spaceport.

“You were right. Nice work.” He paused. “I wish I could still talk to Jack or Amali, so I would know for sure that Castra made it out safely.”

“You really care for her, don’t you?”

He nodded. “More than I probably should. She’s a good kid. Like the daughter I never had.”

“You aren’t too old to have your own, you know.”

“First, I’d need to find a woman who can stand me. Then, I’d need a few years off from trying to stop the Relyeh from

destroying the galaxy. Right now, that feels like a tall order.”

“Maybe you’ve already found a good woman.”

Caleb and Penn locked eyes. “Castra’s too young for me, if that’s what you’re suggesting,” Caleb joked. “I don’t see her that way, anyhow.”

The shuttle rocked slightly as it touched down. Caleb didn’t wait for Tom to announce the landing. He opened the hatch and jumped out, Penn right behind him.

The shuttle lifted off before Caleb made it more than a few meters, rocketing away from the scene. Overhead, the two Specters continued their dance. It was difficult to tell which one was which, but it appeared one of them had angled toward a potential escape. Caleb figured it had to be Lo’ane. And if Haas was leaving, that had to mean Castra was already gone.

Relief flooded through him. If they lost her, especially so quickly, they could forget about drawing any of the hesitant territories into the fight.

“He’s close,” Penn said, watching the tracker on her pad. “Probably reaching the spaceport right about now.”

“Orbital Control grounded all the ships,” Caleb replied, surveying the tarmac. “Either he has one here already, or he’ll steal one to get to the Specter.” There wasn’t a sea of starships like at the Haydrun spaceport on Atlas, but there were enough to make guessing the right one difficult.

“Our best chance is to beat him to his ship,” Penn said.

“I know,” Caleb agreed. “Should we look for the one with Legionnaires loitering outside?”

Penn’s head swiveled, scanning the tarmac. “What about the one with Baron Kagata loitering outside?”

Caleb whipped his head around to look in the direction Penn was looking. His eyes narrowed when he spotted the Baron standing near the ramp of a luxury shuttle. He was looking toward the spaceport’s terminal or he might have seen them approaching.

“Coincidence?” Penn asked.

“I think not,” Caleb replied. “Especially not standing there like that. He’s obviously waiting for someone.”

“Hopefully not his wife. He’ll be there a long time.” Caleb raised an eyebrow at the bitter remark. She shrugged. “They weren’t exactly saints.”

They moved laterally to the Baron, keeping one eye on him and the other on the pad and the tracker’s progression. It had slowed somewhat, Iagorth-the-courier likely needing to make his way through the terminal to the tarmac. Staying out of the Baron’s peripheral vision, they made it directly across from him before sneaking behind a parked shuttle.

“We aren’t getting in by using the ramp, and we can’t take him out,” Caleb said. “It’ll be too suspicious.”

“We can duck into a lander well once they board,” Penn replied. “It’ll be a tight fit but a quick ride.”

“Whatever works.”

They moved more slowly, circling toward the back of Kagata’s ship while still watching the pad. Iagorth had picked up the pace, and as they came around behind the Baron, they saw Iagorth emerge from the terminal gates, blaster in hand. He had doubtless killed at least one guard to get through the gates and out to the tarmac.

“Hurry, before he sees us,” Caleb said.

They sprinted toward Kagata’s ship, reaching the lander and obscuring themselves from the view of both the Baron and Iagorth. Caleb created a step with his hands, allowing Penn to climb up inside the well. She leaned out, offering her hand to help pull him up.

“This isn’t big enough for both of us,” Caleb whispered.

“I told you it would be tight. We need to position ourselves around where the strut sits after the lander collapses into the well.”

She moved into position, curving her body in a C shape around the open part of the well. Caleb mimicked her on the other side, sucking in a breath when the top of her head

pressed intimately into his groin to clear the strut. He could hear Iagorth running to the shuttle, his pace slowing when he neared.

“Do you have it?” Baron Kagata asked.

“What do you think?” Iagorth replied.

“And she’s dead?”

“Again, what do you think?”

“You’re a Relyeh of your word. I appreciate that.”

“And you are a somewhat useful human. With the resistance’s growing capability to bond with my khoron, I need more like you to sanctify and enhance.”

“I’m looking forward to it. Shall we?”

“I no longer desire this body. I’ll meet you when you arrive,” Iagorth said.

Caleb heard the whine and thump of a blaster. Peering out from his hiding place, he saw the courier crumple onto the tarmac, the hole in the side of his temple still burning as Kagata’s boots sounded on the boarding ramp. It raised and latched closed behind him as soon as he reached the top.

Moments later, the anti-gravity plates around them began humming, and the shuttle’s main thrusters came online. The ship rose from the tarmac; the lander beginning to retract with forward momentum. Caleb had to press backward harder into the well to get his body fully clear, his larger size making the fit even tighter for him than Penn. They both had to press their legs a little tighter together. The pressure on Caleb’s chest made it hard to breathe.

“It sounds like he intends to take Kagata to the sanctifier,” Penn said as the shuttle continued its climb. “This could work out better than we hoped.”

“Don’t speak, and try not to breathe any more than you have to,” Caleb replied. “This is all the air we’ve got until we get on board the Specter.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“But yes, it could,” he added.

As long as they didn’t suffocate on the way.

## CHAPTER 28

The ride felt as though it lasted for hours. By the time the ship settled in one of the Specter's hangar bays, it was all Caleb and Penn could do to keep from gasping loudly for air.

They remained in their hiding place for nearly ten minutes after Baron Kagata descended the ramp, passing almost directly beneath them on his way to the exit. Caleb recognized the pilot and the four others following him from the retreat. Nobles, all of them. They were so desperate for standing and power; they had sold their souls to Iagorth with the promise of becoming like Crux. In the end, they would become nothing more than slaves.

"Time to go," Caleb said when he heard no more movement outside the shuttle.

They untangled themselves, both groaning as blood began flowing through limbs that had been pinned too tightly into the small well. Penn's face was beet red when she finally stood up straight. As Caleb surveyed the hangar bay, he rubbed at the ache in the middle of his chest where the retracted landing pad had pressed painfully into him.

Kagata's shuttle was the only spacecraft in the bay that wasn't a Nightmare. There were nearly a dozen of them, all neatly arranged facing the bay doors for easy departure. Thankfully, they were alone in the compartment.

"Baron Kagata has the device," Penn said. "Should we go after it?"

"No," Caleb replied, shaking his head.

“But almost our entire planning meeting is on it.”

“Not the part where we confronted the Baroness. As far as Iagorth is concerned, she gets angry and storms out. If we’re right about where this Specter is headed, then it’s a more than even trade. But only if we don’t get caught.”

“Okay. So what now?”

“Now, we find somewhere safe to hide for a few days. With Ish and Vraxis in hibernation, and as long as nobody sees us, we’re good. On a ship this size, it shouldn’t be too hard to hide out.”

“Except we need to eat.”

“It’s only for a few days.”

“You don’t know how long it might be, and with Vraxis sleeping, I’m already feeling dead on my feet. You don’t feel it?”

“I do. Maybe not to the same extent you do. We’ll cross the food bridge when we get to it.”

They made their way to the smaller of two exits out of the bay, assuming it would lead to a more lightly traveled passageway. They were rewarded with a clear corridor leading deeper into the Specter. Picking their way along the passages, they remained alert for any sounds that might suggest approaching Legionnaires. Penn continued monitoring the tracker, only now they did their best to move away from the device, rather than toward it.

“You don’t think they’ll figure out there’s a transmitter on the comb, do you?” Penn asked softly as they padded along a passageway.

“Johan said it would take a pretty senior engineer to sus it out,” Caleb answered. “I doubt there’s anyone like that in the Legion. Most engineers don’t make suitable hosts for khoron.”

“Because they’re too boring?”

Caleb smiled. “Their logical minds aren’t as susceptible to control.”

“What does that say about us?”

“You’re a special case. You volunteered.”

“And you?”

“I’m just a dumb jarhead.”

“I know you don’t believe that.”

Caleb shrugged, putting a finger to his lips when he heard movement from around a bend further ahead in the passageway. They retreated to a hatch they’d passed a little way back and ducked inside. A service hatch, it left them taking up standing room only in a sea of wires and junction boxes.

“I bet we could raise some serious havoc in here,” Penn noted.

“I wonder why something this critical wasn’t secured. I would think it should be.”

“Not necessarily, when everyone on the ship is under the control of a worm.”

“Good point.” He scanned the wires. “But we do want to get where we’re going in one piece.”

They remained in the compartment for ten more minutes before peeking out. The coast was again clear, and they made it to a stairwell. The deck number helped Penn determine they had landed in one of the upper aft hangar bays.

“Of course, the lower foredecks should be the most quiet, as long as we stay clear of the forward hangar bay,” she said. “It might take us some time to get down there.”

“All we have right now is time.”

They started down the stairs, making it halfway to the lower decks before the sound of footfalls coming up the stairwell forced them out onto the closest deck. More incoming footfalls drove them to the nearest adjoining passageway, and they ducked around the corner just in time to avoid a pair of Legionnaires headed for the stairwell.



“We might need another way down,” Caleb said, noting the heavy traffic on this set of steps.

“Or we just happened across everyone going that way. We should stick with it.”

Caleb nodded. Since the Specter had the same interior as a Royal Navy Destroyer, she knew her way around a lot better than he did. They waited against the bulkhead in the adjacent passageway for a minute until the sounds of footfalls on the deck had faded completely into silence. Returning to the stairwell, Caleb paused when he felt the shift that signaled the Specter had entered hyperspace.

“Well, we’re on our way,” Penn said, noticing it too.

“Yeah, but to where?” Caleb replied.

“I can’t wait to find out,” Penn answered sarcastically. “I’m sure it’ll be a blast.”

Caleb smiled, and they regained the stairwell, making it down to Deck Three without further incident. Traveling forward along the central passageway, they had to divert twice to avoid two separate pairs of techs. One pair trailed a hover cart with a burnt out shield node for a power supply resting on it. Caleb imagined Lo’ane had delivered that minor bit of damage to the ship.

Reaching the bow area, the signs of activity faded almost completely away. There were fewer compartments here, and they were smaller, darker, and dustier than any on the upper decks, leaving Caleb certain that the crew rarely ventured down this far, unless they needed to fix something. There were no berths, supplies, equipment, or anything else in the compartments he and Penn checked in search of food and a soft place to lie down. Eventually, they settled in a small, empty room to rest and wait.

“So much for the Combine,” Penn said.

“I hate leaving our people to fend for themselves,” Caleb replied, thinking of Ettore and Vicki. They had returned to Callus, with Vicki eager to resume her duties at the hospital.

“At least we had time to load all the raylium armor and weapons onto Gorgon and Lo’ane before they left.”

“But we didn’t have time to make any more. And Johan’s idea to make the armor more impervious will never be more than that. An idea.”

“I don’t know how well it would have worked, anyway. Protection is one thing, but I think I would get claustrophobic in armor with no natural view out. It would be like fighting in an iron maiden. Well, without the spikes.” He smiled. “I’m willing to bet the equipment on Primary is the reason Crux attacked. He decided he didn’t want to risk letting us outfit our entire force in raylium. And timing his arrival with the pickup of the listening device let him fulfill two mission objectives at once.”

“You don’t think he came for Castra?”

“No. He had to know we would be ready to evacuate her at the first sign of trouble. And thanks to expansion variability, it’s challenging to sneak up on anyone. Although, that might be why he delivered such a large force. The more ships he sends, the better the odds that one of them will drop in close to the target. Which this ship did, but Lo’ane was waiting. Anyway, the Legion hasn’t harmed any of the civilians on the other planets they’ve garrisoned as long as those civilians didn’t give them any trouble. I expect it will be the same on Callus, assuming they bother taking over the Combine to begin with. It may not be worth it to Crux to spread his forces out even further. Especially once he realizes the Combine Navy left the area with Castra.”

Penn grinned. “So you’re saying everything is going according to plan.”

“It would have been nice to hold Primary Station longer. But we both knew that any time there would be a bonus. And considering this Specter might be headed for Iagorth’s home base, I would say things are going better than planned.”

Penn fell quiet for a few minutes, her expression suggesting she was lost in thought. Caleb leaned his head back against the bulkhead, trying to relax. He found it more difficult

without the familiar sense of Ishek in the back of his mind. He had never thought he would miss the symbiote so much and so quickly.

“Captain,” Penn said after a short time.

Caleb opened his eyes. “Don’t tell me. You want to eat.”

She laughed softly. “Not exactly. I was just noticing the emptiness I feel with Vraxis is in hibernation. He’s only been with me a few weeks, but I have this sense that I can’t live without him.”

“You can’t,” Caleb replied. “Just like I can’t live without Ish.”

“Right. But that’s what makes it work, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“The khoron aren’t parasites. They’re symbiotes. So after a while, they can’t live without their human hosts. And they become more eager to protect them.”

“That’s the underlying theory behind how I freed Jack and Amali from their Advocates’ wills.”

“Exactly,” Penn replied excitedly. “But so far, we’ve only tried to free people who are already under our control. Think about it, Cal. Khoron run this ship with human hosts. We’ve been overpowering them, killing them, to weaken the Specters we’ve engaged. Maybe we’ve been going about it all wrong?”

Caleb stared at her, wishing Ishek could chime in with his opinion. Though, since it was Penn’s idea and not his, he probably wouldn’t complain. “You’re saying we should try to free the humans on this ship.” He shook his head. “It won’t work. Forcing a khoron to choose between life and death doesn’t guarantee they’ll let their host have control. Some might rather die. Even if they do give control back to the host, it doesn’t guarantee the host will want to switch sides.”

“Understood. We’d have to be really careful and plan it out, not just shoot the first Legionnaire we see in the chest and hope for the best. But I think we can do it. And the reward if we succeed would be pretty damn high. Not just another

Specter for our fleet, but a Specter that Crux might not know isn't on his side anymore. You can't argue the benefits of surprise."

"I can't argue with any of the theory behind your idea," Caleb answered. "But the practice seems too risky. If we try to turn a host and it doesn't work, the khoron can send out an alarm to the rest of the ship. They'll be on us in no time, in numbers too great to overcome."

"I know you're right," Penn said. "But I can't just let it go. Don't close your mind to it yet, okay. Give me some more time to think it through."

Caleb grinned. "Like I said before, all we have right now is time."

## CHAPTER 29

They spent two days hiding out on Deck Three while the Specter traveled through hyperspace, only leaving their hideout for quick trips to a nearby cabin when they could relieve themselves. It didn't take long for the compartment to smell, but they didn't have many options. By the end of the second day, Penn had discovered another compartment with access to a pipe carrying drinkable water. With her knife, she'd put a tiny hole in the pipe, just large enough for a single drip to fall at a steady pace into a cup they'd found in the vacant cabin. As the third day wore on, both of their stomachs were in a competition to see which one could growl the loudest.

"We'll have to go up for food soon, or we'll be discovered down here for sure," Penn said in response to the rumbling.

Caleb put his hand on his unhappy stomach. He had gone hungry before. Uncomfortable, sure. But not impossible to handle. "I've been thinking about your idea."

"Which one?" she asked playfully.

"Did you have more than one?" he shot back. "I must have missed it. Your idea to try freeing the people on this ship."

"I thought we scuttled that one two days ago?"

"I haven't stopped weighing the pros and cons since you brought it up."

"And?"

"It still feels risky as hell, and probably doomed to failure. But there's a part of me that can't let it go. In their armor, it's

easy to forget the Legionnaires were human once. Loyal subjects of the Empire who I doubt ever thought they'd wind up in the situation they're in now. It's easy to forget they're slaves, something they undoubtedly don't want to be."

"To be honest, I wasn't even taking that into account. I was only thinking about how we could turn this situation to our favor."

"That's how we learn to see things. That our enemies aren't people, even when they are. It makes choosing to end their lives easier to live with. But they deserve a chance, if we can give them one."

"Does that mean you're agreeing to my plan?"

Caleb nodded. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained, right?"

"That's what I've heard."

"I'm sure you've been thinking about it, too. Where do we start?"

Penn smiled. "You know me so well. My instinct tells me to start at the top."

"The ship's captain?"

"Yes." She put up her hand. "Hear me out."

"Okay," Caleb agreed, putting his argument on hold.

"I know the captain will be the hardest person to reach unseen. But that's one good reason to target him first. If we can't get to him, we probably don't have much of a shot, anyway. Another good reason to go for him—we only need to gain control of the captain to gain control of the ship. As the top of the chain of command, any signs that he's not like he was before may go unnoticed. Besides, it would take a total mutiny to remove him from command." She smiled. "Okay, you can tell me why we should start with someone else now."

"I would never say that. Only that we should determine the return on investment. Going after the captain is diving in headfirst. It'll work out great, as long as there isn't a rock hidden under the water."

“In that respect, it doesn’t matter who we target. If they don’t turn, we’re toast. Right?”

“Right. So we might as well go right for the head of the snake. Okay. I’m in. Do you know where the captain’s quarters are?”

Penn nodded. “Yes. That doesn’t make it certain he’s staying there.”

“As a khoron host, he probably doesn’t care about human comforts,” Caleb agreed. “But I can’t think of a reason he’d want to sleep anywhere else. If the khoron gives his host a stiff neck, he’ll still feel it. What’s the best way to get there from here?”

“We’ll have to snake our way through the ship from the least-traveled areas toward the bridge. We can’t get close without navigating some pretty busy passageways.”

“What about ventilation? Could we crawl through an air vent or something?”

She considered it before shaking her head. “I don’t think you’ll fit. It would be a different story if Greaser were here.”

“Tech access passageways, like on the belt substations?”

“Access passageways?” Penn questioned.

“I guess not. That sounds like a no for shortcuts.”

She thought about it a little more. “I have a route in mind. It’s not short by any means. In fact, it’s the long way around. But any groups we pass should be limited in size and we should hear them coming with plenty of time to duck into a compartment that isn’t occupied.”

“As long as we don’t end up squished in the well of a shuttle again, I can live with that.”

“I’m not making any promises.”

“I only have one other question.”

“What’s that?”

“How are we going to keep our stomachs from giving us away?”

Penn laughed. “My route includes a stop at the galley.”

“I should have guessed.” Caleb stood up, stretching his limbs a little before offering her his hand to help her up. “One more thing,” he added as they moved toward the hatch. “Whatever happens, we can’t be afraid. They’ll smell the pheromones and come running.”

“Easier said than done. How do you stop yourself from being afraid?”

“For me, I try to replace it with anger. Think about what the Relyeh have done to the Empire, or what they’ve taken from you, or how they’ve ruined your life.”

“That won’t work,” Penn said. “Don’t get me wrong, I wish the Legion didn’t exist and Crux was still wasting away on his backwater planet. But without that, I wouldn’t have left the RAF and joined Graystone’s pirates. Without that, I wouldn’t...” she trailed off, looking away from him.

“Wouldn’t what?” he asked.

Her doubts had faded by the time she looked his way again. “Nevermind. I found my fearless place. I’m ready when you are.”

Caleb was sure Ishek would call him an idiot for not understanding where Penn was going with her statement. He knew her well enough to know not to ask again what she meant. If the time came when she wanted him to know what angered her, she’d tell him.

He had plenty of reasons to hate the Relyeh, from all the people he had lost on Earth when the xenotrife came all the way up to the xaxkluth that had killed Jii and what Iagorth would do if he ever found Castra. He let those thoughts fill his mind, creating a burning shield of rage around his heart.

“I’m ready,” he said. “Let’s do this.”



## CHAPTER 30

The hardest part for Caleb was maintaining his shield of anger while resisting the urge to attack the Legionnaires they came near as they made their way up from the lower decks. He had to remind himself that the only Relyeh inside the dark armor were the small worms embedded in the human host's necks, or with the Advocates, under their arms.

Being as careful as possible, it took nearly two hours for he and Penn to work their way up from the lower decks to more populated areas of the ship. Crew members nearly caught them on two occasions, the first time when a pair of techs wandered through the passageway they were in, the men deep in a heated discussion about some missing wiring connectors, and the hatch to the compartment he and Penn tried to hide in wouldn't open. They'd plastered themselves against the bulkhead in a recess that left them only half hidden. They were fortunate that neither tech had looked back after walking past them.

The second time they were nearly caught because of Caleb's rumbling stomach. The Legionnaires in the corridor heard the grumbling noise, but thankfully could not place it, and only hearing it once, moved on after a pause.

Fortunately, they'd been able to walk right into the food storage compartment behind the smaller of two on board galleys. Being in hyperspace, there was little reason for anyone to use the secondary galley near engineering, so it was closed down.

Once inside the compartment, Penn led Caleb past a row of refrigeration units and a built-in freezer to several boxes stacked against the bulkhead in the back corner. “On a typical Navy ship, this compartment would be secured. I figured on a ship crewed by Relyeh, there wouldn’t be a need to prevent wayward spacers from raiding the larder.”

Caleb grinned at her. “And you were right. Let’s eat.”

They stepped into the compartment, the hatch closing behind them. They started opening some boxes stacked against the bulkhead. Penn opened two boxes filled with ration bars. Caleb did the same.

“Pro, the door was open,” he said. “Con, all the boxes contain the same flavor rations.”

“Since it’s not Thanksgiving Dinner, I’ll take it as a pro,” Penn answered, grinning.

Caleb shook his head. “I don’t see how anybody could not like Thanksgiving Dinner.”

They emptied one box, putting a few bars in their pockets and left a few aside to eat before moving the almost empty box to the rear of the stack where it would hopefully not be discovered too soon.

Penn opened two of the refrigerator doors before she found something to wash down the dry bars. Plastic bottles of an awful tasting drink. The pairing didn’t make for a full course meal by any means, but it was better than nothing, filling their bellies and satisfying their hunger. Ready to move out again, Penn pulled the compartment’s hatch open and froze. Caleb quickly grabbed her around the waist and yanked her back inside when he spotted a pair of Legionnaires, sans armor, come around the corner.

“Damn,” he cursed, shutting the hatch, uncertain whether the two soldiers had seen them. Just as problematic, they were headed straight for the storage compartment.

“We’re trapped in here.”

Caleb looked back at the freezer. “There’s one more door to hide behind.”

“I’d rather be squished in the shuttle’s lander well again.”

“Come on.” Caleb retreated to the freezer and opened the door, immediately hit by a blast of frigid air. His arm still around her, he pulled Penn inside and closed the door behind them, leaving them in pitch black cold.

“What the hell are they doing here?” she whispered, her back flush to Caleb’s chest.

“If I had to guess, they’re raiding the larder,” he whispered in her ear.

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“It’s a symbiotic bond. If the host is especially hungry, then the khoron might feel it too.”

“Just our luck.”

“We’ve been pretty lucky so far.” Caleb felt the vibration when the storage room hatch opened. “They have no reason to come in here, everything’s too frozen to eat.”

“I’ll be too frozen to move in a few minutes.”

Trying to listen, Caleb didn’t reply. In the total darkness, all he had at the moment to rely on was his sense of feeling and his hearing. He could feel Penn’s accelerated breathing beneath his palm, feel her nervousness in the twitch of her shoulders against his chest. Unfortunately, the freezer door was too thick to hear much more than the low drone of the soldiers’ voices.

“I wonder if the host’s hunger being strong enough to drive the khoron here might mean they’re more susceptible to the host’s will.”

“It’s not a totally unreasonable thought,” Penn said softly. “Would be nice to have Ish or Vraxis to confirm it.”

“It makes sense though, doesn’t it?”

“What are you suggesting?”

“They aren’t wearing armor. And they aren’t supposed to be here.”

“I just pulled my blaster. I’m game, Cal, if you are.”

“Hit them fast, one shot in the gut, grab them, cover their mouths, and hope their khoron don’t have time to call for help. Remember, no fear.”

“Right. Anger.”

Caleb let go of Penn and gripped the freezer’s handle, drawing his blaster with his other hand. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

He shoved the door open, and Penn rushed out first. He barely made it through the doorway before she gut-shot both Legionnaires. Both were standing in the middle of the compartment with ration bars in hand. They stared at Penn and Caleb with wide eyes as they dropped the bars to clamp their hands to the wounds.

“There’s only one way you’re going to survive those wounds,” Caleb said. “Use your energy to heal the wound, and put your host in charge.”

“N...never,” one of them said.

“I know you,” the other one said.

Caleb grabbed him, putting his blaster to the back of his neck. “Call for help, and you’ll be dead before me.”

“W... wait!” the other Legionnaire said. “I... I’m... I’m back.” A grin split his face. “I’m back!” He started laughing.

“If you want to live, khoron...” Caleb pressed his blaster harder into the neck of the Legionnaire he held captive. “... I suggest you do the same. If you know who I am, then you know you have a better chance of survival with me now, then with the Legion.”

The Legionnaire’s face twisted, but the scowl faded as the khoron realized he was right. If he raised an alarm, he died. If he did nothing, he died. His only chance was to give his host control, heal the wound, and join Caleb’s side of the fight.

The scowl vanished, replaced with a smile. “You...you set me free,” he said to Caleb. “After all this time...” He froze,

breaking down into a sob.

The other man put his arm over his friend's shoulders, looking at Penn. "How did you know that shooting us would work like that?"

"It's not my first time," she replied. "But it's never a guarantee. I was ready to kill you if I had to."

His face paled, but he nodded. "I'm Corporal Jeffrey Hines, of the Nobukkian Territorial Guards. Formerly, I suppose."

"Penn."

He gave her a broad smile. "I can't tell you how good it is to meet you."

She nodded. "Likewise."

"What's the name of your khoron?" Caleb asked.

"His name? I don't know."

"Demand it from him. You have about thirty minutes to gain control, or he'll reestablish himself and we'll all be dead." He looked at the other man. "Same goes for you."

"It's Krishax," Jeffrey said. "His name is Krishax."

"Mine is Lariv," the other man said. "And I'm Zane. Zane Nguyen."

"What's your rank?" Penn asked.

"Rank? Lariv has a rank, I suppose. I'm not military. I was a real estate agent. It feels like three lifetimes ago. The Legion invaded, they grabbed me and held me while Lariv dug into my neck. After that, I could see and feel everything, but I had no control. Until now."

"You have to seize control," Penn said. "You need to be stronger than the khoron, and force it to choose between healing you and controlling you."

Both men looked down at their wounds. Their hands were covered in blood, but the flow had slowed thanks to their khoron.

“The khoron are slaves,” Caleb said. “They have no choice but to serve their master. At least, that’s what they think because it’s all they’ve ever known. Krishax and Lariv, listen to me. You don’t need to be subservient. Yes, you’ll need to work with your host to survive, but the bond can be rewarding. As Legionnaires, you aren’t free. But you can be. There’s another way.”

“Krishax says that’s not true,” Jeff said. “If Iagorth doesn’t destroy him, then Shub’Nigu will.”

“He hasn’t destroyed me yet,” Caleb replied. “They’re both powerful Ancients, but there’s strength in numbers. And our numbers are growing.”

“Our numbers?” Zane asked. “Lariv says you aren’t carrying a khoron.”

“His name is Ishek, and he’s hibernating right now to avoid detection.”

“My Advocate’s name is Vraxis,” Penn added.

The two men looked at one another. “Could he be right?” Jeff asked.

“All I know is that I don’t want to be here,” Zane answered. “I want to go home.”

“Then you need to help us fight,” Penn said. “It’s the only way.”

Jeff turned to Caleb. “What can we do?”

Caleb smiled. Two more Legionnaires on their side was something they could really use. “We need to get close to the captain. Do you think you can help?”

Zane shook his head. “Not with the captain, no. You won’t be able to turn him against Iagorth. His Advocate is sanctified, whatever that means.”

“I guess we dodged a bullet on that one,” Penn said.

“We also just ran out of options,” Caleb replied. “We need a new plan.”

“We can’t help you with the captain,” Jeff said. “That doesn’t mean we can’t help you. I know it’s a risk, but you need to trust us.”

Caleb nodded. “We set you free for a reason. If you can help us, we can help you.”

“Lariv can steer us clear of the others,” Zane said. “Follow us.”

## CHAPTER 31

Jeff and Zane led Caleb and Penn from the galley's storeroom, walking confidently along the ship's passageways, speeding up or slowing down depending on where their khoron symbiotes detected other crew members. Since the rest of the Relyeh had no idea Krishax and Lariv were compromised, they didn't confront the pair in the corridors or act as though anything was out of the ordinary.

It wasn't long before they reached a secured hatch closer to the center of the ship, a handful of decks beneath the bridge. Jeff had clearance for the door and opened it without a problem, leading them into the armory. They had just stepped over the threshold when another Legionnaire without armor stepped out from behind a rack of weaponry right in front of them, stopping them dead in their tracks. For a split second, Caleb was certain their two guides had betrayed him and Penn, until Jeff lunged at the Legionnaire, putting her in a chokehold.

"Shoot her," Jeff said to Penn, who fired a single round into her gut, just like she had with Jeff and Zane. "Mithrak..." Jeff growled in her ear. "... this is our chance at freedom. Don't resist. Let Keller take over."

"Krishax..." The woman groaned. "... are you insane?"

"We're speaking clearly for the first time. Do you want to be a slave to Crux and Iagorth for the rest of your life, or make your own choices?"

"This is treason."



“This is necessary,” Jeff countered. “Help us. Heal Keller.”

The woman’s eyes rolled up as if she were looking inside herself. Her expression changed from anger to confusion to fear. Then she sagged in his arms. “I’m...free?” she sobbed. “It’s been so long...”

Jeff turned her around and pulled her into an embrace. She cried against his chest while he looked back at Caleb and Penn. “If we can get close enough, we can do this with many of our fellow Legionnaires. Many of us want to be free, we just never knew how to do it. We never had hope that it was something we could do on our own.”

“We know who is most likely to see reason,” Zane added. “Like Keller here.”

She pulled away from Jeff, turning to Caleb, her hand clasped to her bloody wound. “I know who you are, Captain Card. I’ve heard about you and your symbiote. I never believed it could be possible for humans and khoron to co-exist.”

“It’s not just possible,” Penn said. “It can be a benefit to both human and khoron. You’ll need to work together to accomplish it.”

Keller nodded. “What’s your plan?”

“To convince as many of us as we can to change sides,” Zane said. “The ones we know would be more willing. And then, take over the ship.”

“Will there be enough of us to seize the ship?” Keller asked.

“With our help, there will be,” Caleb replied. “But we need to do this carefully. One Legionnaire at a time. We can’t afford to be found out until our forces have grown large enough.”

“In the meantime, you two should suit up in armor,” Jeff said. “It will allow us to move around the ship a little more freely and protect you if things go poorly.”

“We should suit up, too,” Zane suggested. “We don’t want to be seen in these bloody uniforms.”

“I just finished my shift,” Keller said, looking down at her wound. It had already stopped bleeding. “Incredible.” She looked back up at Caleb. “It will be suspicious if I get back in my armor. I’m sure I can get to my rack without being seen. No problem.”

“Go ahead then,” Caleb said. “Wait there for us, for now. Krishax will let Mithrak know when it’s time.”

Jeff pulled a blaster off the weapons rack. “Take this. You’ll need it later.”

Keller took the gun and tucked it into the back of her waistband, hiding it beneath her shirt. “This is a moment I’ve dreamed about from the second I lost control of my body. I want so much to hate Mithrak for what he did to me. At the same time...” She trailed off, again looking at her rapidly healing wound. “Maybe it will all work out for the best.”

Caleb nodded. “I think maybe it will for you. Just remember, Mithrak has been held captive just like you and for probably a lot longer.”

She smiled and nodded. “I understand. I’ll be waiting.” She hurried out through the hatch.

“We should hurry too,” Zane said once she was gone. “The shift rotation isn’t far behind Keller’s.”

They circled around the weapons racks to where the combat armor was stored. Jeff and Zane claimed their usual suits before helping Caleb and Penn find armor to fit them. They were still in the armory, claiming plasma rifles and blasters when the Legionnaires in the next rotation arrived. Finding it hard to hate them after having helped three of their comrades regain control of their lives, Caleb had to work hard to hold onto his shield of anger..

He had no other choice.

“What about them?” Caleb whispered to Jeff as the unit turned down an aisle and moved out of sight. “Are they good converts?”

“Two of them, yes. The other three, no,” he replied. “Too risky to do it now.”

Caleb nodded, joining Penn in following Jeff and Zane out the door. They made their way to a more secluded corridor before regrouping.

“How many Legionnaires are there on the ship?” Caleb asked.

“If you’re only counting fighters, four hundred,” Jeff replied. “If you include the techs and bridge crew, around five hundred.”

“If they’re not armored fighters, I’m not too worried about them. Do you think we can turn two hundred bonded pairs?”

“Some of our bonds, like with Jeffrey and me,” Zane said, “are stronger with our symbiotes than those of others and I think that actually made it easier for us to turn our khorons to our side. Many of us are former RAF like Jeffrey, or just civilians like me. But some are former prisoners, stains on the galaxy before they hosted a khoron. They’d rather see the galaxy burn, or at least delight in causing chaos. I don’t think they can be turned, not that we’d want them with us anyway.”

“Criminals like them personify what the Relyeh are all about,” Caleb said. “Like Crux, himself. This isn’t only a fight for the Spiral. It’s also a fight for human and khoron emancipation. At least for the khoron who want it.”

“We should go find some more who do,” Penn said. “The sooner we build up our forces, the better I’ll feel.”

“Agreed,” Caleb replied. “Where should—”

“What is the meaning of this?” a deep voice snapped from behind them. Caleb froze and then turned slowly, keeping his face hidden in the reflection of the passageway lights off his faceplate.

Baron Kagata stood at the intersection in the adjoining passageway, glaring at them with his hands balled into fists.

## CHAPTER 32

“I hate that arrogant idiot,” Penn grated as they watched Kagata strut off. Once they’d convinced him they were only discussing their security detail routes, he’d dismissed them as inelegant boors and walked away.

“Jeff, do you know how Kagata is connected to Crux?” Caleb asked.

“No,” Jeff replied. “He only came on board after we arrived in the Combine. I’ve seen him in the passageways, always glaring at the Legionnaires. I even heard him browbeating Captain North. He thinks he’s superior to all of us, human and Relyeh alike.”

“And Iagorth is going to sanctify that idiot?” Penn said. “Stars protect us.”

“We should keep moving,” Zane suggested. “The longer we stand here talking about it...”

“We definitely don’t want anyone else questioning us,” Caleb agreed.

They started down the corridor, making their way through a series of passageways before reaching an open hatch leading into a small compartment with four bunks stacked atop one another against three walls and lockers along the bulkhead of the fourth wall. A man slept in one bed, but his eyes opened as they entered.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded, just before Jeff grabbed him and pulled him out of bed. The man didn’t resist,

going limp as a rag doll in response to the rough handling. “Did I displease the master?” he blurted out.

“No, Gregory,” Jeff replied. “We’re not here to hurt you. We’re here to help you.” He nodded to Penn, who shot the man in his shirtless stomach before Jeff let him go.

Crying out and clutching his wound, Gregory fell to his knees. “Not hurt me?” he blubbered, looking up at Penn and then Jeff. “I’m gonna die!”

“No, you’re not. Yarix, heal the wound and set Gregory free,” Zane said. “We’re seizing control of our destiny. Join us.”

Like Keller in the armory, Gregory seemed confused and then surprised as he glanced down at his wound as the blood flow eased. He looked up and grinned at Zane. “We have a choice again? Both of us?” he asked, the pain of his wound lessening.

“Yes,” Zane answered. “Never again will you be slaves to Crux, as long as you work together.”

“We’re in,” Gregory announced. “What do you need us to do?”

Jeff turned to Caleb. “Gregory is a hangar technician. He maintains the Nightmares.”

“Not all alone. I have a team.”

“You have a new team now. I’m Caleb Card.” He put out his hand.

“I’ve heard of you. And your Advocate,” Gregory replied, shaking Caleb’s hand. Caleb helped him back to his feet. “I couldn’t believe it was possible for khoron and humans to coexist. I asked Yarix so many times if we could work together instead of being enemies bonded to one another. He always refused. He said it was too dangerous to counter the will of the master. That we would both end up dead. But now...you’re here...proving him wrong and freeing us.”

“Not everyone. Only those who can be freed,” Caleb specified. He looked at the trio of free Legionnaires. “We’re

like a virus now, infecting the crew members we pick out as converts. I think it's time we split up, so we can increase the velocity of our spread. Penn, I want you to go with Gregory and Zane. I'll work with Jeffrey. Once we pick up another convert, we'll work in threes and then split up again. Jeff and Zane, you'll lead the next group once we get there, and so on. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Jeffrey replied.

"Aye, Captain," Penn said. "We won't be able to communicate with one another."

"Not directly, but as long as what we're doing goes unnoticed, we can pass messages to one another through our teams."

"We need to be careful, Caleb," Zane said. "If there's too much random activity across the Collective, others will notice. Even if they aren't suspicious, they will become curious."

"In that case, let's keep the chatter to a minimum. We'll reach out to one another each hour for a progress report. If you get in trouble, do your best to isolate the problem to your group. I know it's counter to your nature, but if we sell each other out, this whole thing will fall apart in a hurry, and everyone loses."

Zane laughed. "Lariv says you know khoron well. I'll do my best to keep him in line."

"All right. Let's do this."

They split up at the hatch, with Penn and Zane following Gregory toward the stern. Caleb watched Penn until she disappeared with Gregory around the corner into the adjoining corridor. He shook off his concern for her as he, Jeff, Brijesh and Suki continued deeper into the bowels of the ship. They made their way silently through Deck Fourteen before heading down two more decks where they came across a pair of Legionnaires walking toward them. Caleb slowed, looking over at Jeffrey for guidance.

Jeffrey nodded once and drew his blaster, shooting both soldiers in the gut without breaking stride. The suddenness of

it caused both men to react instinctively, both grabbing at their wounds as they fell to their knees, shock flickering across their faces.

“Do not contact your superiors,” Jeffrey implored, rushing over to them. Like with the others, he quickly explained the situation and solicited their help. And like with most of the others, they and their symbiotes were eager to work together to not only survive their wounds but to regain their freedom.

They continued on, locating isolated Legionnaires either by themselves or in pairs, wounding them and forcing their khoron symbiotes to relinquish control and heal their bodies. By the end of the first hour, they had freed six more Legionnaires, splitting the groups three more times. At the first progress report, Penn relayed they had done similarly, their efforts speeding up as Caleb figured they would.

By the end of the third hour, nearly a hundred khoron had changed sides. It was a formidable group, strengthened by their powerfully strong morale. With the human minds under control, their thirst for freedom intensified in the bonded khoron, ensuring their continued cooperation..

By the end of the fourth hour, the effort had understandably slowed, the number of potential targets nearly exhausted. With over one hundred and fifty Legionnaires on their side, they had made tremendous progress in a relatively short time.

But it wasn't enough. Not yet. Caleb wanted to give as many of the khoron as possible a chance to change sides.

He followed Brijesh and Suki into the head outside of berthing for the lower hangar bay. Another maintenance tech was in the communal shower, washing off grease and other grime. The sound of the running water prevented him from hearing them as they entered, and Suki surgically struck him in the abdomen with a blaster round. The man went down one knee, clutching his wound as the water carried his blood to the drain, his eyes narrowed in anger.

“What is the meaning of this? You commit treason against Crux. You will pay for this.”

A cautious chill ran through Caleb. It was a different reaction than he had gotten from any of the others they'd targeted.

"Sanjay," Brijesh said. "It's okay. We're here to free you. Vrex, give up your control. Heal Sanjay's wound, save your life and the life of your host."

"And allow him superiority?" the man asked, grimacing in pain as he dropped to both knees, one arm breaking his fall.

"Not superiority," Suki said. "Equivalency."

"How can a human be equivalent to a Relyeh? Have you lost your minds?"

"We can be free," Brijesh said again. "Free to do as we please, instead of following the will of an unscrupulous master."

Sanjay slumped a little more, the wound still gushing blood while Vrex refused to repair it.

"We are khoron," Vrex said through his host. "The will of the master is the reason we exist. He made us."

"Yes, but we don't need to be slaves to him. We have free will, or Suki and I, and our symbiotes wouldn't have been able to make this decision for ourselves. You and your symbiote can make the same choice."

Sanjay looked up at them, eyes softening for a moment. Then they narrowed again, his face tensing. "No." Spurred on by his symbiote, he stumbled to his feet. "There is only one choice. And that is to serve." He threw himself at Suki. She shot him, backpedaling when he didn't go down again. Wounding him two more times, he ultimately fell dead on the floor.

A red light flashed overhead. In the corridor outside the head, klaxons rang out.

*Ish!* Caleb snapped forcefully in his mind as he squeezed his arm against his side to put pressure on the Advocate. *Ish!*  
*Time to wake up.*



He sensed Ishek's presence pour back into his consciousness, filling the hole his absence had left. At once, Caleb felt stronger and more alert.

*Red flashing lights. A blaring alarm. I'm glad you woke me up in time for the party. What do we call this one?*

*Mutiny, Caleb replied.*

## CHAPTER 33

*Penn, are you there?* Caleb asked, hoping she had woken Vraxis when the alarm went off. There was no reason to hide their symbiotes now that they had been discovered.

*I'm here,* she replied. *All hell is breaking loose.*

*Isn't it glorious?* Ishek commented.

*Grab everyone from our side you find and lead them to the reactors,* Caleb said. *We can't rule out the enemy destroying the ship to stop us.*

*Aye, Captain.*

*I'll head for the bridge with my group.* Caleb turned to Suki. "Inform the others, it's time to fight."

"Already on it," she answered.

Caleb hurried out of the head, eyes narrowing against the glare of the flashing lights. Plasma rifle in hand, he guided Suki and Brijesh along the passageway, freezing when a group of Legionnaires turned the corner. Offering curt waves, they went left, and Caleb relaxed when they headed away from them instead of passing them.

"We're going for the bridge, and I want—"

Interrupted by a hail of plasma bolts hitting them from behind, Caleb whirled around to return fire.

"Go, Captain." The convert next to him stepped in front of Caleb, taking a hit to his chest that had been meant for Caleb. Knowing the raylium armor would protect them all from

plasma hits for some time, he rushed down the corridor, escaping with his team while several mutineers held the oncoming Legionnaires back.

He still took a couple of plasma bolts to the back of his armor with little effect before reaching the end of the passageway. Suki took the lead there, guiding him along what he assumed would be the best route to the bridge. It wasn't long before another group of khoron-infected Legionnaires entered the corridor through a hatch and immediately opened fire on them. Suki and Brijesh returned fire.

Caleb kept moving, sprinting down the corridor toward the enemy, his head lowered to reduce the chance of being hit in the face. One of the Legionnaires dropped ahead of him, courtesy of Ishek. A second collapsed a moment later. Caleb reached the last two, barreling into one and smashing him into the bulkhead. Caleb ricocheted off him, grabbing the other by the throat and slamming her down hard on the deck. He held her there, glaring down through her faceplate. "You don't have to die today," he ground out. "Forget about following the will of Crux and Iagorth. Help us fight them."

He could see her desire to be free flicker in her eyes, but that part of her, her humanity, wasn't strong enough. "I will die a loyal servant," she vowed, grabbing for his rifle but succeeding only in catching the bolt he fired through her faceplate.

*I hate having to kill them.*

*You tried, Ishek replied. That is all you can do.*

With the corridor clear, Suki and Brijesh joined him, and they continued on, the fighting intensifying in corridors throughout the ship. They passed another small group of Legionnaires engaged in a pitched firefight. Outnumbered, their armor gave them an enormous advantage, but it worked only to delay the outcome.

*Captain, Penn said. We're nearing Engineering. The fighting is heavy, but Vraxis helps to keep the momentum in our favor. We should be there within a few minutes.*

*I copy, Caleb answered. We're still a ways out from the bridge, but the situation is similar. Keep at it.*

*Aye, Captain.*

Caleb tried not to worry about Penn as he kept moving with his team, reaching the elevators leading up toward the Specter's bridge. He hit the call button and waited with Suki and Brijesh, the sounds of battle echoing around them. They were still outside the elevator when a large group of Legionnaires arrived. They lowered their weapons, offering a wave as the others had before. On drawing closer, they brought their rifles up suddenly, moving to attack at close range. Two of the Legionnaires fired on Suki, another pair on Brijesh. A single fighter took aim at Caleb, only to collapse when Ishek overpowered him, buying Caleb precious seconds.

The surprise ambush saw his two mutineers shot through their faceplates, their bodies dropping on either side of Caleb and leaving him alone with the four opponents. The doors to the elevator opened just then, and he backpedaled into it, covering his face with his arms. Plasma bolts scored his raylium armor along his forearms and upper chest. One of the Legionnaires tried to force his way into the cab, pausing there as his face changed from a sneer into a knowing grin as Ishek turned him around. Under Ishek's control, he knocked the rifle from the hands of the other Legionnaires. Throwing wild punches, he allowed the door to close and Caleb to escape.

"Legionnaire!" a familiar voice demanded, as Caleb discovered he wasn't in the elevator alone. "What is the meaning of this? You're all supposed to be loyal to your master."

Caleb turned slowly, eyes crossing over not just Baron Kagata, but the other members of the nobility he had seen departing the shuttle. "Are you loyal to the master?" he said, making sure not to swivel enough for the baron to see his face.

Unwilling to admit being subservient in front of the other nobles, Kagata scoffed. "It's a business deal, not servitude. Not that I need to explain myself to you. You're nothing more

than a worm wrapped in a soft outer layer of muscle and bone, wrapped in a hard shell.”

“You should be careful how you speak to me,” Caleb said.

“Nonsense. I know you’re under orders to deliver us safely to Achnea. You couldn’t harm a hair on my head if you wanted to.”

“As if you had any,” one noble commented, drawing laughter from the others. *The ship was in the middle of a mutiny, and they seemed strangely confident their side would win.*

*Perhaps they don’t comprehend the true scope of the fighting?* Ishek suggested. *They certainly don’t know what it means on a larger scale.*

“I expect you to protect us,” Kagata continued. “The others did. It’s the only reason we made it to the lift alive.”

“I won’t let anyone else hurt you,” Caleb answered, returning his gaze to the front of the elevator while Ishek chuckled at his choice of words.

“Do you think there’s anything to worry about?” a woman Caleb remembered as Baroness of the planet Cillian. Like Kagata, she had come without her spouse. “There’s no chance Iagorth can lose, is there?”

*I stand corrected. One of them has half a brain.*

Caleb didn’t answer before the cab stopped, reaching the deck the bridge was on. A group of Legionnaires waited outside the doors as they opened, ready to shoot until they saw Kagata and the nobles. They dropped back a few steps to give them space to emerge, only to find themselves under attack from the adjoining passageway.

“Wait!” Caleb said, putting out his hand to hold the nobles back.

“Perhaps we should choose a different deck,” one of the other nobles said.

“We need to get to the bridge,” Caleb answered. “It’s the safest place on the ship. Just hold here a moment.”

Caleb stayed back with them while the Legionnaires outside the cab took heavy fire from the mutineers. When they tried to duck into the elevator for cover, he pushed them back out. “Protect the nobility, you spineless worms!” he shouted, urging Iagorth’s khoron to stay in the open. A second group of friendlies caught the defenders in a crossfire, and within seconds they had succumbed to the assault.

“We should go,” Kagata said, seeing their side had lost. “Now!”

“The bridge is the safest place on the ship,” Caleb repeated.

“What does that matter if we don’t live long enough to reach it?”

Caleb glanced back at the baron. His face was red with anger, hands balled into fists. He looked ready to throw a tantrum like a petulant child. “I told you, I won’t let anyone else hurt you.”

“And how do you propose to protect us from stars know how many disloyal Legionnaires are on this ship?”

The mutineer Legionnaires approached the cab, led by Jeffrey.

“Captain?” he said on seeing Caleb with the nobles.

“Nobody told me this ship was infested with rats,” Caleb said, motioning to Kagata. “We need someone to watch them.”

“You...you’re one of them?” the Baroness of Cillian asked.

“Why didn’t you kill us?” another noble asked.

Caleb turned around, only now letting Kagata get a look at him. “Because unlike the alien you’ve chosen to side with, who aims to destroy everything you care about, assuming you care about anything, I’m not a monster.”

“You!” Kagata cried, face twisting in fury. “How are you here? Iagorth assured me—”

“Iagorth thinks he has a lot more control than he really does. He’s in no position to assure anyone, anything.” He turned back to his mutineers. “Find somewhere to lock them up,” he told Jeff. A pair of rebel Legionnaires came forward. “Yes, sir,” they replied. “Iagorth will kill you,” Kagata growled as he passed Caleb, his face a mask of rage. Caleb stepped out of the elevator cab to join with Jeff and his force of over a dozen. “You can’t stand against him. No one can.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Caleb replied.

“Your Advocate is awake,” Jeff noticed, grinning.

“I knew he wouldn’t want to miss the fun. Do we have enough nearby to take the bridge?”

“Let’s find out.”

## CHAPTER 34

*Captain, we've breached Engineering, Penn reported as Caleb, Jeff, and over two dozen friendly Legionnaires closed on the bridge. You were right. They were trying to melt the core and cause a chain reaction to destroy the ship.*

*How close was it? Caleb asked.*

*Five more minutes, and we wouldn't be having this conversation.*

*Nice work. We're nearing the bridge. I also ran into an old friend on the way.*

*Kagata?*

*How'd you guess?*

*It's not rocket science, Cal. Are we winning?*

*I don't know. Caleb tapped Jeff on the shoulder. "What's our status?"*

*"There are still several firefights taking place across the ship," he replied. "But on a whole, we are relatively evenly matched. Once we take the bridge and the reactors, we'll have control over the critical functions. With any luck, that will diminish the willingness of the less intelligent khoron to continue fighting."*

*"We already have the reactors and all of engineering," Caleb informed him. "We'll claim the bridge soon. I'm sure of it."*



Jeff smiled. "I believe you. We're in good shape, Captain Card. The bridge is just ahead. Iagorth's khoron await us there."

"The only way past them is to go through them," Caleb agreed. *Ish, are you ready?*

*I am prepared.*

*Still no activity from Captain North?*

*No, but I don't expect him to remain out of the fight forever. I am concerned this may be a trap.*

*You can't really call it a trap. He isn't leading us to the bridge. It's our only viable target.*

*It will not be as easy to enter as you think.*

*We should attack him from the Collective.*

*That may be what he's waiting for. We don't know if he's carrying a moiety.*

*Iagorth said he would meet the nobles at the destination. Doesn't that suggest the captain is clean?*

*I thought that may be the case before, but now I'm not so sure.*

*Because Kagata named the destination?*

*Yes. If Kagata already knew the planet, why did Iagorth not say he would meet him on Achnea, unless he suspected we were listening in?*

*Perhaps he surmised the listening device was compromised. Which it is.*

*Or he saw us slip into the shuttle's lander well. We just don't know for sure, but I'm suspicious, and that means we need to be careful. We have enough here to reach Captain North conventionally.*

*I hope you are right.*

"Free People of the Legion," Jeff shouted, his voice echoing along the passageway as he raised his rifle. "Attack!" He flourished the rifle, jerking it up and down over his head,

to urge the other Legionnaires forward toward the last corner before reaching the bridge and the barricade at its doors. Free Legionnaires rushed past Jeff and Caleb, the corridor allowing them to charge three abreast. In corridors next to theirs, additional friendly forces copied the charge, closing in on the defenders from three sides.

The first three Legionnaires ahead of Caleb reached the corner, the charge stalling almost instantly as they collapsed one after another without the enemy opening fire. The line behind them dropped a few seconds later, the assault breaking like waves on the shore.

*I told you so*, Ishek said in response to North's powerful attack over the Collective. *He's dropping them like flies.*

Three more Legionnaires stumbled and fell dead to the deck.

"Jeff, they need to hibernate. Get them off the Collective," Caleb cried, the attack quickly falling apart. *Penn, I need help. North is decimating our offensive.*

*Vraxis and I are on it*, she replied.

*Ish, give me a boost, and then keep an eye on Penn.*

*Beast mode incoming.*

The familiar tingle ran through Caleb just before Ish faded from his consciousness, his symbiote joining Penn on the Collective. The Free Legionnaires had stopped dying, the khoron retreating into themselves to avoid North's detection. The human fighters went around the corner, immediately hitting a barrage of plasma fire that tore into their armor, threatening to burn through in seconds under its volume.

As he rushed forward, Caleb once more wished he had brought Hiro's sword with him. Bypassing the last two rows of Free Legionnaires, he activated the maglock on his gloves and leaped to the overhead. Twisting and grabbing on with hands and feet, he tucked his head in and crawled blindly along the overhead on all fours. Sporadically, he took glancing fire as the Free Legionnaires recovered from their initial losses.

A quick look revealed nearly forty Legionnaires blocking the doors onto the bridge, energy shields arrayed ahead of them to absorb the Free Legionnaire's fire. Of course, the shields weren't designed to go all the way to the ceiling or there would be no open air for them to shoot through. Caleb threw himself forward into that space, tackling two of the enemy Legionnaires as he released the maglock to his boots and then his gloves, dropping back down to the deck.

Surrounded by a multitude of Iagorth's Relyeh, Caleb grabbed his blaster and tackled one of the enemy, firing into the faceplate, the close range allowing the blast to go right through the transparency, instantly killing the Legionnaire. He rolled off the body, shooting another before coming up on one knee behind their line of defense. A Legionnaire turned his rifle on Caleb, only to have him bat it away and then barrel over the enemy, knocking him flat. Caleb pushed him into another, disrupting his aim. With the strength granted him by Ishek's boost, he threw the Legionnaire into one of the energy shields, knocking it aside. Right away, the Free Legionnaires shifted their aim to fire through the opening, killing one of Iagorth's Legionnaire's.

Caleb took a number of plasma bolts to his armor. He ignored them, keeping one hand in front of his face as he fired his blaster point-blank, or kicked and shoved the enemy out of his way. When he had the chance, he knocked them into the energy shields to disrupt the defenses.

*Cal... Ishek's voice was strained. Penn needs help. The Captain is stronger than we expected.*

*I'm a little busy, Ish,* Caleb replied, putting his fist into the faceplate of another of Iagorth's Legionnaires. The transparency cracked, and he brought his blaster up, his shot smashing the Legionnaire's faceplate and destroying his face. He turned toward another when a third Legionnaire threw himself into him, knocking his legs out from under him.

Landing on his rear, Caleb kicked up at the enemy before she could get a bead on his faceplate. His boot caught her elbow, knocking her off balance. Scissoring his legs around her ankle, he pulled her down and rolled sideways just in time

to avoid taking a bolt to his face. Reaching behind him, he grabbed the ankle of the Legionnaire who'd fired on him and yanked his foot out from under him, taking him down, too. Two more Legionnaires took aim at him. Caleb dropped his blaster to cover his face with both hands, the plasma bolts sinking into the backs of his gloves, piercing them and burning his skin almost to the bone. Before they could fire a second round, a barrage of fire from the Free Legionnaires poured into them, removing Caleb from danger.

*She's going to die, Cal!* Ishek screamed.

He rolled onto his stomach, dropping his head to the deck to play dead. There was no guarantee the enemy Legionnaires would buy it. He could only hope the Free Legionnaires would keep him safe as he turned his attention toward the Collective, joining Ishek in the darkness of the pocket universe. He followed him, rushing toward the light that was Penn. Despite Vraxis' best efforts, North's dark tendrils had almost overcome her.

Caleb and Ishek pressed into her presence on the Collective. She didn't resist their aid, opening her mind to them so they could help her push North back. Caleb felt the strain of trying to resist him. His Advocate was stronger than any Caleb had encountered before, the sanctification process making it perfect.

But there was more.

Even though Caleb hadn't penetrated North's defenses, or even attacked him, he could feel Iagorth's moiety bleeding through the captain's assault, the dark sense of furious yet gleeful destruction boosting the Advocate's strength. In no time, Caleb struggled against the hundreds of dark tendrils reaching out to envelop Penn's light, hoping to choke her to death. He focused his energy on stopping it, swatting at the snaking darkness as if it were an infinite swarm of flies.

In the beginning, he succeeded, but his ability faltered while the tendrils somehow remained relentless. Iagorth had sent one of his most capable captains to ferry the nobles to Achnea. What did the Ancient plan to do with them? Mutating

them in sanctification would strengthen them, but it wasn't a game-changer.

Not unless he had other plans.

Caleb continued fighting against North's assault, both he and Ishek growing weaker. Penn's voice broke through into his mind. *Cal! It's no use. We can't hold him much longer. Get out and leave me behind.*

*No way, Penn. Not happening.*

*Cal, please. All of his energy is tied up in attacking me. Get on the bridge and kill him. It's our only chance.*

*You're too weak. I won't make it in time.*

*You have to try.*

Caleb's concentration faltered, letting North nearly break through. He pushed the tendrils back with great effort.

*Cal, go! Don't make me waste my energy kicking you out.*

Leaving her to fight on alone was the last thing he wanted to do, but he knew she was right. He couldn't stop North this way. But could he get onto the bridge in time? There was only one way to find out.

*Damn it, Penn! You hold on! You hear me! Don't you die on me!*

He didn't wait for a response. He retreated from the Collective, returning to his body, which remained unharmed. Lifting his head, he scrambled to his feet, throwing himself at the Legionnaires in front of the hatch to the bridge. Kicking, punching, and throwing them aside with reckless abandon, he cleared a path for himself.

A Legionnaire grabbed at him from the side, only to punch a fist through his faceplate before Caleb shoved him aside. Digging his fingers into the hatch's center seal, he set himself and pulled, straining to pull the doors apart.

*Penn, I'm coming!* His wall of fury drowned out any potential for fear as he fought to dispense with the hatch. Plasma bolts hit him from both sides and from behind.

Thankfully, the volume of fire had decreased, the Free Legionnaires making progress. He continued pulling, screaming out loud as he dug deep for every bit of strength.

Finally, the doors gave way, just enough for him to slip through. They slammed closed behind him, leaving him alone with the entire enemy crew. North sat at the command station, forehead sweating but otherwise still. Caleb ignored the unarmed and unarmored bridge crew, throwing himself at North. He'd nearly reached him when a Legionnaire he hadn't seen tackled him from the side. The pair grappled as they rolled across the deck, Caleb ending up on his knees behind him, his arms wrapped around the Legionnaire's head to break his neck. Grabbing the pistol from the Legionnaire's hip, he swung it toward North.

North's eyes snapped open. "Card," Iagorth shouted through him. "You're too—"

Caleb's shot punched through the Advocate tucked under North's arm, killing them both.

*Penn!* he shouted through Ishek. *Penn! Are you there?* She didn't answer. *Ish? Tell me she's okay.*

*Cal,* Ish said softly.

*No,* Caleb repeated, slumping back down on the deck. The bridge crew stared at him, too stunned by the loss of their captain to move. *I'm too late. She's...gone.* He slammed a fist on the deck.

*Cal,* Penn said, her mental energy almost imperceptible. *I'm here.*

The doors to the bridge opened, and this time they stayed that way as the Free Legionnaires poured into the room, led by Jeff.

*You're alive,* Caleb replied, relief bringing tears to his eyes.

*Thanks to the Free Legionnaires,* she replied. *They came out of hibernation to distract North. Some of them died to save me.*

“We owed you, Captain Card,” Jeff said out loud, approaching him. “They died free.” He put out his hand. Caleb took it, allowing the man to pull him to his feet before looking out over the still-shocked bridge crew. “This ship is under the control of the Free Legion,” he said to them. “Surrender or die.”

## CHAPTER 35

As expected, defeating Captain North was the impetus the other Relyeh aboard the Specter needed to change their minds about giving their human hosts more control. It still required shooting them and forcing the khoron to spend the energy to heal the wounds to confirm the change of allegiance, but with the Free Legion running the show, the process went as smoothly as expected.

Knowing Iagorth was aware they had compromised the ship, the first order of business was to bring the Specter out of hyperspace while the Free Legionnaires set about removing the dead. Expanding into open space, they dumped the bodies, including Captain North's, out of an airlock, celebrating the irrevocable act of emancipation from the Relyeh yoke.

As Caleb saw it, the biggest problem for the freed Legionnaires was that they required pheromones to survive. It was easy enough for Crux to keep them fed. All he had to do was drop them on a planet and threaten the locals, and they could top right up. But that wouldn't be an option if they wanted to return to a normal life once the fighting was over. He recalled the synthetic pheromone he had left Proxima with. Once they won this fight against Iagorth—and he refused to entertain the idea that they wouldn't—and Tae helped him and Ham get home, he would have to work with Proxima's scientists to produce the life saving elixir in greater abundance. There was no other way.

It would take time, but he was determined to get it done.



Caleb passed word to Jack on Gorgon, who signaled Amali on Lo'ane, pausing both ships halfway to their destinations. Word that they knew the location of the khoron replication facility quickly spread from there to Draco and the growing fleet of resistance ships. Within a day, they had arranged a rendezvous en route to Iagorth's planet, which Caleb learned was in the area known as the Outworlds.

While the area of space had been explored nearly two hundred years earlier, Achnea and the worlds within a few hundred light years of it were believed uninhabited. Achnea was an E-type planet, suitable for settlement, but the distance from the rest of the settled Spiral made it an even more remote locale than the Kallio Combine. The costs of populating the planet were still too high for anyone to go through the expense.

The more Caleb learned about Achnea in the three days needed for the rebels to reach the rendezvous point, the more curious he became about the connection between Pathfinder, Iagorth, and the khoron who had come to the Spiral on board the generation ship, such as Mayor Pine. He would only have access to Benning's recordings once Gorgon arrived, but he knew enough about the ship's history to fill in some blanks from memory.

It had taken conversations with multiple members of the Free Legion to piece together the history of Achnea, but after what he had done for them, they were all eager to help. Zane knew the most about the planet, having taken an interest in the earlier days of the Spiral while he was still a child. A well-known family of explorers with ties to the Founders had scouted the region of space. Their pattern was to travel to a system in a mothership before splitting up in smaller craft, often running recon missions alone or in pairs to the different worlds. They ran surface surveys of all of them, often making passes well within the planet's gravity wells and atmospheres when they had one to run.

According to Zane, the mothership lost contact with the scout craft that had gone to explore Achnea. The other ships redeployed as a search party, scouring the area for any sign of

the group's eldest male relative for the next several weeks. Unsurprisingly, they finally gave up when the mothership's supplies ran out nearly six months later. The family left the sector, never to return.

What surprised Caleb was the name of the family. Cruxton, which some family members shortened to Crux after a falling out led to the disbandment of the exploration team. He couldn't fathom a coincidence between Lord Byron Crux's elevation in status and Iagorth's presence on Achnea. If he or anyone among Gorgon's crew had known the story, that might have been the first place he looked.

What he wondered was whether the family name was Cruxton on Pathfinder's manifest, and if so, had there been any signs that Iagorth's moieties were in one or more of the family's members. It seemed likely. Had the moiety directed the eldest Cruxton to land on Achnea and hide from his family? And in the centuries that followed, had he built the replication facilities from scratch?

None of that made any sense. Ishek had already expressed how difficult it was to reproduce khoron, and they'd already theorized that the apparatus was on Pathfinder and in use from the beginning. What seemed more logical to both him and Ish was that the mothership had carried all the equipment out into deep space with the goal of finding a safe place to deploy it. The entire family of explorers angle was a ruse meant to throw off suspicion, as were the reports of the eldest Cruxton's disappearance. Caleb also already knew from Iagorth himself that he had already identified the wormhole and intentionally guided Pathfinder into it, meaning this too had been part of the Ancient's plan from the start.

Iagorth had to know someone might try to claim Achnea, eventually. Perhaps his distributed moieties had made it less likely as they worked to steer interested parties away from the area, the same way they had made records of Pathfinder's origins disappear. This was a plan centuries in the making. Caleb doubted the Ancient would leave the potential arrival of outsiders to chance. He already expected Iagorth to bolster whatever defenses he had in orbit.

They had to be ready for a more extensive ground defense, too. Caleb could only hope the three-day delay wouldn't give Iagorth enough extra time to substantially boost any of his protection. He felt safe to presume Achnea might not be strongly guarded because of its secretive nature. At the same time, no part of him expected anything about attacking the planet to be easy.

Gorgon arrived first and docked with the Specter before Lo'ane joined them a few hours later. Caleb shared a joyful reunion with a tearful Castra, who was grateful both he and Penn had not only survived the ordeal but had turned it in their favor. The other ships came one after another until they numbered nearly forty vessels strong, including twenty-five led by Duke Draco.

It surprised Caleb when Jack informed him he had contacted what remained of the Consortium, especially since most were still in hiding. It was Klim of Dragonfire Station who had tracked down the members of the Pirate group and helped Jack and Castra reach out to them. The princess promised them full pardons if they helped her regain her seat. It seemed strange to Caleb that they had agreed, considering they seemed in favor of their illicit dealings. He supposed the loss of so much of their business on Aroon had a lot to do with that. While none of the Consortium's forces were in play against Achnea, they had given assurances that when Castra called on them against Crux, they would be ready.

But what were the assurances of pirates worth?

*In your case, quite a lot,* Ishek answered.

*I'm not a pirate,* Caleb countered.

*Neither are they. Not really. They're more like the board of a corporation. It's just that their company deals almost completely in stolen goods.*

*So, more like the mafia.*

"What are you smirking about?" Penn asked, noticing Caleb's expression shift in response to his exchange with Ishek. They were on their way down to the hangar where Jeff

waited with one of the freed Nightmare pilots to transfer them over to Gorgon. Caleb would be glad to finally return to the ship, even though he hadn't been gone all that long.

"Ishek and I were discussing the Consortium," he replied. "Determining whether they really count as pirates."

"They're more like a crime syndicate," Penn answered.

*Precisely*, Ishek agreed.

"But they were composed of former pirates, so an argument could be made either way, I think."

"What does Vraxis have to say about it?" Caleb asked.

"He doesn't care. He thinks it's a stupid thing to waste mental energy on."

"Kind of rude, isn't he?"

Penn laughed. "He has his moments."

They approached the entrance to the hangar; the doors parting ahead of them. Caleb groaned when Baron Kagata's whining voice reached his ears.

Caleb glanced at Penn before looking back at Baron Kagata. "You want us to make a deal with you?"

"Of course not!" he snapped. "I have no interest in dealing with the likes of you. I want to make a deal with Princess Castra."

"You already made a deal with her, remember?" Caleb growled, barely keeping his composure. He had never met a man in his life that he disliked more than Kagata. Even Riley Valentine, the lead scientist on Deliverance, hadn't been as grating as the baron. "You reneged on it by helping Iagorth. You also asked him to kill your wife for you. You're a despicable human being. I'm going to need to shower after riding in the same Nightmare with you."

The baron surprised Caleb again by chuckling. "Come off it, Card. I'm sure you've done some awful things in your time. And if you knew the entire story, you would understand, I'm sure of it. Yes, I planned to sell you out to Iagorth. It would be

foolish to deny it. But that obviously won't work out, so I'm looking to make a different bargain. I give you something you want, you give me something I want. Simple as that."

"Captain, I think you should just shoot him," one of the other nobles said.

"Shut it, Horace," Kagata snapped. "You're on the same sinking ship. You just prefer to stand there venting atmosphere instead of heading for an escape pod."

"You have nothing Castra wants," Caleb said.

"That's where you're wrong. I've been dealing with Crux for some time. I know some of his secrets, and I'm willing to share them for the right price."

*He's full of it,* Ishek said.

*I think so too,* Caleb agreed. "And what's the price?"

"As I was telling this one." He pointed at Jeff. "I'll only discuss it with Princess Castra. You may think you're special, Card. But she's the rightful heir to the Spiral. You're just her little lapoodle. You should be grateful I'm even talking to you."

Caleb turned away from Kagata to keep from doing something he probably wouldn't regret later, but also something that wouldn't make him look very good either.

"We're all set to depart, Captain," Jeff said. "I look forward to meeting Princess Castra."

"She's looking forward to meeting you, too," Caleb replied, having spoken to her earlier over the comms.

"Up the ramp," Jeff said, turning to the nobles. With their hands and feet bound, they had to shuffle into the Nightmare. Jeff followed, seating them on the floor and latching their bindings to the bulkhead.

"This is how I'm going to remember you, Kagata. Restrained and powerless," Caleb said, smiling. He moved to the area in the bow, just ahead of the flight deck, as did Jeff and Penn. The pilot started the reactor, and anti-gravity plates

immediately began humming as an unseen deckhand outside the side hatch closed and sealed it.

Caleb positioned himself at the forward transparency to watch their takeoff. Gorgon wasn't far from the Free Legion Specter, near the center of the fleet with Lo'ane close by. It impressed Caleb to see the number of ships that had joined them at the rendezvous point, when the resistance had comprised just Gorgon and Glory only a few months earlier. They'd come a long way in a short time.

Still, he didn't fool himself into believing the fleet would be enough to defeat Crux's Specters orbiting Atlas. They would need every craft they could get their hands on for that. But he hoped it would be enough to deal with Achnea and any additional forces they encountered there.

The trip took less than ten minutes; the Nightmare drifting backward into Gorgon's hangar bay and landing smoothly. Thankfully, Kagata had kept his mouth shut for the duration of the flight. Of course, there had been no shortage of glares and dirty looks, which Caleb ignored. Like a good car salesman, the moment the landers touched down and the hatch to the outside opened, the baron was all smiles. It was enough to turn Caleb's stomach..

The first one off the Nightmare, he smiled when he saw Castra had come to the hangar to meet him, along with Damian, Jack, and Elena.

"Welcome home, Captain," Damian said as he approached.

"Caleb, thank the stars you're safe," Castra said, throwing her arms around him in a warm embrace he affectionately returned as he nodded at Damien.

"It's good to have you back, sir," Elena said.

"Thank you," Caleb answered. "It's good to be back."

"Princess Castra!" Baron Kagata shouted, still out of sight inside the ship. "Princess Castra, I must speak with you at once."

"Who is that?" Castra asked, frowning.

“You don’t recognize Baron Kagata’s voice?” Caleb replied.

“What is he doing here? You told me he was helping Iagorth, and he had his wife killed.”

“He was, and he did. But now that he’s a prisoner, he wants to cut a deal.”

“He has nothing we need, right?”

“Not that I can fathom, but he insists he does and that he’ll only bargain with you.”

Caleb was proud of Castra when she rolled her eye and shook her head. “Why didn’t you just leave him on Lo’ane?”

“Specters don’t have brigs, and to be fair, they are our problem.”

“Can *we* put them in the brig?”

“Gladly. But don’t you want to hear Kagata’s pitch first?”

“Not right now. We have more important things to discuss.”

“I agree.”

“Princess Castra,” Kagata said again as Penn and Jeff herded the Baron and the other nobles down the ramp. “Please, Your Highness.” Still a few meters away, he dropped to a knee and lowered his eyes to the deck. “I have valuable information, and I’m willing to trade it for my freedom.”

“I’ll give you an audience at my convenience, Baron. And not a moment sooner.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Kagata said, leaving his head bowed. “I’ll eagerly await your attention.”

Penn guided the nobles out of the hangar as Jeff approached the group.

“Princess Castra,” Caleb said. “I’d like you to meet Captain Jeffrey Khan of the Free Legion.”

“Your Highness,” Jeff said, bowing to her. Caleb had noticed his slight flinch as he’d descended the ramp, obviously

surprised by Castra's disfigured appearance.

"Free Legion," she replied. "I like the sound of that. It's an honor to meet you, Captain. Caleb's had only good things to say about you."

"And I about him," Jeff replied. "I can never repay him for helping us."

"You can repay me," Caleb said. "And you are by being here."

"We need all the help against Iagorth we can get," Castra added.

"Believe me, Your Highness, we know better than anyone the threat Iagorth poses to the Spiral. If we lose this fight, no matter where we try to go, our freedom will be short-lived."

"I'm grateful for your aid. And please, call me Castra. We can worry about formalities when we aren't at war."

"Of course, Castra. Please call me Jeff."

"I already assembled the others," she continued. "General Haas and Duke Draco have prepared a briefing and analysis on Achnea to help us plan our attack. Jeff, don't be shy about sharing your opinions. We're all too desperate here to have egos."

"I won't be shy," he replied.

"Good. Shall we go?"



## CHAPTER 36

“I’d like to open this meeting by thanking you all for your quick response to my pleas for aid,” Castra said, adjusting the holographic projection in the center of the conference table from where she stood behind it. The display showed all thirty-seven of the patched-in captains in small thumbnails, their ships clustered around Gorgon in a random sector of open space. Caleb, Damian and Penn sat at the table off to Castra’s right. Jack, Elena, and Jeff sat to her left, with General Haas, Duke Draco, Ham, and Istari rounding out the live delegation.

Castra’s gaze turned to Jack. “I’d also like to offer a special public thank you to Jack Leighton, whose efforts to bring the resources of the Consortium into the fight will no doubt pay off soon.”

“The Consortium?” one of the remote captains said. “Are you kidding? They’re criminals.”

“Criminals with connections to the entire network of pirates operating across the Spiral,” Duke Draco pointed out. “Not to mention their own personal militias. That’s upwards of five hundred ships, over ten times the size of what we’ve assembled here today.”

“Half those ships can barely be counted as space worthy,” the same captain rebutted. Caleb found her on the screen. She had dark red hair twisted into dreadlocks and a round face displaying a deep scar on her pale cheek. “And I could take out the other half without using a fire control system.”

“I seriously doubt that,” Jack commented. “There are a few other pirate crews with ships like Gorgon.”

“It may be an exaggeration,” the woman admitted. “But not by much.”

“Every extra target we can put in front of Crux’s Specters buys us that much more time to destroy them,” General Haas said. “And to be honest, I’m fine with using the Consortium’s pirates as cannon fodder.”

“I’m not,” Jack countered. “They agreed to help in good faith. That means using them strategically, not throwing them to the wolves.”

“We’ll use them however we must to succeed,” Haas countered. “You have no standing to do otherwise.”

“I can tell them not to bother,” Jack threatened.

“That’s enough,” Caleb said, getting to his feet. “This isn’t the time for internal squabbling. Putting together a formidable coalition means finding compromise across the board. As someone who hates to compromise, I know how easy it is to dig in. But we won’t get anywhere that way. Besides, this meeting is about Achnea, not Atlas. We have to win this battle before we worry about the next one.”

“Well said,” Draco agreed as Caleb sat. “Princess Castra, please continue.”

“Again, my thanks to all of you for your pledges of help and for believing in me and my family as caretakers of the Spiral. Though I never knew any of them, I appreciate your loyalty to our name and our governance. As you already know, our target is the planet Achnea.” She nodded to General Haas and took her seat at the head of the table, indicating he would lead the rest of the meeting.

Haas changed the holographic projection to a view of the planet. Smaller than Caleb had expected, Achnea was mostly dry land rich with vegetation. Dozens of bodies of water spread across the surface, and though it was hard to tell from the image, he knew a complex network of rivers interconnected them, though he wasn’t convinced they were

naturally formed. It was easy to see from the image why the Cruyton family hadn't been able to locate their eldest family member all those years ago. With the greenery so dense, it would be easy to hide pretty much anything from view from above the planet. Including a khoron replication facility or a sanctification chamber. "As you can see," Haas began, "Achnea is an E-type planet. The atmosphere contains a high level of oxygen, however, so while we won't need to use supplemental life support systems while on the ground, we will be limited in the time we can remain exposed without additional equipment. The max is thirty-three standard hours. The archives suggest an abundance of non-violent native life. Not that the composition matters much. Our goal is to keep the combat beyond the atmosphere."

"Even if that means more Specters?" Damian asked.

"We can deal with the Specters. We have four human-Advocate bonded pairs, plus the Free Legion and two Specters of our own. With the number of warships Crux has positioned around Atlas, the defenses at Achnea are unlikely to be formidable."

"Iagorth knows we're coming," Caleb pointed out.

"Even with our delay here, he can't get Specters from Atlas to Achnea before we reach the planet," Draco said. "Any reinforcements would need to come from surrounding systems."

"Like the nine Specters that arrived off Callus," Penn said. "I bet they'll be there. That's not a miniscule force."

"We can defeat them," Jeff said "Especially considering the weakness you've discovered and our ability to cover you in the Collective."

"I like your confidence, Captain," Haas said.

"Jeff, what are the chances we might turn the other Specters against Iagorth?" Castra asked.

"It would be difficult," he replied. "From the time Caleb turned me, it took nearly four hours to bring half the onboard

Legion under control, and we still had to fight hard to win the ship. We'll all be long dead in four hours of pitched battle."

"Right," Castra agreed resignedly.

"It wasn't a bad thought," Caleb said. "Even if it isn't viable."

"Between our resources and the Free Legion, we have an excellent shot at holding our own against the Specters," Draco said. "But ultimately, our aim is to locate the khoron replication facility and the sanctifier, and then destroy them. That will leave Iagorth's forces stuck at their current strength, with no hope of reinforcements or additional mutations to the khoron or the humans he enlists."

"Including Baron Kagata," Penn said. "Who's locked up in our brig."

"Does he have any information we can use?" Haas asked.

"It's unclear right now," Caleb replied.

"He wants to bargain information for his freedom," Castra said. "So far, I've declined."

"Perhaps you should reconsider that position," Haas suggested.

"He's bluffing," Caleb said. "The man has no spine. He'll do anything he can to get away with his life."

"There's no harm done if we discover he has nothing useful to say."

"True," Caleb agreed.

"In that case," Castra said, "I'll speak to him following this meeting."

"I would suggest destroying the replication facility and the sanctifier should be the primary objectives," Draco said. "Even above taking out the orbital defenses and keeping our ships in the fight. We can use our fleet as a diversion while a smaller segment of craft moves on the surface."

"It could take days to locate the facility," Caleb said.

“It won’t,” Jeff said. “We can sense the khoron on the ground if needed. It’ll leave us more open to attack, but we’re willing to make sacrifices to see this through, as you already know.”

“How quickly might you be able to pinpoint the location?” Castra asked.

“Within a few minutes.”

A silence fell over the room as the group considered the option.

“I have an idea,” Ham said. “It’s kind of crazy, but I figure when you’re up the creek and your dog ate the paddle, maybe crazy is exactly what you need.”

Caleb glanced at Penn. He had made a similar statement to her back when they had met. She caught his gaze and smiled back at him.

“I don’t want to leave any idea unsaid,” Castra replied. “Go ahead.”

“What if we forget about storming the castle,” he said, “and go in stealth-like instead? Cap was a Marine Raider. Special forces. He knows all about silent infiltration. And if there’s a way to get him down there unseen, I can fly him in. Atrice gave me a tour of Medusa back at Primary Station. That’s a sweet ride.”

“You want to send a single man against a fortified enemy target?” Haas asked. “I know you’re a skilled pilot, Abraham, but that won’t help Captain Card once he’s on the ground.”

“Of course, he wouldn’t go alone. He has a team. What are they called again, Cap? Occum’s Razor?”

“Razor’s Edge,” Penn said.

“I was close.”

“No, you weren’t,” Caleb said. “It’s an idea. I don’t know if it’s a good one, but—”

“What’s the downside?” Ham asked. “If we fail, you’re out one small shuttle and a special ops unit. On the other hand, if

we succeed...”

“We’re out more than a unit,” Castra finished. “We’d also be out two Advocates in Ishek and Vraxis. And Caleb is hardly expendable, regardless.”

“We shouldn’t let personal feelings get in the way of—”

“Personal feelings are what separate us from the Relyeh,” Castra snapped, again cutting her off. “They don’t get in the way. They give us an edge.”

“Perhaps not this time,” Draco suggested.

“Castra is right,” Haas said. “Caleb and Penn are too useful for what they can do in the Collective to risk in this way. Keep in mind, any resources we destroy on Achnea are resources neither Iagorth nor Crux will have to throw at us later. There’s a benefit to a pitched battle in orbit.”

“With a lot of risk,” Ham reminded them.

“No one is questioning that,” Draco said. “We need to determine which path is the right one.”

“Maybe we can send a different group to the surface,” Damian said. “Orin and I can lead it.”

“That’s an appropriate compromise, in my opinion,” Haas agreed.

“You need a bonded pair on the ground.” Ham sighed, obviously coming to the only conclusion that made sense, no matter how much he detested the option. “You need Caleb and Ishek. They already helped save Earth from the Relyeh. They have experience at this.”

“That option isn’t on the table,” Haas said.

“Every option is on the table,” Castra replied in rebuke. She paused. “I know the meeting just started, but I think we should take a brief break. I’d like to speak with Baron Kagata on your recommendation, General. And I think taking some time to consider these options and trying to come up with others is worthwhile. We’ll reconvene in one hour.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Haas said in deference to her decision, though his expression suggested he wanted to argue the divergent plans now.

For his part, Caleb was intrigued by Ham’s idea, but he also understood the hesitancy of having his focus pulled away from fighting through the Collective.

“Caleb, can you please join me?” Castra asked.

“Of course,” he replied.

“The rest of you are dismissed,” she continued. “Meet back here in one hour.”

## CHAPTER 37

Caleb guided Castra down to Gorgon's brig. En route, they'd stopped to talk to Nurse Gillroy and Orin. The pair had just left the cells, where Gillroy had administered blood tests to each of the nobles—none carried moieties, and they had found none harboring dormant khoron—while Orin made sure they behaved themselves, which they all had.

In the brig, Caleb found Baron Kagata seated on the edge of his mattress in the cell near the center, his eyes closed as if he were meditating. The other nobles also occupied individual cells, and they stood, approaching the front of their enclosures when they noticed Castra was with him.

“Princess Castra,” the Baroness of Cillian said. “Your Highness, I'm afraid there's been a terrible misunderstanding. We—”

“Caleb discovered you on an enemy Specter,” Casta interrupted. “I generously forgave you for the way you've treated the people of the Combine for years. I gave you a chance to join the right side in this fight, and this is how you repaid me. You're lucky I don't have you jettisoned out of an airlock. I'm still considering it an option.”

The baroness clamped her mouth shut, retreating from the front of her cell.

“Your Highness,” Kagata said, his eyes opening as he came to his feet. He offered Castra a Cheshire grin while casting an annoyed glare at Caleb. “Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to meet with me,” he said. He



glanced over at Caleb again before glancing away. “And thank you for bringing Captain Card with you.”

Caleb said nothing. Kagata could try to butter him up all he wanted. It was obvious he was the last person Kagata wanted to see. The feeling was mutual.

“You asked to speak with me,” Castra said. “You said you have valuable information. Personally, I think you’re full of it. But I agreed because General Haas suggested it might be worth my time and effort to at least hear you out. I’m here now, so make your pitch.”

Kagata’s smile widened. “Of course, Your Highness. I would prefer to discuss such sensitive information in private.”

Caleb chuckled. “I thought you were glad Castra brought me along.”

She didn’t give Kagata the chance to comment. “You’ll discuss it here and now with Captain Card present, or we won’t discuss it at all.”

“I think that not hearing me out would be a grave mistake, Your Highness.”

Castra glanced at Caleb, who nodded in support. “Then let’s cut right to the chase, Baron,” she said, moving in close to him. “You claim to have information that’s worth enough for me to set you free. I think you’re lying through your crooked yellow teeth. So say what you have to say. If I agree with your assessment of the information’s value, I’ll give you a ship and you can go.” She looked at the other nobles. “If Baron Kagata has something useful for the resistance, all of you will be free to go.”

Kagata’s face tightened. The other nobles lifted their heads, more interested now.

“You have something, don’t you, Urias?” one noble asked.

“He’d better,” another replied.

“Let’s hear it,” Caleb said.

Kagata’s expression settled as he decided. “No.”

“What do you mean, no?” Castra said. “Your life is in my hands, Baron. Are you suddenly so willing to throw it away?”

“I would prefer not to. But my secret is such that revealing it to you will be an irreversible betrayal to Iagorth. And if you cannot defeat him... Let’s just say, it would be less painful to go out of an airlock than to wait for his retribution.”

*His fear is delicious, Ishek said. And the more seriously he considers telling us the truth, the more frightened he becomes. Perhaps he knows something after all.*

*Are you certain?* Caleb asked.

*The pheromones don’t lie, even if he lies about nearly everything else.*

“Castra, I think we should agree to his terms,” he said. *I’m trusting you on this one, Ish.*

*Worst case, we set him loose. How much damage can he do? Iagorth already knows we’re coming.*

“Caleb, are you sure?” Castra asked.

He nodded. “I’m sure.”

“Well, this is an unexpected change of heart,” Kagata said. “I appreciate the vote of confidence, Captain Card.”

“Judging by how anxious you are, I’m not sure you do,” Caleb answered.

“You have my word, Baron,” Castra said. “Say what you have to say, and I’ll arrange for one of the Combine captains to drop you off at a nearby settlement of your choosing.”

“Regardless of your assessment of my information’s value?” Kagata confirmed.

“So long as you’re telling the truth.”

“Then let me prove my honesty to you, Your Highness. I listened to the recording from the night of your meeting after I boarded the Specter. My wife, as she was even more skilled at doing than myself, lied to you when she told you she didn’t know what Lord Crux planned to use the raylium for. She

knew exactly what he intended, and who he had allied with to achieve his goals. We all did.”

“Urias!” the Baroness of Cillian shouted.

“How could you?” another cried.

“There,” Kagata said. “You see?” He grinned. “Proof that I’m telling the truth.”

Castra glanced at Caleb for confirmation. He waited for Ishek’s input.

*If their fear is anything to go by, he has just revealed something they did not want Castra to know.*

Caleb nodded his approval.

“But, that makes no sense,” Castra said, shocked. “If she was in league with both Crux and Iagorth from the beginning, then why didn’t she kill me when she had the chance? She knew who I was. She had to know I was a threat.”

“Does an alliance with monsters make you a monster yourself?” Kagata asked. “I don’t know. Maybe. Maybe not. My wife was many ugly things, but she was never one to murder a child. My guess is that she always believed the belt would kill you before your true identity ever became a concern. I’m sure she never considered a white knight coming along to save you.” He chuckled. “I’ve always found it intriguing how seemingly innocuous events can come to have such an outsized impact on the bigger picture.”

“You’re all traitors to the Empire,” Castra growled, overcoming her initial surprise. “All of you are beyond reprehensible. It wasn’t enough to put the innocent people of the Combine through hell in the belt, was it? How much more blood is on your hands? I may not have ever known my family, but each of you is responsible for murdering them.” She paused, her fury obvious in her red face and clenched fists. “Whatever you had to say, I don’t need to hear it. We’ll figure things out on our own.” She looked at Caleb. “I want them all brought to the nearest airlock and vented out into space.”

“Castra,” Caleb said, trying to calm her.

“No. I’m the rightful heir to the throne. It’s my decision to make. Not yours. You’re my subject. Do as I say. Now!”

Caleb stared at her, fighting his anger-tinged surprise at her words, while Ishek became increasingly amused by the chaos of it all. “With all due respect, Your Highness,” he replied coldly. “I’m not from the Manticore Spiral. I’m not your subject. And seeing as you’re on my ship, I’m not required to do anything you say.”

She glared at him with her good eye, spittle running down the damaged side of her face. “Are you going to abandon me, too?”

The question calmed him in an instant. “No,” he replied softly. “But I am going to make sure your heart doesn’t overrule your head. You already made the deal. You can’t renege on it now.”

“They knew, Caleb! For years! Without the belt, without the raylium, without their complicity, none of this would have happened.”

“That isn’t true. Your mother would have still left you in that orphanage. You would still have gone to the belt.”

“Would there be a belt without raylium?” Castra asked, her gaze whipping back to Kagata. “Would there?” When he didn’t answer, her gaze shifted, sliding individually over the other nobles until she finally got to one who finally gave her an answer.

“It was the payments for the raylium that made the operation profitable,” the baroness offered.

“So I wouldn’t have been in the belt,” Castra said, turning back to Caleb. “I wouldn’t look like this.” She ran her hand down the damaged side of her face. “Who knows where I would be.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that you agreed to the deal,” Caleb replied.

“I didn’t have all the information.”

“He only shared it with you because of the deal. I know it hurts, Castra. And I’m sorry. But this is bigger than your pain.”

She kept her eyes on his, slowly beginning to calm. She nodded and looked back at Kagata. “What do you know, Baron?”

“We received the first messenger from Iagorth quite some time ago,” he said. “Before we ever discovered the raylium in the belt. Iagorth had seized control of a woman and come to complete our agreement. She stayed the night in a guest room at the retreat, and of course, the room was under surveillance. She left the next afternoon once we made the deal. I reviewed the footage soon after. Do you know what I discovered?” He waited a moment for an answer before continuing. “The woman woke in the middle of the night, and the look on her face had changed. Relieved, and alert in a way she hadn’t been prior. I believe Iagorth had lost control of her. It didn’t last long. A few seconds, at most. But it happened. I’m certain of it.”

“I don’t see how that helps us,” Castra said after a brief silence. “Is that all you have?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Kagata replied.

Castra looked at Caleb, her anger returning. “This is what we agreed to free these traitors for? A useless anecdote about a woman waking up in the middle of the night?”

Caleb met her gaze. “Baron Kagata is right.”

“About what?” she complained.

“It is intriguing how seemingly innocuous events can have such an outsized impact on the bigger picture.” He glanced at Kagata. “Thank you, Baron. You’ve been very helpful. We’ll see that you’re on your way within the hour.”

“Caleb, I don’t understand,” Castra said, confused.

*I know I’ve said this before, but this is a terrible idea,* Ishek said. *Probably the worst idea you’ve ever had, or will ever have.*

“I’ll explain everything,” Caleb replied. “I think I know how we can win this war.”

## CHAPTER 38

The meeting of Castra's command staff and ship's captains resumed at the top of the hour with all but one of the additional captains floating above the table in video feeds. General Haas stood behind his seat, while Duke Draco sat in his with his arms stiffly folded across his chest. Both men were tense following the release of Baron Kagata and the other nobles.

"Your Highness," General Haas started once everyone was settled. "We're ready to resume our deliberations regarding Achnea."

"Thank you, General," Castra replied. "However, no further deliberations are necessary. I've decided regarding our course of action."

"I assume this has to do with Kagata's release?" Draco offered. Caleb had informed him they were letting the nobles go, but neither he nor Castra had yet explained the reasoning behind the action.

Caleb glanced over at Ham. The pilot didn't look pleased about the potential outcome. Caleb imagined his friend felt as though nothing would come of the idea he had presented. That Castra would announce it as too risky. His idea had excited him, eager to help in any way possible, and pleased to have a voice in the discussion. Now he looked impatient, ready to receive orders and get to work, but without his prior zeal.

"It does," Castra said. "Baron Kagata provided us with information Captain Card believes may be vital in our chances

of defeating Iagorth and Lord Crux once and for all.”

Haas’ face turned red. “You let them free based on what a known traitor told you?”

“I did,” she replied without hesitation.

The General’s eyes shifted to Caleb. “And you agreed with this decision? You supported her agreement?”

Caleb nodded. “I support it.” He knew Haas didn’t understand why they had made the deal or what value the information held. He also understood there would be consequences if Castra went ahead with Ham’s plan. The general would never approve of him going down to the planet alone. Fortunately, it wasn’t his call.

“I don’t understand’,” Haas ranted. “Baron Kagata is a traitor, a liar, and a murderer, willing to do or say anything he must to get what he wants. And you just let him fly away. What if he goes running right to the enemy to tell him our plans?”

“Iagorth already knows our plans,” Caleb said. “Besides, Kagata’s headed for Caprium.”

“I didn’t authorize that,” Draco said in defense of his homeworld.

“I’m sure you have people who can monitor him there.”

Draco nodded. “Of course.”

“I understand you’re upset, General,” Castra said. “I felt it too, and would have done something rash if not for Captain Card. Trading the lives of five traitors for potential victory was an easy call to make.”

“So, what did you learn that makes you so confident?” Istari asked.

“I wouldn’t call it confident,” Caleb said. “It may not be possible at all, and it’s still risky as hell. We won’t abandon our backup plan for it.”

Ham perked up, his familiarity with Caleb allowing him to smell what his captain was cooking.



“The risk is noted,” Haas said. “What did Kagata tell you?”

“He said he had a messenger from Iagorth, infected with a moiety,” Caleb explained. “She was under surveillance, and he caught her coming out of a dream in control of her body.”

“And?”

“That’s it,” Caleb said.

Haas’ eyebrows crinkled inward in confusion. “And you’ve decided on our plan of attack based on that?”

“I’m having trouble seeing how that information helps us,” Draco added. “I’m sure I’m not the only one.”

Istari, Damian, and Ham all nodded in agreement. Jack started laughing, while Jeff and Penn wore thoughtful grins.

“That’s because you aren’t bonded,” Jeff said.

“Well, can one of you who is bonded please explain?” Haas boomed.

“It means Iagorth’s moieties aren’t invincible,” Caleb answered. “They can be overpowered.”

“I’m sorry, Captain,” Draco said. “You’ll have to elaborate a little more if you want me to understand.”

Caleb stood up, so Haas took his seat, giving him the room. “First, you need to think about how Iagorth’s moieties function. You have Iagorth’s consciousness over here.” He raised his left hand, holding it away from his body. “I don’t want to call it his body because I don’t know for sure that he has one. Then you have his moieties here.” He raised his other hand, wiggling his fingers. “Iagorth doesn’t actively control every single fingertip. Instead, his network is like the branches of a tree, and he’s the trunk. Each branch is a larger appendage that attaches to ever-smaller appendages. Are you with me so far?”

“The tree visualization is good,” Istari said.

“Great. So the messenger who visited Kagata was likely a bud at the end of the branch.”

“Or a fingertip,” Ham blurted.

“Exactly,” Caleb replied, pointing to him. “The same goes for the courier that shot himself once it had finished its task. But I believe the moieties we’ve encountered embedded in the mutated Advocates as captains of some Specters are larger branches. And I believe the moiety running the show on Achnea is an even bigger branch than that. It may even be the primary in this system.”

“Primary?” Draco asked.

“The key link between the left hand and the right,” Caleb replied. “The strongest moiety in the Spiral. Although the primary may also be Crux’s advisor.”

“I see,” Haas said. “And your plan then, I assume, is to destroy the strongest moiety to disable the weaker ones, which may help us overpower the Specters more easily.”

“No,” Caleb answered. “My plan is to overpower the moiety on Achnea. I believe I can gain control of the weaker moieties by doing so.”

The others stared at him in shock. The audacity of the idea even seemed to shock Penn.

“Doesn’t being closer to the trunk make a branch stronger?” Damian asked.

“It does,” Caleb agreed.

“So what makes you think you’re strong enough to overpower it?” Draco questioned.

“I may not be. I told you it’s a risky plan, and that’s why we need to stick to a backup. But I have to try.”

“No, you don’t,” Penn said, shooting to her feet and planting her hands on the table as she leaned toward him. “I’m sure Ishek’s already told you it’s the worst plan you’ve ever had. But let me second that. No offense, Caleb. You’re the best warrior I’ve ever met, and a damn good leader, but you and Ish are the weakest bonded pair in our group.”

“I think I take those honors,” Jeff countered. “I don’t have an Advocate.”

Caleb stared uneasily at Penn. “We’re the weakest against khoron,” he admitted. “I can’t argue that. But Iagorth isn’t a khoron. And I’ve done mental battle against an Ancient before.”

“How would you even seize a moiety like that?” Jack asked. “Especially if it’s not in a khoron. Then it can’t use the Collective, and you can’t hijack it there.”

“There’s only one way I can think of,” Caleb replied.

“Cal, no,” Penn said, practically begging. “You can’t risk it.”

“I have to. There’s too much at stake for me not to try.”

“I can do it.”

“No. It has to be me.”

“Why?”

“Because there’s no way in hell I’d ever let anyone else take the risk. For starters.”

“What are you two talking about?” Haas asked.

“He has to kill the moiety’s host and swallow the moiety,” Castra said.

“It’ll try to seize control,” Caleb added. “If I can overpower it, I can control it, instead.”

“And if you can’t, then it will have you,” Damian pointed out.

“I know,” Caleb said. “And that’s definitely a possibility. That’s why I’ll have a team standing by to kill me and burn the moiety if that happens.”

A tense silence fell over the room, broken at last by General Haas. “While I think this plan is doomed to failure, my instinct tells me it’s worth the risk, and the sacrifice.”

“I’m glad you agree, General,” Castra said. “But the decision is mine alone, and I’ve already given Captain Card the go-ahead.” She grinned, but Caleb could sense the worry behind it. “It’s not like he would listen to me if I didn’t. He’d

probably recruit Ham and Damian to steal Medusa and fly him down there.”

“In my defense, I am a pirate,” Caleb replied.

“And a friend,” Castra answered. “So you’d better come back to us.”

“I’ll second that,” Penn said.

The others all agreed.

“Well, we have our objectives,” Haas said. “But as they say, the devil is in the details. Let’s have a go at that bastard.”

## CHAPTER 39

Caleb stood with his arms folded over his chest, staring out of the viewscreen on Gorgon's bridge to the pale blank panorama of the hyperspace compression field. The fleet had already jumped away from the rendezvous point, headed toward Achnea on a course that General Haas believed would best mitigate the effects of drop variability. Once the ships arrived near the planet, it would take anywhere from three to ten hours to reach orbit. What happened next would depend on where Gorgon came out of hyperspace and what defenses Iagorth might have waiting for them. It was almost definite he wouldn't be caught off-guard.

If Gorgon came out of her jump too far away and if the sensors didn't register an overwhelming orbital defense, then Medusa would launch immediately. Her more powerful thrusters would allow them to reach the planet's surface much sooner, while the incoming fleet did their best to synchronize their approach and engage the enemy. With two Specters in the fold, they would have two chances for one of them to exit hyperspace close to the planet, giving Medusa a little more cover. But it wasn't part of the launch requirements.

On the other hand, if Gorgon expanded out of hyperspace right at Achnea, Caleb and his team could make it to the surface even sooner, but that was the beginning and end of the benefit a closer expansion would provide them. Either the rest of the fleet would need to scramble to come to the pirate ship's aid before the defenses wiped them out, or Gorgon would need to scramble to reset the hyperdrive and get out of Dodge before the defenses blew them to bits. That last possibility was

the reason they had set the optimal drop point nearly an hour away from Achnea.

While Caleb had yet to leave the bridge, the rest of his team were busy making preparations for the mission. Damian and Elena were in the conference room, working through scenarios with tactical officers who'd transferred over from Lo'ane. While Penn and Vraxis wouldn't be joining him on Medusa, Razer's Edge remained her team, and she would be damned if anyone but her prepped them for the mission. Simultaneously, Ham was in the hangar with Medusa, going over her systems with Atrice one last time, getting ready to fly Caleb to his fate, whatever it turned out to be. He had been eager enough when Castra agreed to let him pilot the ship, but now that they knew what they would need to do on Achnea, he seemed more subdued than usual.

Caleb understood why.

Ishek was right to believe this wasn't a good plan. Almost anything else would have been preferable had any other option been possible. The lack of other better options almost forced the idea to be a good one. Almost. If things went wrong, he could end up a slave to Iagorth. If that happened, it would force his teammates to put him down. He wasn't eager for that outcome, though his willingness to take the risk suggested otherwise, even to himself. There was no guarantee he could overpower a moiety. In fact, it was more likely he couldn't, even with Ishek's help. Neither of them were sure they'd have the combined strength or knowledge to come out of this with their minds intact. The only thing he knew about confronting Iagorth came from his interaction with the Ancient through the Collective, and he had lost that fight. He would have died if not for Ish.

There were too many ways for this mission to go sideways. Too much risk involved with every step. But there was no other way forward. No alternative path toward victory. They needed to win on Achnea to have any chance at all of defeating Crux at Atlas and taking back the Spiral once and for all.

“Captain,” Rufus said. “We’re thirty minutes from expansion.”

Caleb looked away from the viewscreen to the young pilot. “Copy that.” He paused, swiveling his head to look at each of the present members of his bridge crew. “Listen up, everyone.” He waited for everyone to give him their complete attention. “If I don’t make it back, it’s been an honor to be your captain.”

“Don’t say that, sir,” Sasha said, practically in tears. “You’ll make it back. You have to.”

“The honor is ours, Captain,” Naya said. “You took this ship of refugees and misfits and made us a family, and no matter what, I’ll never forget that.”

“You’re one of a kind, Cap,” Rufus said. “I’m thankful to have spent these last few months under your command.”

He nodded his appreciation of their sentiment as the door to the bridge opened, and Damian and Elena walked in. They returned to take their stations as if they had read his mind.

“Sarge, Cap was just signing off,” Sasha informed him.

Damian stepped up to Caleb. “My friend,” he said with a concerned smile. “Good hunting out there. I’ll see you again soon.”

“You too, Damian,” Caleb answered, embracing him. “You have the bridge.”

“Aye, Captain,” he replied. “I have the bridge.”

Caleb turned to Elena, whose tears flowed more freely than Sasha’s. “I was right about you,” she said. “I’ve never regretted my decision to join you.”

“And I hope you never will.” He hugged her too before heading for the exit, pausing at the doorway. When he looked back, the rest of the bridge crew had come together to stand at attention and offer him a proper salute. He went to attention and saluted back before turning with a sharp pivot and leaving, the door closing behind him.

*Well, that really hit me in the feels,* Ishek said.

*You and me both, bud, Caleb replied, his emotions high.*

*I have to admit; I feel as though we're marching to our demise. There's no guarantee we'll even make it to the moiety.*

*We'll make it. I just hope Johan comes through for us.*

*If he does, we don't need to do this.*

*Yes, we do. The upside is too great not to.*

*We should have sucked in Sarah's moiety when we had the chance. It would have saved us a lot of time.*

*Hindsight, Ish.*

Caleb made his way to the armory, finding it deserted, the rest of his team already on their way to the hangar. Outfitting himself in Legionnaire armor, a plasma rifle, a pair of blasters and finally, Hiro's sword, he was on his way out when Castra entered.

"Leaving without saying goodbye?" she asked.

"I know you're busy. Especially now. I still wish you had transferred back to Lo'ane. You would be safer there."

"I'll never be too busy for you. And believe it or not, I feel safer here. Even Haas agreed the Specters are more likely to be targeted."

Caleb nodded. "As long as Iagorth doesn't think along the same lines. Given a choice between destroying the Specters and killing you, he'll pick the latter, I'm sure."

"Your life is the one I'm worried about. I should have died already. Everything that's happened since is..." She trailed off before shrugging. "I don't even know what to make of it all yet. It's a blur in my mind. I can still hardly believe that success will lead to me becoming the Empress of the galaxy. The thought terrifies me. And if things go sideways, I don't know if I can do it without you to guide me."

Caleb already knew she was scared, both for herself and for him. He almost felt guilty to have Ishek gaining strength from her fear. "From what I've seen over the last couple of



weeks, I'm confident you'll make a better Empress than your mother ever was. With or without me."

"I don't know about that. The whole thing with Kagata. I shouldn't have let my emotions impede making good decisions for everyone else involved."

"Maybe not, but nobody can expect you to be perfect, especially this early on. I know you've already taken the experience to heart, and the next time you'll react differently. From one leader to another, humility is one of the most valuable traits you can have. But so is confidence. Be bold enough to decide, and humble enough to learn from mistakes. I guess that's my parting advice."

She smiled. "I'll miss your advice if..."

"I don't intend to die down there."

"We both know the odds."

"I've beaten the odds before. I'll beat them again."

"You'd better." She wrapped him in a tight embrace and pressed her head against his chest. He returned the affection, kissing the top of her head. He never imagined he would become so fond and protective of anyone in so short a time, but she had won him over before they'd even met, and that paternal sense had only gotten stronger.

"I need to go," he said, breaking the embrace. "Let Damian and the others do their thing, and you'll be okay. I trust them all completely."

She nodded. "So do I."

He squeezed her shoulder before leaving her behind, making his way down to the hangar bay. His away team were the only ones in the hangar when he arrived, standing together near Medusa's ramp. He could feel their tension before he even crossed the threshold. They were nervous, not so much about the mission, he figured, as the risk to his life.

"Captain," Penn said, stepping out ahead of the others to greet him. "Razor's Edge is ready for action, sir."

Caleb smiled at her. "Thank you, Penn. For everything."

The statement brought immediate tears, and she nodded tightly. “Please be careful, Cal.”

“You know I’ll do my best.”

“I wish I could go with you.”

“Me, too.”

She nodded again as she stepped aside. Caleb looked over each member of his away team. Orin, Goldie, Strom, Sparkles, Haruka, and Penn’s replacement who barely fit into his armor.

“Can you breathe, Usef?” he asked.

“Barely,” the stout man replied with a laugh. “I don’t need to breathe to kill Legionnaires.”

Caleb nodded in response. Knowing the Legionnaires were half-human, he had never enjoyed killing them. Knowing almost half of them would gladly change sides if given a chance reduced his desire to kill them even more. He was a Marine, and if they came between him and his objectives, he would do what needed to be done. It also made no sense to temper Usef’s enthusiasm. At least, not now. “Let’s load up, people. We’ve got places to go and a Relyeh Ancient to overthrow.”

They boarded Medusa together. Ham entered the flight deck while the rest of the away team filed to the back to take their seats. Caleb waited until the Edgers had stowed their gear and strapped in before joining Ham, taking the co-pilot seat.

“Glad you could make it,” Ham joked.

“Just like old times,” Caleb replied.

“I hope not. As I recall, the last time I flew with you, things didn’t go so well.”

“Through no fault of yours. We wouldn’t have made it through the wormhole or survived the crash landing without your skill. I know you’ll get us to the surface now.”

“Thank you, Captain. You always know how to boost a guy’s confidence.”

“Of course, if we crash and burn, just remember this was your idea.”

Ham threw his head back in a deep belly-laugh. “I’m not the nut job who wants to eat a Relyeh Ancient.”

“I don’t want to. I have to.”

“What do you think, Ish?” Ham asked. “Is this plan crazy or what?”

*Absolutely.*

“He says he agrees with anything I say,” Caleb relayed.

Ham chuckled. “I know Ish better than that.” He tapped on the control screen, responding to a hail.

“Medusa, this is Gorgon,” Damian said. “We drop in ten minutes.”

“Aye, Gorgon,” Ham answered. “We’re loaded and ready to go. I just need Captain Card to show me where the throttle is on this thing.”

“What?” Damian asked nervously. Ham’s follow-up laughter ensured he knew it was a joke.

“Just trying to keep things light, Gorgon,” the pilot added. “I always get weird when I’m this nervous.”

“Which fortunately isn’t too often,” Caleb said.

“I wish I had some words of wisdom to impart to you both before you make a run at the surface,” Damian said. “You have nerves of steel, Captain.”

“I just know what needs to be done, and I do it,” Caleb answered. “Anyone else can do the same.”

“Yeah, sure,” Ham said. “I hope Ish is getting a full belly from my nerves of steel.”

*I am.*

“He is,” Caleb relayed. “And he thanks you for it.”

“At least I wore armor this time,” Ham said, flexing his Legionnaire armor. It was bulky in the pilot seat, making for a tight fit, but he had it on.

“Do you have a helmet this time?” Caleb asked.

”Damn, I almost forgot.” Grinning, he reached around behind the seat and retrieved it. “Tada. Never again leaving home without it.”

They fell silent after Ham put his helmet on and latched it, both of them listened to Damian counting down the minutes to drop. Rather than growing more tense as the countdown progressed, both Caleb and Ham grew calmer and more focused. The anticipation of the mission was always more nerve-wracking than the mission itself. Once they launched, they couldn’t afford to spare any time or energy on fear, uncertainty, or doubt.

“One minute to drop, Medusa,” Damian announced.

“Copy that, Gorgon,” Ham replied. He tapped on the ship’s controls, igniting the reactor and quickly running through basic pre-launch checks. Caleb assumed he had done the same thing earlier with Atrice, but he was doing everything by the book. He finished the checks with twenty seconds to spare.

The hangar doors began opening, even though they were still in the compression field. If the stars were with them, they would drop in an optimal position where every second mattered. If not, at least they were ready to do what they had to do.

“Five. Four. Three. Two. One,” Damian counted down.

The stars expanded around them as the hyperdrive disengaged. Ham rested his hands on Medusa’s controls, ready to go at a moment’s notice, waiting only for Damian’s go-ahead.

“Uh... Captain,” Damian said in a strained voice that instantly swung Caleb’s nerves in the wrong direction. “It’s a trap.”

## CHAPTER 40

Caleb didn't have a chance to question Damian before the first energy beam hit Gorgon's shields, the light of the shot flashing in the hangar like a bolt of lightning.

"Evasive maneuvers!" Damian shouted. "Rufus, get us the hell out of here!"

"Ham," Caleb cried. "Go!"

"What?" Ham replied. "We don't even know what we're —"

"Just go, damn it. We have one shot; we're taking it."

Another energy beam flashed past the hangar, barely missing Gorgon as Rufus made a sharp turn, starting their evasives. Caleb's next thought turned to Castra and the danger she was in, but he only took a single heartbeat to worry about her before his thoughts flooded with fury. Kagata hadn't accidentally let slip the name of the planet where Iagorth had located his equipment. He'd fed Caleb exactly what the Ancient wanted him to know. Did that mean his story about the moiety was garbage, too? Was Iagorth even on Achnea?

He didn't have time to give it another thought. Ham jammed the throttle forward, sending Medusa skidding across the deck before Ham had enough thrust to lift them off. The thrust shoved them back in their seats before they exploded out into space.

Yet another flash of energy shot overhead, a little too close for comfort. Making a hard right, Ham immediately oriented them toward the planet. Sensor data finally spilled into the

projection grid, revealing more than what Caleb could see through the forward surround.

They had dropped into a web of Specters, at least thirty by his quick estimate, arranged around Achnea such that they were interspersed with the incoming resistance fleet. In fact, they were so well positioned that one of Draco's corvettes slammed into the side of one of them before it could change its course. The impact sent the corvette careening away, the entire front of the ship shredded and venting atmosphere.

"Damn, this is worse than those Shales back at Trappist," Ham growled, sending Medusa hurtling toward the planet. He made a quick series of course changes, an energy beam sweeping past below them.

Caleb continued surveying the grid, searching for Lo'ane and the Free Legion in the sudden mess. He found one friendly Specter poorly positioned at the rear, already under fire from two enemy ships. The other was ahead of them, in the upper starboard quadrant from their current heading, also targeted by multiple enemies.

"Sarge," Caleb said. "Tell the Draconians and Kallians to stay clear and prep their nukes."

"Captain, they're already on the run," Damian replied.

Caleb looked at the grid again, noticing the other ships were all facing the wrong direction, trying to escape the net. "If they run, they die. Our only chance is to even the odds."

"There are thirty Specters out there, Captain. We barely have a numerical edge."

"You have Jack, Penn, Amali, and me," he roared back. "It's on you, Haas, and Draco to get them turned around. Now!" He slammed his fist on the control board for emphasis before glancing back at Ham, who had already broken into a focused sweat. "Ham, don't get us killed. I'm going to help the others."

"Doing my best, Cap," Ham replied.

Caleb closed his eyes, joining Ishek on the Collective, where he was immediately bombarded by the din of thousands

of Legionnaires. It took him a moment to orient.

*Cal, this is bad,* Penn said.

*Then it's a good thing we have no choice except to fight,* he replied. *Ish, get us on one of those Specters.*

*Can't you tell I'm working on it?*

Caleb found the khoron Ishek had attacked, joining him in the assault. Teaming up, they broke through in an instant, seizing the khoron, and by extension, his host. Caleb's vision returned, only now he was in the hangar of a Specter, halfway to a Nightmare. The bay doors had just started opening.

He spotted one of Draco's corvettes in the distance as he resumed running toward the Nightmare. *Ish, can you handle this one on your own?*

*Easily.*

Caleb left the Collective, returning to Medusa as Ham barely avoided another energy beam. The shuttle continued speeding up, already outpacing the surrounding Specters. "Damian, there's a Draconian corvette almost in position to fire on a Specter opening its hangar bay. Watch for Nightmares. Get the word out."

"Aye, Captain," Damian replied.

"That was quick," Ham said.

"I'm not staying," Caleb replied.

"Well, it looks like your pep talk worked," Ham said. "The other ships are coming back around."

"Good, because this whole battlefield is about to be littered with Nightmares."

"I was hoping you'd say that," Ham answered sarcastically.

Caleb eyed the grid, finding one of Draco's ships had reoriented itself near one Specter. The sensors picked up a projectile launch from it, and he leaned forward as though he could will the nuclear warhead into the hangar bay with his mind.

“Come on,” he whispered tensely, the missile nearing the target. A Nightmare appeared on the grid at the entrance, seemingly on a collision course with the projectile. “No!” he cried, tensing.

A second Nightmare slammed into the first, knocking it aside as the warhead shot into the hangar. Like he had witnessed earlier, the Specter seemed unaffected at first. As the detonation created secondary explosions and the interior of the raylium heated, shards began breaking away from the ship until the whole thing shattered like glass.

He would have loved to admire the destruction of the Specter, but one lucky shot would hardly be enough to win the day. His heart sank as two enemy warships pounded the corvette that had fired the missile, their combined firepower shredding it in seconds.

“Ham, ETA to Achnea?”

“Depends on how you want to hit the atmosphere.”

“As recklessly as survivable.”

“Twenty-two minutes.”

It was a long time under the circumstances. Especially as the projection began filling with smaller contacts, Nightmares launching from their Specters. Three more nukes followed quickly after, launched at the vulnerable hangar bays. Of course, the enemy was ready, and two of the Nightmares veered in front of the weapons, intercepting them and detonating them too early. The immediate electromagnetic pulse of the blast was enough to knock out some of the departing fighters before they could go on the offensive.

The third warhead snuck through, the intercepting Nightmare veering off-course at the last second. Caleb didn't know which of their team had done it, but it didn't matter. The nuke slipped into the hangar and detonated, a burst of fire escaping the open doors. The Specter shattered soon after.

Glancing at the grid, Caleb could tell that General Haas had taken over directing the other ships. They were slowly forming up into widely spaced groups, moving in unison



toward a central area that was the least defended of the sector. If they could knock out the Specters in that part of the combat zone, they would give themselves some breathing room to regroup and buy him and his away team more time.

But time to do what? Consuming Iagorth's moiety had always been a risky idea. Knowing how Kagata had helped the Ancient outmaneuver them, it seemed downright foolish now.

*We both know you're going to do it, anyway. You might as well commit.*

Caleb knew Ishek was right. He would ultimately take the risk, even if the odds of success were barely above zero. It was too late to do otherwise. "Ham, I'm going back to the Collective."

"Aye, Captain."

Caleb slipped back through Ishek's collux, returning to the din of their space in the tiny universe. Ishek had filtered out a lot of the noise, and he immediately gained a vague sense of positioning, the groups of khoron separated as if by ship.

*This is different,* he commented, surprised by the clarity.

*You can thank Jack and Jeff,* Ishek replied. *They assisted me in attenuating the signals from the other Relyeh.*

*Can you link me to everyone?*

Caleb sensed his white light glowing brighter at different segments as Ishek drew the others in.

*Haas is organizing a defensive position,* he explained. *Take a moment to review it and then target the ships in question.*

*Aye, Captain,* Penn replied.

*We need to double-up on targets. One pair goes for the reactor, the other to open a hole to sneak a nuke through. Jack, you're the strongest, so you're with me to balance me out.*

*Aye, Captain,* Jack answered.

*Let's go. I'll follow your lead.*

## CHAPTER 41

Caleb sensed Jack's light dart into the darkness, and he trailed behind it, watching as both Jack and Gareshk crashed into a tightly packed group of khoron. They targeted one, quickly overwhelming it. He did the same, hitting a second khoron in the cluster while Ishek took the one beside it. It took a little more time and effort to overpower the khoron without Ish, but he could tell their strengthening bond had made him more adept. He peered through the faceplate of a Legionnaire positioned in a corridor, damage control equipment nearby. Jeff had taught him how to find the best position in a Specter using the armor's computer, and he quickly located himself near the bow. Not where he wanted to be, he cut the khoron's cord and returned to the Collective, choosing a second target as the Legionnaire collapsed.

Moving to the opposite side of the cluster, he seized a Legionnaire closer to the reactor, standing by to react to any emergency the ship might experience. Caleb smirked at the idea. He was the emergency.

Rushing down the corridors, he encountered a few other Legionnaires along the way, cutting them down before they even knew what hit them. Arriving at the entrance to engineering, he forced the khoron to boost the host, sensing tingling as the Legionnaire's strength increased enough for him to force the doors open. The dose was enough to kill the man if he held it too long, but he didn't expect the Legionnaire to be alive much longer, anyway.

His entrance surprised the engineers in the room, and they succumbed quickly to his rifle's plasma fire, dropping like flies. Rushing to the nearest terminal, he tapped on the controls, following the steps Johan had taught all the bonded pairs. The core meltdown was a self-destruct feature and would alert the bridge as soon as he activated it, so he first entered a command line and used the commands he had memorized to lock the bridge out of this part of the network. It was only possible because Johan, Tae, and Naya had had a Specter of their own to play with. The easiest way to hack the ship's computer was with a virus Tae had come up with, but obviously, he couldn't use it here. Instead, he had to type in individual commands that ultimately permitted root access.

It took a few minutes longer than he wanted and allowed the defenses to reach the control room. They shot him in the back as he activated the overload, stepped back, and blasted the terminal. They continued shooting him while he destroyed the rest of the equipment in the room, preventing them from stopping the meltdown. Cutting loose his Legionnaire, he returned to the Collective.

*Jack, that target is toast. On to the next.*

*Aye Captain, Jack replied. Nice work.*

Jack's light darted away again, headed for another ship. Caleb intended to follow until a sense of intense pressure on his body pulled him back to his universe.

Immediately, he felt the high Gs as Ham threw Medusa through a series of tight maneuvers. A pair of Nightmares shot past the forward surround, even more of the fighters approaching from the Specters closer to the planet.

"It's getting hot in here," Ham grunted, sending Medusa into another quick evasive maneuver. "I could use some help with the FCS."

"On it," Caleb replied, grabbing hold of the co-pilot controls and activating the fire control system. He didn't waste time targeting the incoming Nightmares, instead quickly setting the guns to work as anti-missile defense. "There's

nothing I can do about their energy weapons. All the firepower we have will be hard pressed to defeat their armor.”

“Are you kidding? How are we supposed to get through that?” Ham pointed his chin toward the projection. The Specters and Nightmares were forming a blockade between them and the planet. They knew Medusa was going for the surface. Maybe it was a good sign that Iagorth was trying so hard to keep them away.

Caleb considered asking Jack and Penn to help him thin out the Nightmares or try to melt down the Specters. A quick look at the grid changed his mind. Their fleet had already been reduced by half, the weaker corvettes succumbing more quickly to the enemy than their Specters. Gorgon had retreated to relative safety near Lo’ane, but they still had to break through six enemy warships to clear the defensive position Haas had set. No doubt, the bonded pairs were working on softening those Specters, and neither Gorgon nor Castra would survive if he pulled those resources away from them now.

“You’re the best damned pilot I know,” Caleb replied. “You’ll get us through.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence, and maybe you’re right, but what about the group coming up on our tail? All these evasives are slowing us down.”

Caleb hadn’t noticed the Nightmares behind them. He saw them now, racing up in a straight line from the rear. It wasn’t obvious which Specter they had come from. “I think we need to go faster.”

“Oh, you think?” Ham bit back with a slight hint of amusement. “I’ve got an idea.” He cut the forward thrust and hit the retro-rockets, slowing Medusa down.

“That’s the opposite of what I just said.”

“Wait for it,” Ham replied, still maneuvering with the vectoring thrusters. Medusa’s guns opened up, blasting a handful of enemy missiles before they could impact the shields, which were already taking fire from the Nightmare’s energy weapons.

“Ham!” Caleb cried, getting nervous about the whole thing. He tensed even more when the trailing Nightmares launched rockets.

Ham changed the ship’s vector and hit the mains, sending them streaking away from both groups of enemy fighters. It wasn’t until they had nearly cleared the entire mess that Caleb saw the rear missiles slam into the front Nightmares, taking the squadrons by surprise. They followed up with energy blasts that knocked out nearly a dozen Nightmares in an instant before engaging the oncoming group.

*We’ll take care of these, Jeff said. You’re clear, Captain.*

Caleb exhaled in relief. In the chaos, he had forgotten about the Free Legion’s Nightmares. A portion of them had just come to their rescue. *Thanks for the backup.*

*Anytime.*

With some Nightmares distracted, Ham concentrated on breaking through the Specter blockade, making constant, random adjustments to their course as energy beams flashed past. Caleb again shut his eyes, returning to the Collective.

*Ish, we need to get on those Specters.*

*Haas and the others are taking a pounding, Ishek replied. This isn’t going as well as we had hoped. We need to focus on assisting them.*

*Is Gorgon in trouble that I can’t see on the grid?*

*Not at the moment. Amali says the combined forces have burned almost half their nukes, with only five kills to show for it.*

*Five is still damn good.*

*It isn’t good enough.*

Caleb considered the situation. He could try to aid Castra and the others, counting on Ham to steer them through the intensifying defenses ahead. Or he could help Ham, hoping the fleet could hold out. There was no right option. No suitable answer. Whatever he chose added risk on the other side.

He had praised Ham as the best pilot he knew. In the end, he went with that.

*Find us a target, Ish.*

*I already did.*

Ishek led him to a cluster of noise that had to be from one of the Specters. Focusing on one of them, he and Caleb quickly overpowered the khoron, seizing the host and entering her consciousness.

“Move, move, move!” one of the Legionnaires shouted, waving others along. Noticing Caleb had paused the female Legionnaire, he turned his attention toward her. “Why are you standing there? We’re on emergency lockdown. Let’s go!”

Caleb overcame his initial confusion, prompting the woman to join the other Legionnaires and techs hurrying through the passageway. *What is this?* He asked Ish.

*He said emergency lockdown, Ishek replied. It appears they’ve grown wise to our plan of attack and are sending the majority away from areas we can target. It will be difficult to gain control of a useful khoron this way.*

*Which means we’re about to lose our only edge.*

*It seems that way.*

Caleb moved the woman along the corridor with the others, waiting as they filed through a smaller hatch deeper into the Specter. He had her remain outside the hatch as the last Legionnaire approached; the man bringing his plasma rifle up into the woman’s face.

“You have two seconds to—”

She lunged at the Legionnaire, knocking his rifle aside before he could pull the trigger. Caleb’s female pawn wasn’t as strong as the male Legionnaire, but she was quicker and a better fighter. He prompted her to grab the Legionnaire’s arm and flip him over her back to the deck. Dropping on him and scissoring her legs around his neck, she leaned back and put pressure on his neck until it cracked, severing his spinal column.

Shouts arose from the other side of the hatch as the Legionnaires there saw what she'd done. Caleb incited her to spring up. Ignoring the rifle fire that blasted her armor, she protected her faceplate as she reached for the hatch controls. The blast door slid closed just before the others could reach her, already programmed to remain locked from the other side.

Caleb used the armor's systems to locate the woman in the Specter before sprinting for the nearest outer hatch. *Ish, you need to tell the others about this. We're going to need to cook up another way to breach these ships, and fast.*

He sensed Ishek leave him, returning before the woman cleared the first long passageway. *They are informed. Penn has already seen it happening on another Specter as well. Vraxis could locate a Legionnaire outside the lockdown, but it took multiple attempts.*

*Alternate ideas?*

*None yet.*

"Damn it," Caleb cursed out loud in the unfamiliar voice of his host. She sprinted to the end of the corridor, down another, to a third. A single, small access airlock waited at the end of the line. He started shooting at it before she ever got there, blasting through the inner material by the time she reached the door. He changed the rifle's firing mode so it would dispatch a constant stream of plasma and buried the muzzle in the newly made gap, heating up the interior of the raylium lining the hatch. Within half a minute, it became visibly brittle.

He kicked the spot. The armor shattered, his host immediately sucked out into space, her armor protecting her from a quick death in the unfriendly expanse. Drifting away from the Specter, Caleb noticed Duke Draco's flagship in the distance. A sense of elation flowed through him when the ship adjusted course and a single rocket launched in his general direction from one of its firing tubes. He didn't intend to stick around to watch the impact. With no Nightmares to intercept the warhead, the outcome was nearly guaranteed.

Abandoning the Legionnaire and returning to his body on Medusa's flight deck, Caleb was equally elated to see that they were on the other side of the blockade, with nothing but space between them and Achnea. Energy bolts continued trying to spear the ship, but Ham swerved and juked away from them as if he had a sixth sense and knew ahead of time when and where they would be.

"We made it," Caleb breathed, relieved.



## CHAPTER 42

“As if you had any doubts,” Ham replied. “We even have an escort.”

From the co-pilot’s seat, Caleb looked at the grid. Eight of Jeff’s Nightmares had made it through the blockade and remained with Medusa as the shuttle descended. “Nice. How long until we breach the atmosphere?”

“Six minutes.”

*Jeff, have you located Iagorth’s base?*

*Since Iagorth knows we’re coming, he may have hibernated his Legionnaires to make them invisible to us. But if the report of a replication facility is accurate, he won’t be able to hide the signs of immature khoron. Unfortunately, we’ll likely need closer physical proximity to pick them out from the Legionnaires on the Specters.*

That wasn’t what Caleb wanted to hear. What kind of physical proximity? *Are you talking meters, or...*

*It’s hard to be sure, but a few hundred kilometers at least. Once the Nightmares reach altitude they’ll split up to cover more ground. If the stars are with us, we’ll triangulate quickly. I know this wasn’t our original plan, but if the facility is here, we will find it.*

*Copy that. I’m glad to have the Free Legion with us.*

*And we’re grateful to you for creating us.*

*Assuming there is a base, Ishek commented. Why would Iagorth spring a trap at his primary place of operations when*

*there are so many uninhabited planets around?*

*I don't know. Maybe he figured it would be less suspicious, considering the planet's history. He also probably thinks the chance of us winning here is zero.* Caleb glanced back at Ham. “The Nightmares will drop into the atmosphere and split up to search for signs of khoron. Keep us loitering in a low orbit until they get a position and be ready to drop in hard.”

“Wilco,” Ham replied.

“Sarge, how are you doing up there?” Caleb asked over the comms. A look at the grid showed the fleet had thinned the immediate area of Specters, having destroyed nearly a third of the ships with their attacks over the Collective. It was an impressive number, but considering how the enemy reacted to their tactics, it would be the final tally if they didn't come up with another attack vector soon.

“We have about fifteen minutes before things get ugly again,” Damian replied. “But we're still alive right now, and our shields are in decent shape. Lo'ane has taken the brunt of it. Her shields are offline. Only the raylium armor is keeping her in the fight.”

*That definitely isn't good news,* Ishek said.

Caleb fell silent, hesitant to say the words that spilled from him next. “Sarge, in all honesty. We came expecting some resistance, but nothing like this. Kagata tricked us, and Iagorth is obviously prepared. You have an opening to jump out of here, and live to fight another day with a decent portion of the fleet intact, and with Castra still alive. You need to take it.”

Damian chuckled. “Cap, you don't think Haas already said the same thing? His entire strategy when he saw the number of Specters out here was to create a lane out, not a fortified defensive position.”

Caleb glanced at the grid with fresh eyes. His lack of fleet-level combat experience was showing, as he'd misread the maneuvering. He saw it now. A path from the grouped fleet away from Achnea.

Away from him.

He didn't like it, but it needed to be done. "So why are you still here?"

"Castra ordered us to stay," he replied. As a former member of the Royal Armed Forces, it was probably all the reason he'd needed to stay, even if it was suicide. Especially after what had happened on Atlas soon after Lo'ane had fled the planet.

"No offense to Castra," Caleb said. "But she's never been in a battle before. There are still thirteen Specters out there, and our fleet is down to twenty-five from forty. Plus Lo'ane has no shields. Destroying seven Specters is a great day's work, our losses comparatively minor given the circumstances. But they're adjusting to our tactics faster than I'd hoped. Erasing our edge. We'll be lucky to destroy even one more."

"I know all this, Cap. And I relayed most of what you said to her. She doesn't care. She said you didn't give up on her on Primary Station when the Legionnaires came for her. She's not military, Cap. She's only thinking with her heart. But she's the Empress-in-waiting, and if you ask me, someone who thinks with their heart is exactly what the Spiral needs right now."

"That may be true, but she won't live long enough to become Empress if she won't jump out of here."

"If it makes you feel any better, the Free Legion won't leave, either."

"It doesn't make me feel any better. If Castra dies, the resistance dies. Crux wins. Iagorth wins. She has to know that."

"She does. She made her decision, foolish as it may be. Suicidal as it may be. It's not unusual for someone's greatest strength to be their biggest weakness. It's our job to make that decision work."

Caleb balled his hand into a fist, squeezing tightly to release some of his frustration. He hadn't gone through too much effort to find and save Castra just to see her throw her life away. But Damian was right. Castra had lost half her face and nearly died trying to help a stranger. She would risk a lot

more to protect him. The only thing he could do was try to make her choice the right one.

“So, what’s Haas’ plan?” he asked.

“Look at the grid,” Damian replied.

Caleb shifted his attention to it. The fleet had moved again. Only instead of heading away from Achnea, they were undertaking a synchronized burn toward the planet. “I don’t understand.”

“We’re moving to a low orbit to cut off as much of the Specter’s attack vector as possible. That’ll allow us to more easily keep the fresh sides of our ships facing the enemy and buy us more time to lay into them with everything we have.”

“Except everything we have isn’t enough. Besides, you’re intentionally putting your back against the wall. You’ll have zero chance of changing your mind and escaping.”

“Castra won’t change her mind. I’m sure you know that. As for our offensive capabilities, Johan, Naya, and Tae are reviewing with Jack and Penn the data we collected on the Specters. They’re trying to determine if there’s anything we haven’t considered that would breach the ships from the inside or outside.”

*I wonder if anyone’s ever tried spearing a Splinter into a Specter before, Ishek mused.*

“Wait. What was that, Ish?” Caleb asked out loud.

*Hiro’s sword does a fine job against Legionnaire armor. Raylium is not completely impervious. Perhaps a sharp instrument would work better than kinetic force.*

“Even if that worked, how would it help?”

*You could load a nuclear warhead into the Splinter.*

*Even if that worked, Gorgon is only carrying four warheads. That isn’t nearly enough. Also, the Splinters don’t have autopilot or targeting systems. Someone would need to pilot them into the Specter.*

*An honorable end, if I say so myself.*

The comment gave Caleb pause. He didn't want to ask anyone on his crew to throw their lives away like that. Given the circumstances, however; how could he not at least entertain the idea?

“Sarge, do you know if anyone has ever tried to spear a Specter with a breacher?”

“Ram it with a splinter?” Damian replied. “Wait. Are you serious?”

“It's Ishek's idea.”

“Hold on.”

Damian's comms went silent. Caleb used the pause to check the forward viewscreen. The Nightmares had already entered Achnea's gravity well, pushing hard toward the atmosphere. The blockade had given up shooting at them, turning their attention toward the resistance fleet's approach and leaving the ground defenses to handle the incoming fighters.

“I asked everyone on the bridge, plus Penn,” Damian said, returning to the channel. “The consensus is that since only pirates use breacher class ships, odds are it's never been attempted. I can't imagine any pirate being dumb enough to go after a Specter. Even if you make it inside, there's only one way home and hundreds of Legionnaires blocking your path.”

“So it might work,” Caleb said.

The statement left Damian at a loss for words. “I...I suppose it could. I mean...nobody's ever... What does Ishek have in mind?”

“He wants to kamikaze nukes into the Specters.”

“What's a kamikaze?”

“A suicide pilot.”

“That's brilliant and terrifying.”

*Thank you.*

“I suppose it may be worth a shot,” Damian continued. “The stars know we have nothing to lose, but there's still a few

problems with the idea. For one, we only have two nukes left. We already burned a pair. For another, who would be crazy enough to volunteer for a suicide mission?"

*I have another idea.*

"What is it, Ish?" Caleb questioned.

*Instead of nukes, we send away teams. Groups of five. Once they breach, they go for an outer hatch and open it, allowing the other ships in the fleet to target the hole and slip a warhead through. That removes the first limitation.*

"And requires five times more volunteers," Caleb complained. "Plus they'll have to get through the Legionnaires to reach their target."

*Except most of the Legionnaires are on lockdown, leaving the outer portions of the ship mostly clear. What is the human expression? You cannot break an omelet without making some eggs.*

"That's sort of it. Sarge, how many Splinters do we have?"

"Six functional, another six waiting on repairs."

"Do we have parts for them?"

"Aye, Captain. But since our pirating days are behind us, we haven't wasted time putting them back together."

"It may not be a waste of time after all." Caleb paused, again considering Ishek's idea. Everyone who boarded an enemy Splinter would be making a one-way trip. It was a hard ask. Given the circumstances, it was a straightforward decision. "Send word across Gorgon. We need volunteers."

## CHAPTER 43

*Captain, our Nightmares have entered the atmosphere and are ready to begin their search for khoron,* Jeff informed him.

*Copy that,* Caleb replied. *We're standing by for ingress.* His gaze moved from the forward viewscreen to the sensor grid, taking in the full scene. The Nightmares began as a grouping of dots over the planet, so close it filled the entire bottom half of the projection. Then the dots separated, some moving faster than others until they maneuvered into position. Then they broke away from each other, one in each major cardinal direction.

In low orbit, on the opposite side of the grid from Medusa's position, the two blockading Specters exchanged fire. Lo'ane and the Free Legion Specter took point in the approach. The weaker ships in the fleet sat nestled behind them, Gorgon in the center, as well protected there as possible.

The remaining eleven Specters had all updated their headings, but the unexpected movement by the resistance fleet had caught them by surprise, requiring additional time for them to cut their velocity and come about. The original fifteen-minute estimate had extended closer to forty before the full bulk of the defense could regain a firing solution.

Not that Iagorth needed the full strength of his defenses to finish the fleet.

"Sarge, sitrep," he said, activating the comms.

"Captain, good news and bad news. We have more volunteers than we expected."

“Is that the good news or the bad news?”

“Both,” Damian replied. Caleb understood what he meant without an explanation. “To be honest, I’m surprised by the crew’s willingness to sacrifice themselves for the cause. It seems you’ve had a positive effect on them.”

“We’ve come a long way from putting down mutinies, that’s for sure,” Caleb answered. “We only need one volunteer for the first Splinter. Preferably someone with training on flight controls.”

“Atrice volunteered.”

Caleb winced, afraid Damian would say that. “No. Not unless we’re desperate. He’s too valuable.”

“For his flying, or his cooking?”

“Both.”

“What about Mathias, from Callus? He also volunteered, and he claims he has experience as a shuttle operator.”

Caleb opened his mouth, ready to answer with a reflexive negative. Since he had helped Caleb rescue Castra and shut down the mining operations, Mathias had been one of the resistance’s most fervent supporters. It wasn’t a surprise to him that the man had volunteered. But their friendship made it that much harder to accept his willingness to give himself up for what amounted to an experiment.

“Captain?” Damian pressed, waiting on an answer. “Every second counts.”

The words sat in Caleb’s mouth like lead. He had no good reason to ask for someone else. Only personal ones. “Get him prepped.”

“Aye, Captain. Should we load the second Splinter as well, in case our plan is a success?”

“Affirmative. Select whoever you think is appropriate. I trust your instincts.”

“Aye, Captain.”



“What about the non-functional Splinters? What’s the ETA on affecting repairs?”

“The techs and engineering teams think they can get them all running within the next half hour.”

“Looking at the grid, that seems like it’ll be just in the nick of time.”

“Like I said, every second counts.”

“Keep me posted.”

“Aye, Captain.”

The comms fell silent. At that moment, the entire universe seemed completely still, despite the intermittent flashing of energy beams traded between the two Legion Specters and the resistance ships. The eye of the storm. For as much as he wanted to enjoy the moment of respite, he would have gladly traded it for a swifter resolution. Waiting had never been his strong suit, and he knew that once the eye had passed, everything would happen all at once.

It came sooner than he expected.

*Captain, our Nightmares have determined the likely position,* Jeff announced.

“Ham, coordinates incoming,” Caleb said. *Copy that, Jeff. Go ahead.* He entered the coordinates into the ship’s computer as Jeff recited them. The moment he entered the last digit, he whipped his head back to Ham. “Let’s go.”

“It’s about time,” Ham replied, opening a channel to the rear of the ship. “Get ready for some Gs. We’re going in.” He pushed the throttle open and adjusted Medusa’s heading. The thrusters flared, shoving Caleb hard into his seat as the ship launched toward the upper atmosphere.

“Captain,” Damian said. “The Splinter is loaded and ready for launch.”

Caleb’s jaw clenched in response to the statement. He knew the moment was coming, but now that it had arrived, he didn’t want to give the order. He had to remind himself that Mathias was a volunteer. He wanted to be part of this and had

accepted his fate. Now Caleb needed to do the same. “You’re clear to launch,” he spat.

“Launching now,” Damian replied.

Caleb shifted his attention from the blob of green in the forward viewscreen to the grid. The atmosphere had already reduced the sensor range, but he clearly made out the new contact as it sped away from the center of the resistance fleet, headed for one of the blockading Specters.

“Cap,” Ham said. “Something’s happening on the surface.”

Caleb looked back at the viewscreen, his brow crinkling in confusion as a dark tendril expanded from beneath the surface sea of green. “What is that?”

“I don’t know, but it can’t be good.”

Another glance at the grid. “Whatever it is, it isn’t showing on the sensors.”

*It appears the enemy knows we know where they are, Ishek commented. There’s no more reason to hide.*

*Captain, Jeff cried. Our Nightmares are under attack.*

Caleb’s attention bounced back to the viewscreen, where he found the two Nightmares closest to the tendril. The darkness had split into three lines, two going after the two Free Legion ships, the third heading straight for them in Medusa.

“Are those ships?” Ham asked. “There have to be thousands of them.”

Caleb recalled how Damian had once mentioned swarms. This had to be what he’d meant. “They’re drones,” he said. “Although, considering they’re Relyeh, I imagine they’re at least partially organic.”

“I don’t think it matters if their brains are circuits or cells,” Ham complained. “There are just so damn many of them.”

Caleb tapped on his control board. “I’m setting the FCS. Standby.” He couldn’t mark individual targets if he wanted to. They were too small and numerous to pick out, especially at their current distance. Instead, he locked onto one and

magnified it with one of the forward-facing cameras, not only getting a better look himself but teaching the FCS to attack anything that resembled it.

Each drone was nearly two meters long, thin and disc-shaped, with no obvious source of propulsion. It reminded Caleb of a Pebble, albeit a Pebble with raylium armor. He wasn't sure how Medusa's guns would fare against the aircraft, but he was about to find out. If the Nightmares were any indication, the Slates, as he immediately took to calling them, were formidable but not indestructible. Even with their enhanced armor, the Nightmares' plasma fire knocked them down in two or three shots.

Then again, any other drone Caleb had even encountered would have succumbed after a single hit.

And there were so many that one of the Nightmares vanished into a cloud of Slates, its guns unable to keep up with the number of craft attacking it. The Slates appeared to detonate when they hit the Free Legion fighter, first breaking down its shields before gouging into the starship's armor. Within seconds, nearly two hundred or more members of the swarm had exploded against the Nightmare, breaching the armor and sending it into an uncontrolled descent toward the forest canopy, smoke pouring out of multiple open wounds.

The second Nightmare didn't fare much better, though its more skilled pilot shook off the first group of Slates trying to ram it. A steady stream of fire knocked out most of the drones ahead of it, though more than a few detonated against the shields, each explosion weakening the craft a little more.

The whole thing reminded Caleb of the trife on Earth, using their superior numbers to overwhelm humankind. It was the preferred Relyeh tactic, just as effective here as it had been back home.

"Captain," Damian said over the comms, reminding Caleb of the other activity he was keeping an eye on. "Mathias is nearing the target."

Shifting his attention to the upper half of the sensor grid, Caleb found the Splinter had nearly reached the Specter. Cover

fire from Lo'ane kept the enemy warship from getting a bead on the smaller breacher, energy beams lashing past the diminutive craft.

“Here they come,” Ham said, pulling Caleb’s attention away from the Splinter. Medusa’s FCS opened fire the moment the swarm came into range, the ship’s frame shivering as the motorized turrets made dozens of rapid adjustments to their aim, blasting the first few lines of Slates out of the sky before they could come any closer.

“Five, four, three,” Damian counted out, dragging Caleb’s eyes back to the Splinter. He realized he was holding his breath as the counter hit zero and Mathias’ craft speared through the Specter’s shields and hopefully dug into the hull.

“Sarge?” he asked after a few seconds passed without a report. He tapped his control board, looking up at the sky through the overhead camera feed. He could see the Specters in orbit above. Both remained in place, with no sign of distress. His stomach dropped. Mathias had died for nothing. Ishek’s plan hadn’t worked. “Sarge,” he asked again, still eager for confirmation of the outcome. “Sarge, come in.”

The comms appeared to be offline. Caleb gave up contacting Gorgon. He didn’t have time to dwell on the failure. The Slates had finished the second Nightmare, the entire swarm redirecting toward Medusa. The ship’s guns continued blasting drones out of the sky by the handful as they descended almost straight down toward the target, the Slates rising straight up. They were losing ground to the swarm, and once it reached them, they would be hard-pressed to survive for long.

“I have a feeling this won’t end well,” Ham said, throwing Medusa into a high-G maneuver to confuse the swarm and disrupt the drones’ targeting. Caleb grunted, quickly growing dizzy in response to the change in direction. Medusa complained too, the frame flexing as he pulled them out of the dive at the same time he went into a wild corkscrew.

The front line of Slates shot past, unable to adjust in time. The drones further back reacted quickly to the change in path,

shifting like a flock of birds so that the back end swung into line with Medusa. The guns tore into them, knocking a dozen more out of the sky, but it wasn't enough. A series of detonations rocked the shuttle, knocking them around as Ham cursed and spiraled away.

“We can't get through in one piece,” he growled.

Caleb looked at the grid, noticing the other six Nightmares converging on their position. “Ham, looks like the cavalry's coming.”

He just finished saying it when the Nightmares opened fire, ripping a hole through the swarm of Slates for Medusa to slip through. The sudden attack quickly drew the drones' attention, and they split into segments again, groups of hundreds moving to intercept each ship. The arrival didn't clear them completely, but it considerably reduced the number of bogies attacking them.

“Captain,” Damian said, finally coming through. “Captain, it worked.” He was practically laughing. “It actually worked!”

Caleb's heart immediately started racing. He looked back at his feed, noticing now that where there had been two Specters earlier, now there was only one, wrapped in the haze of the destroyed warship's pulverized raylium armor. No wonder they had lost contact. The detonation had likely created too much interference for the signal to reach through.

“Ish,” Caleb cried with joy. “You did it!”

*I believe I am a genius.*

Caleb caught himself, remembering Mathias. He was sure his friend would be glad to know he hadn't given his life for nothing after all.

“The second Splinter is en route,” Damian added. “And when those other Specters arrive, we'll be waiting for them.”

“We just might pull this off after all,” Caleb commented. “It's easy to get carried away with the success, but let's never forget the cost.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Cap, we’re getting close to the ground,” Ham said. “We need somewhere to land.”

“There has to be an LZ somewhere down there,” Caleb replied. “The new khoron don’t teleport up to the orbiting ships for transport.”

“Damn it!” Ham cursed as Medusa shuddered, hit by another Slate. “That one just knocked out our shields on the left wing.”

“It’ll be fine,” Caleb replied. “We’re almost there.” A tone from his station drew his attention to his screen. Turret overheat warnings flashed, indicating the guns would shut down any second. “Oh, hell,” he spat, just before the guns fired their last round.

The Slates they were targeting survived to speed into Medusa’s bow and detonate, knocking the ship around even more.

“I think I found the LZ,” Ham said, pulling Medusa out of her dive while banking hard left. “Cap, what happened to the guns?” he asked a half-second later when he realized they’d stopped firing.

“Dead,” Caleb replied.

A half dozen Slates slammed into Medusa’s side. One of them hit the damaged wing, the explosion shearing it off.

“Then so are we,” Ham hissed, compensating as much as he could for losing half a wing, the shuddering ship beginning to spin and drop more quickly, beyond his ability to control.

“Captain,” Damian said with renewed tension as Caleb watched the dizzying view as they approached the forest. “We’re tracking new targets. Forty additional Specters just dropped nearby.”

Caleb didn’t have time to look at the sensor grid. He clenched his jaw, gripping his seat tightly as Medusa skimmed the treetops, what remained of the sheared off wing dipping down and catching limbs. It was enough to send the shuttle into a wild tumble before it smashed through the canopy’s branches. Contact with a thick tree trunk tore off the intact

wing, spinning the fuselage into another tree. The ship's skin crumpled like it was nothing more than paper mache, Caleb's restraints pushing and pulling him in every direction, the straps digging hard into his gut and shoulders but holding fast.

The camera feed sputtered, the projection going black. Only emergency systems remained online as the ship finally hit the ground upside down. Sliding across the forest floor, it slammed into another tree and jolted to a dead stop.

"Captain," Damian said again. "Do you copy? I repeat. Forty additional Specters just dropped out of hyperspace."

Caleb groaned, shaken and groggy. A warm tingle flowed through him as Ishek pumped him with chemicals to help him recover more quickly.

"Captain," Damian said a third time. "Crux is here."

## CHAPTER 44

“Sarge,” Caleb replied, dangling upside down in his harness. Ham groaned from the pilot’s seat, still shaking off the effects of the impact. “What do you mean Crux is here?”

“His flagship dropped with the other Specters,” Damian explained. “It wouldn’t be here unless he’s on board.”

“He’s supposed to be on Atlas.”

“I imagine Iagorth invited him to witness the end of the resistance. Without you, without Haas, without Draco, and especially without Castra, we’re done for.”

“How long until they’re in firing range?” Caleb asked.

“To finish us, you mean?”

“You haven’t launched all the Splinters, have you?”

Damian laughed, though it was more likely all he could do not to cry. “You really never quit, do you, Captain?”

“I’m still alive, aren’t I? Get enough pirates onto Crux’s ship, and maybe we’ll have a chance.”

“He’s an hour away. Half the other Specters that came with him are nearly twenty minutes closer. I’d love to get a shot off at him, Cap, but it isn’t in the cards.”

“Did you have to put it that way?” Caleb asked. He held onto the co-pilot console as he pulled the emergency release on his restraints. They let go, leaving him dangling. He kicked out and swung out behind his seat, letting go and landing on Medusa’s overhead. “Don’t give up yet. We just crash-landed



on the surface within a couple of clicks of the facility. We still have a chance.”

“Did you say crash-landed?”

“There’s a good chance all of us are still alive. I’m switching the comms over. We’ll probably lose the connection once we reach the facility and get inside.” He reached up to use the control board, transferring the facility coordinates to his helmet before linking the long-range channel to the team’s short-range network. “Edgers, if you’re dead, speak now or forever hold your peace.” He counted the voices behind the macabre laughter that followed, Usef’s loudest of all. “All right, knuckle up, pirates. We’ve got work to do.” He reached up and slapped Ham on his arm. “Just once, couldn’t you have gotten us on the ground without crashing into a tree?”

“Maybe next time, Cap,” Ham answered, releasing himself from his seat. He fell awkwardly onto his hands and knees before jumping back to his feet.

*Captain, Jeff said. “You have drones incoming.”*

“Damn it!” Caleb snapped. “We need to clear the ship, now!”

He hurried to the flight deck’s hatch, which fortunately opened without a hitch. Realizing Ham wasn’t right behind him, he spun around. “Any day now.” Ham had put on his helmet and picked up something that looked like a cross between a shotgun and a trombone. “What is that?”

“Johan made it,” Ham replied. “At your request, but he didn’t tell me what it is.”

For the first time since they arrived near Achnea, Caleb grinned. “I owe him one.”

“So what is it?”

“Let’s find some khoron, and you’ll see.”

Ham slung the weapon’s strap over his head, carrying his sidearm instead as he followed Caleb off the flight deck and to the exit. Already clear, the others screamed and waved to them, pointing frantically at the sky.

Caleb and Ham sprinted away from Medusa, sharp whistling coming from the sky indicating numerous drones were rapidly descending on their position. They all scrambled into the underbrush and behind trees as the Slates crashed into the shuttle and exploded, sending shrapnel everywhere and reducing the ship to rent metal. The ship's textiles and electronics went up in flames.

“Well, there goes our direct link to Gorgon,” Caleb said, remaining in place and waiting to see if the drones tried to hunt them down on the ground. *Ish, can you get in touch with Penn? We need comms back to the fleet.*

*I will try.*

The Edgers hunkered down together for a few more seconds, eyes on the sky, watching as dozens of Slates passed overhead before shifting direction and shooting back the other way. Caleb caught a glimpse of a Nightmare rocketing past, one of the Free Legion working to distract the drones.

“Let's go,” Caleb said. His helmet's HUD pointing the way, he hefted his plasma rifle and waved the others forward.

They had only gone a couple of steps when a soft grunt followed by a screeching whine sent a shiver down Caleb's spine. He put up his hand, freezing the unit.

*You have to be kidding me,* he said silently to Ishek. *All the way out here?*

*It leaves one to wonder if Iagorth is messing with us.*

*Or if the trife were here before he ever arrived.* “Edgers, weapons ready.”

“What's making that noise?” Usef asked.

“Xenotrife,” Caleb replied. “Individually, they're not much of a threat. But there's never just one of them. Consider them a ground-based swarm.”

“Lovely,” Goldie said.

“We didn't think we'd be able to walk right into the enemy's top secret base, did we?” Haruka replied, leveling her rifle.

A pair of screams echoed the first. Further away, the foliage began shifting, giving away the trife's approach. Of course, they were coming from the same place Caleb and the Edgers needed to go.

A few, already on top of them, dropped from the overhead branches, hissing and screaming as they landed on Usef. Scratching at his armor, their long, sharp teeth bit into the top of his helmet. Usef fired multiple rounds into the mottled black chest of the one on his shoulders, the bolts sinking straight through and out the other side of it. The trife choked and died, falling off him as a second came out from behind a tree, rushing him. He planted a plasma bolt in that one too, dropping it like a rock.

"These things are ugly," Usef growled, firing into three more emerging from the forest. "They remind me of my ex."

Goldie dispatch a trife that jumped at her. She turned and fired at a few that came out of the woods, mouths open in threatening howls, claws spread wide for slashing. They didn't seem able to penetrate the raylium with their talons, but each slash left score marks. If they caught the transparency of their helmets or consistently found the weaker joints of their armor, they could break through it. Caleb knew from experience that prolonged fighting only ever wound up in favor of the trife. They needed to clear the horde before they were bogged down in it and slashed to pieces.

"This way!" Caleb shouted, guiding them away from the oncoming trife sounds, planning to skirt their flank and sneak right past. It would be easier said than done, especially as the vanguard reached their location, breaking into lunging runs the moment they spotted the Edgers. In no time, dozens of trife stormed their position, leaving Caleb no choice but to slow and open fire, cutting down the immediate creatures trying to reach him. It didn't take long for the group to kill the trife, but no sooner had they thinned the group to a handful than the next wave charged them in greater numbers.

"Come on, Edgers! We need to move!" he shouted, doing his best to continue toward the base while the demons attacked. He used his plasma rifle sparingly, single rounds

going through the heads or hearts of the trife and bringing them down in a hurry. The others were less judicious, unaccustomed to fighting Relyeh. “They’ll bog us down here until we run out of ammo if we let them. They don’t need to beat us, they just need to slow us down.”

The statement hit home for the Edgers, and they started shooting one or two rounds to kill most of the trife. Caleb formed them up around him, leading them through the forest as more trife arrived, charging them from every side.

“They like to use claws?” Orin said beside Caleb. “I will show them claws.” He slung his rifle and quickly pulled off his gloves, revealing his claws beneath. Growling, he jumped into the fray, slashing and cutting, the trife dropping beneath his onslaught.

“I’m out of ammo,” Haruka said. “Reloading.”

“I’ve got you,” Goldie replied, shifting her aim to cover her fellow Edger while she reloaded. Digging a fresh cell out of a pocket, Haruka dropped the old one from her plasma rifle and inserted the new.

“Ready,” Haruka announced, back in business. Usef repeated the process a few seconds later, soon followed by Goldie and Ham. Caleb glanced at his ammo counter. He had only used half his cell. He stopped shooting, trading the weapon for Hiro’s sword. The way Orin continued powering through the incoming trife suggested that right now, a blade was the better choice.

He swung it without finesse, in a long sweeping arc that struck a trife, continuing through its grizzled body with little resistance and slicing the one beside it in half. Still swinging, he turned the blade, bringing it up and through a third trife’s neck before pulling it back and catching another trife on its approach. He whirled through the horde like a vengeful tornado, slicing, dicing and lopping off heads by the handful.

The Edgers continued their slow advance, Caleb and Orin cutting a path through the xenotrife as if they were made of paper. For all their efforts, more trife poured out of the forest,

swarming them until there was nothing else in sight beyond the black creatures with their long claws and sharp teeth.

“There are too many of them,” Goldie shouted, firing into one and killing it just before its claws slashed across her throat. A second caught her arm with its claws, tugging her to the ground. Usef shot it in the head before kicking out at the next one, breaking its face in and throwing it backward into another demon.

“Cap, man down!” Usef roared, unable to pause from shooting to come to Goldie’s aid. She slumped on the forest floor, the tactical network embedded in Caleb’s faceplate reporting her heavy blood loss and showing her vitals already dimming. A quick glance back revealed blood pouring from her neck where the trife had found the weaker spot between her armor and helmet. A lucky blow for the demon, a deadly outcome for her. Battling three trife at once, there was nothing he could do for her. By the time he had an opening to get to her, she was dead.

“Bastards!” Usef shouted, fighting the trife with renewed intensity.

“None of us are going to last much longer like this,” Ham said. “We’re going to run out of ammo, and then we’re going to end up like Goldie. Cap, what are we supposed to do?”

Caleb thrust his sword into the chest of another trife. “Knuckle up and keep fighting!” he shouted, driving the blade through that one and then the chest of another. “We’re only half a klick out now.”

“It might as well be on the other side of the planet,” Haruka said. Rarely one to complain, she obviously felt the stress of the constant onslaught and the weight of losing her friend.

*Ish, have you gotten through to Penn? Caleb demanded.*

*I would have told you if I had.*

*We need comms to Gorgon. Now! Keep trying.*

He stabbed a trife in the neck, grabbing a second with his enhanced strength and throwing it into two more, knocking

them back.

*Captain, what's happening down there?* Penn asked.

*Xenotrife. Thousands of them. We need air support asap, or we aren't going to make it to the facility.*

*Air support? The Free Legion already launched all its Nightmares. We—*

*Bombardment, Penn, Caleb explained. We need Lo'ane to target the surface, near our coordinates.*

*I don't think that's a good idea. If they're aim is just a hair off—*

*Then we'll be toast. I understand. We need support. Now!*

*Aye, Captain,* Penn said, falling silent for nearly ten seconds. *Bombardment incoming.*

“Edgers, we’re about to get air support. Follow me and don’t deviate from my footsteps.”

He killed four more trife as Haruka cried out. Head whipping back, he saw that a trife had landed a claw in the elbow joint of her armor, breaking the skin. That one was already dead, but another jumped on her back, locking its fangs onto her helmet and trying to rip it off. Usef grabbed it with his huge hand, dragging it off Haruka and dashing its head against a tree trunk.

“Cap, I want to go home,” she whimpered, losing her nerve and backing up.

“Knuckle up, Haruka,” he snapped back. “Don’t retreat. You can do this.”

She responded, shooting several trife in the face to move forward again, just as an energy beam hit the ground nearly a hundred meters away, lighting up the forest like lightning. Despite the distance, Caleb still felt the heat of it through his armor as the trees and trife within the blast radius went up in flames. A few seconds later, another beam struck the area on the other side of them, roasting more of the demons.

The Edgers finished off the closest trife, the bombardment giving them some breathing room to advance. A third beam hit the ground behind them, blasting more trife and some Slates as well.

*What's the status up top?* Caleb asked as he charged toward the facility, going hard, slashing and stabbing the trife approaching from the same direction. Orin took out some more of them, leaving Ham, Usef, and Haruka to kill the last of them.

*Crux's fleet is moving toward orbit, Penn replied. The eleven original Specters are almost in firing range. We have no path to jump out now, even if Castra would allow it, which she won't.*

*And the Splinters?*

*Sarge has loaded all of them with volunteers, even the ones that aren't repaired yet. Atrice is giving them a crash-course in flying the things. We should be okay against the first group of Specters, but Crux's fleet is twice the size of what's left of ours, and we'll be out of kamikazes by the time he gets here. I hate to put more pressure on you, Cap, but you're our only hope of surviving this thing.*

*I already figured as much. How much time do we have?*

*Twenty-five minutes, assuming we hold out against the first group of Specters.*

*Copy that. What about you and the other bonded pairs?*

*We're harassing the Specters, looking for Legionnaires outside the lockdown. The ones on the outside are paired up with their rifles already pointed at one another. The moment we find a target and make a move, we get shot. The best we can do is keep the Legionnaires tied up so when the Splinters do launch, they can move around without too much... Penn's voice faded suddenly, as though she were speaking over radio waves and not through an alternate universe.*

*Ish, what just happened?*

*I do not know.*

*Get her back.*

*I'm trying. She is...missing.*

*What do you mean, missing?*

Distracted just enough to slow his reaction time, an incoming trife took Caleb by surprise, sinking its claws through his faceplate, pulling him down.

Caleb stared for an instant at the embedded claws that had nearly come close enough to tear his nose off, and then they were gone as Orin speared the trife in the chest, hurling it away from Caleb.

“Captain, are you injured?” he asked, batting another trife aside to pull Caleb to his feet.

“I’m good. Thanks for the save.” With the gouges obscuring his vision, Caleb ripped off his helmet and swung it into an incoming trife, smashing its face in. Running up behind it, Ham shot it dead, and the three of them took off again, Usef, Haruka and the others right behind them. Almost simultaneously, another energy beam hit the ground behind them, lighting up the sky and killing a huge number of the pursuing horde.

“I lost contact with Penn!” Caleb shouted.

“Over the Collective?” Orin asked.

“Yeah. Something’s wrong, and there’s only one way to fix it.”

Orin pointed straight ahead. “I believe I see the facility entrance up ahead. It is true.”

It was only after Orin said it that Caleb realized the trife assault had abated. Iagorth had either finally run out of the demons, or he’d chosen to stop throwing the creatures at them. What he didn’t see was an entrance to anything. “Where?”

“There...” Orin pointed out an earthen mound. “...through the trees,” There is an entrance on the other side.”

“How do you know?”



“It is like a Jiba-ki warren entrance, designed to be difficult to locate, even from the ground. You are fortunate you have a beautiful Jiba-ki on your team.”

“It is true,” Caleb agreed.

“So you finally admit that I am beautiful?”

“Right now, you’re exceedingly beautiful.”

“Yeah!” Usef roared behind him. “Take that you bastards!” He laughed loudly enough Caleb could hear him without a helmet.

Tapping on his comms patch, he motioned forward. “Edgers, Orin says the entrance is on the other side of that mound. We’re almost there. I want a status report while we move.”

“I have a laceration to my elbow, Cap,” Haruka announced. “I’m down to one arm, but I can still fight. One plasma cell remaining, loaded at eighty percent. Blaster is full. Armor is pretty scraped up but otherwise intact.”

“I’m enjoying killing these bastards, Captain,” Usef said. “No injuries. One cell at sixty percent, full blaster, a little scraped up but ready to go.”

The others quickly made their reports as they reached the mound and circled around it. The trife had vanished, which coupled with Penn’s disappearance left Caleb at greater unease. Iagorth had to know they were close. He’d chosen to let them inside.

And who could blame him? They were beaten up and running low on ammunition. Excluding Usef, the Edgers sounded exhausted. Even he felt the fatigue creeping in despite Ishek’s boost.

*Ish, any luck?*

*She is no longer on the Collective, Ishek replied. Vraxis is also gone.*

*What about Jack or Amali?*

*I cannot locate them.*

*What about Jeff?*

*He is strangely absent as well. I cannot sense the Free Legion at all.*

*Was their Specter destroyed?* Caleb asked, struggling to understand the situation overhead.

*With only the Collective to go by, then I would say yes. Knowing it was not under attack, that seems unlikely.*

*Do you think this has anything to do with Crux's arrival?*

*That seems likely. Perhaps Crux attacked them personally? If he is powerful enough to overcome them, they may have gone into hibernation to escape him.*

*If that's true, then why isn't he attacking us?*

*It may not be true. I am purely speculating. I'm as puzzled by this as you are. But if he chooses not to attack us, it is likely at Iagorth's request.*

*Another trap?*

*I do not know. There are many possibilities.*

*Then we need to work with what we have in front of us. Anyway, we didn't think Crux was a host.*

*He is mutated. Perhaps he has formed a collux.*

*Can you find him on the Collective?*

*I have sensed nothing unusual, but if I seek him out, if I find him, then he will also find us. We probably do not want that.*

*Not yet, anyway, Caleb agreed. I hope Penn is—*

*Knuckle up, partner. The only way to find out is to survive.*

## CHAPTER 45

The entrance to the facility was right where Orin promised, though they had to pass through a holographic projection that made the mound seem unbroken. The lack of a worn path to the large blast doors tucked under the mound suggested that the clearing Ham had been angling for before the crash was likely hidden as well. Probably a hangar bay with a covering that pulled back to allow shuttles carrying fresh batches of khoron up to orbiting Specters that would distribute them across the Legion.

The deteriorating condition of the doors told Caleb a couple of things. First, they had been there for a long time. He already knew from Achnea's history that the Cruyton's had explored the planet nearly two centuries earlier. The rust along the edges and the moss clinging to the doors suggested they were at least that old, if not more ancient. Second, they hadn't been used in some time, meaning the trife had come either from a different exit, were native to the planet, or had been created by Iagorth and released into the wild to defend the facility, which seemed the most likely. Along with the khoron, Iagorth had probably brought trife eggs from Earth aboard Pathfinder.

The doors didn't open easily, requiring another boost from Ishek plus Usef and Orin's added strength to help pry them apart. They entered within a few minutes of Caleb losing contact with Penn. Ishek continued the silent countdown to when the bulk of Crux's fleet would engage the resistance forces. He had twenty-two minutes to confront Iagorth before all of his efforts went for nothing.

The entrance led to a large, unlit passageway that immediately descended at a ten degree angle into the earth. The Edgers lit it up with their helmet LEDs, revealing wooden crates, palettes, and other packaging debris, including a hover lift, scattered along the sides. Obviously, the components of the replication technology and the sanctifier had come in pieces, probably stored on Pathfinder, such that no one would ever discover its true purpose. Especially humans who knew nothing about what they might be transporting.

There was no sign of the enemy as they made their way down. After starting along the corridor at a slow, cautious pace, Caleb abandoned the caution, breaking into a sprint. He didn't know how far the passageway stretched, and every second counted.

As he ran, he couldn't shake the sense that they were charging headlong into another trap. Or, short of an actual ambush, this was a measured response from Iagorth based on the outcomes of the initial conflict so far. The Relyeh Ancient had used Kagata to not only bring them here, but to deliver him on a schedule he had clearly arranged, or at least understood. Otherwise, there would have been no way to get Crux's fleet here so soon after their arrival. Even if Crux had been waiting nearby, he would have needed to leave Atlas before Kagata's last act of treachery to have already made it here. That fact led Caleb to believe that if it hadn't been Kagata who'd revealed the planet, it would have been someone else.

The question then was whether Iagorth wanted Caleb here, inside the facility. His initial answer was no, because the immediate ambush from the waiting Specters could have destroyed Gorgon if they'd come out of hyperspace in a less opportune position. In that sense, it was pure luck, or the stars, to which the Spiral's residents would attribute it, that had gotten them this far. And both the Slaters and the trife had done their damndest to bring them down before they'd made it this far. There was no indication any of them had pulled punches to allow Caleb to reach this place alive.

On the other hand, the trife had disappeared before they'd entered the facility. And, if the Free Legion, Penn, and the others had gone off the Collective to escape Crux or another powerful Relyeh, then he and Ish remained unchallenged because Iagorth wanted it that way. The Relyeh Ancient had millions of years of experience across untold numbers of galaxies. There was no question he was more dangerous than Shub'Nigu because of his ability to spread himself through his moieties. It made sense that Iagorth would change his tactics on the fly, coming to different conclusions as the inputs also changed.

*Ish, I have a feeling I know how this might play out.*

*Yes. I believe you may be right. This is a dangerous game we are playing. One that not all of us here will win.*

*Goldie already lost, Caleb reminded him. I'll be damned if I'm going to lose anyone else.*

They burned nearly five minutes before reaching the end of the main passageway, where a second blast door waited. Again, Caleb forced it open, leading the others through into the primary facility. Greeted by a series of corridors branching ahead and on both sides, he stopped to look around. The passageways were empty, the visible overhead lights shut off, the place deserted.

“Don't tell me this place is abandoned,” Ham said. “I don't think my mind could take it.”

“The Free Legion sensed khoron down here,” Caleb replied.

“Maybe Iagorth abandoned them, too,” Haruka offered. “Or maybe he's up there with Lord Crux, laughing his ass off at us for wasting time coming for him.”

“I would be, if I were him,” Usef agreed.

They were about to pass an adjoining corridor when a banging from somewhere down the right of it drew their attention.

“That sounds like someone's in trouble,” Ham said.

“I will investigate,” Orin said.

“Usef, go with him.”

“Yes, sir.”

They took off down the corridor just as more banging erupted, this time from the left.

“What the...” Ham said. “I feel like I just stepped into a horror movie.”

“You only started feeling that now?” Haruka said.

“You two go check it out,” Caleb said.

They nodded and went down the left side of the flanking corridor, leaving Caleb alone in the center of the junction, ready to react if either pair needed him. He watched Orin and Usef stop in front of a door. Usef used the butt of his rifle to bang back, and the pounding stopped. It looked to Caleb as if a verbal exchange took place, and then Usef reached for the door controls.

“Wait!” Caleb shouted. His voice, loud over his comms patch, echoed through the corridor. “All Edgers, stand down.”

“Captain, there are people trapped behind these doors,” Haruka said.

“No,” Caleb answered. “They’re Legionnaires. Infected. Their khoron are hibernating, that’s why they’re locked in. That’s why they’re begging to get out.”

“Sneaky,” Usef growled. “You can all rot in there!” he shouted. “We aren’t fooled!”

*Caleb, Ish said urgently. They’re waking up.*

“Clear the doors!” Caleb snapped. “Retreat to me. Now!”

The Edgers on both ends of the corridor raced back toward Caleb as the doors opened. The first Legionnaires out seemed confused, but quickly brought their rifles up, ready to fire at the two pairs of Edgers.

The Legionnaires on Orin’s side opened fire, their plasma rounds hitting both men in their backs as they retreated. Ham

paused on the other side of the corridor, turning toward the group emerging from the doorway, nearly a dozen in all. He raised Johan's newly invented weapon, hesitating for a moment before pulling the trigger. The Legionnaires, stunned by a hypersonic blast, each reached up and clutched their heads before dropping like sacks of potatoes.

"Whoa! I was not expecting that!" Ham said excitedly before turning and running back to Caleb, who was impressed with the weapon's effectiveness.

Ham returned to the junction just after Orin and Usef. Firing the hyperblaster at the Legionnaires on the other side, they too dropped to the floor, clutching their heads, all of them paralyzed by Johan's invention.

"Johan said the design continues to modulate the frequency, so it should remain effective, Ham said. "I didn't understand what he meant before now."

"I'm glad it works. Let's go," Caleb said, sprinting up the center passageway, the Edgers on his heels.

*You realize they were herding us, not attacking us,* Ishek pointed out.

*They were attacking the others,* Caleb replied. *It's all according to plan.*

*Yes.*

They continued along the passageway to another blast door. Caleb pulled it open, urging them through and allowing the doors to close behind them. "Orin, you have the most plasma left. Seal it."

"Aye, Captain," Orin replied, setting his plasma rifle to stream. He turned it on the doors, the heat from the plasma melting and fusing the metal. The extra grip would slow the Legionnaires behind them, keeping them out.

Of course, it would also keep them in.

*Fourteen minutes,* Ishek informed him, still keeping track of Crux's fleet. Caleb hated there was no way he could know

the condition of the rebel ships. He could only hope Castra and the others were still alive and well up there.

As Orin finished sealing the door, Caleb realized they were in a control room. A series of terminals lined the walls on two sides with doors in between the banks of displays. Another blast door sat opposite them.

*The immature khoron are through that door,* Ishek announced.

“This way,” Caleb said. The door opened ahead of them. Stepping through, they encountered individual fish tank-like enclosures. There had to be at least five hundred tanks, all occupied by juvenile khoron in various stages of development. Each was suspended in a nutrient bath, tendrils stretching to them from a black, shell-like object on the side of each tank.

*The khorux transfers the genetic code to the khoron,* Ishek explained. *These khorux are not like any I have seen before. They are normally smaller and lighter in color.*

*Iagorth’s modified them.*

*It appears so.*

“Do we shoot them, or what?” Usef asked as Caleb stopped them at the middle of an intersecting aisle.

“We brought the detonators for a reason,” Caleb replied. “Haruka, you’re up.”

“Aye, Captain.” She opened a pair of compartments in her armor, retrieving small pucks of explosives and quickly placing them around the room. Further back, the Legionnaires attempted to open the doors Orin had sealed.

*More Legionnaires are approaching from the other side of the compartment,* Ishek said, able to sense them. We are about to get blocked in.

“Ham, get ready with the repeller,” Caleb said. “Follow me.”

They continued past the area, through another blast door on the other side of the compartment into another passageway. Two units of Legionnaires greeted them, but Ham’s hyperblast



repeller stunned them, dropping them to the deck before they could open fire.

“Do we kill them, or—” Usef asked as they ran down the corridor approaching the Legionnaires.

“We only have one target,” Caleb replied. “And we’re running out of time.” He looked over at Haruka. “Blow the replication chamber.”

She smiled and nodded, pressing the trigger on the detonator. The entire facility shuddered as the explosives went off, the full effect to the compartment contained behind the blast doors.

“I don’t think Iagorth will be very happy about that,” Ham said.

“Good,” Usef grunted back.

They left the Legionnaires alive behind them, navigating deeper into the facility. Whenever they reached a junction, Caleb redirected away from any Legionnaires that came out of hibernation, obviously released from their locked compartments by Iagorth’s host to confront them. Their releases guided Caleb where Iagorth wanted him to go, which was fine by Caleb, since it was also where he wanted to go.

In fact, he was pretty sure both he and the Ancient wanted the same thing right now. He just needed to make sure Iagorth didn’t suspect that was the case or it might not happen.

*Eight minutes, Ishek informed him as they approached another blast door. And we’re surrounded by Legionnaires. I think this is the place.*

*It’s about time,* Caleb replied, pausing in front of the door. “Iagorth’s host is on the other side.”

“Are you sure?” Ham asked.

“As sure as I can be. Thank you all for getting me this far. If things don’t work out...”

“I’ve never liked you, Card,” Usef said. “But I respect you more than anyone I’ve ever taken orders from.”

“I should like to be the one to kill you, Cayheb,” Orin joked. “It is true.”

“Captain, I am prepared to die a warrior’s death at your side,” Haruka said.

“It’s been an honor, Cap,” Ham said. “But we’ll make it out. You promised you would get me home. Remember?”

Caleb smiled. “Right.” *Ish, are you ready?*

*I will not enjoy this.*

*Neither will I. But we are going to do it.*

*I’m prepared.*

Caleb reached for the blast door controls.

The door opened before he touched it.

## CHAPTER 46

Caleb stepped into the compartment, his eyes immediately drawn to the walls where a layer of black goop dangled in hundreds of thin tendrils. It shivered and shifted, contracting and expanding like a giant, disgusting worm, parts of it moving as if it were made of mercury, globbing out and traveling from one appendage to another. Part of it had spread along the ceiling, wrapping around an overhead projector that cast a hologram of a sensor grid just above a command surface in the center of the room. Much like the one in the briefing room on Gorgon, Caleb's ship and the others in the resistance fleet, were represented on the grid. They were seemingly backed into a corner by the large fleet of Specters bearing down on them, the largest ship Caleb had ever seen bringing up the rear.

Seven minutes remained until Crux and his fleet came within range to open fire on the rebels. Seven minutes until they were all likely to die. The only good news, if he could call it that, was that only six of the original enemy warships remained, the others apparently removed successfully by the breaching teams.

“Caleb Card.”

The voice wasn't familiar to Caleb. He shifted his gaze from the grid to the man standing beside the table. Tall and handsome, with short black hair and a lean physique, he wore a basic pair of black utilities. Hardly an intimidating look.

“Tagorth, I presume,” Caleb replied.

“In the flesh,” he answered, his tone and expression flat. “Not my flesh, of course. But flesh, all the same. I suppose you’ve come to kill me.”

“I came to destroy your khoron breeding grounds,” Caleb answered. “Mission accomplished. Killing you will be a bonus.”

The Edgers filed in beside Caleb, spreading out with their weapons aimed at the man, who laughed in response.

“This feels a bit like the OK Corral,” Iagorth said. “Did you know I was there, Caleb? A part of me, anyway. Tombstone, Arizona. Eighteen eighty-one.”

“Wyatt Earp,” Caleb replied. “Which Cowboy were you?”

“Fortunately for Wyatt, I was a bystander that day.” His gaze swept from Caleb to the rest of the Edgers. “Not this day, however. You’re all going to die here.” His eyes returned to Caleb. “All except you. I have other plans for you. I’ve been waiting...”

“I bet you have,” Caleb said, raising Hiro’s sword. “I’ve been waiting for this, too.”

He tried to charge, already knowing he would never make it. Half a step, and he collapsed to the floor as Ishek cried out in excruciating pain. The scream rippled through his head, stunning him more completely than any hypersonic repeller.

A new presence made itself known within his consciousness.

*Crux*, he eked out in his mind.

“Kill him!” Ham shouted, as he and the other Edgers squeezed the triggers of their rifles. Plasma bolts launched at Iagorth, making it halfway before something dragged them into the floor, where they sizzled and dissipated against the stone.

“What the—?” Usef growled, unable to complete the question as an invisible force threw him backward. He hit the wall with a wet crack, dropped onto his stomach, and didn’t move again.

Haruka dropped her rifle and rushed toward Iagorth, a blade in her good hand. She let it loose, and Caleb watched in frozen horror as it turned around in mid-air and flew back into the Edger, sinking into her chest. She gasped and fell to the floor, clutching the blade, clearly in agony.

Ham shifted to the side, still firing his plasma rifle at Iagorth, while Orin tried to approach him from the other flank. Dropping to all fours, the Jiba-ki changed directions and threw himself at Iagorth with a quick pounce. He nearly reached the man when what had to have merely been a thought tossed him aside. The wall of dark ooze advanced and caught him, quickly expanding over him.

“S...s...stop,” Caleb squeezed out, even as Crux defeated the last barrier to stealing his consciousness. An icy cold sensation rushed through him as the mutant pushed him to the background, seizing control of his body and bringing him back to his feet.

Iagorth pulled the rifle from Ham’s hands, telekinetically throwing it across the room and leaving the pilot defenseless. He took two steps toward Iagorth as if to fight him hand-to-hand. Crux reached out with Caleb’s arm, catching him by the throat and lifting him easily off the deck.

“Cap?” Ham questioned, looking down at him with bulging eyes. “You...you aren’t Caleb.” He tried struggling, but Iagorth froze him in place.

*What shall I do with him, Caleb Card? Crux asked in a deep, amused tone. You brought him here to die. You brought all of them here to die. Did you really think you stood a chance against Iagorth the Devourer? Against me?*

I...had...to try,” Caleb pushed back, fighting to regain control. He knew he didn’t stand a chance. Crux was more powerful than he’d ever imagined him to be.

*I respect that, Crux answered. It’s the reason you’re here. A moiety is reliant on the strength of the host to provide the stamina needed to carry and channel its abilities effectively. This is especially true of the primary.*

Caleb's eyes shifted to the projection. From the look of the battlefield, he had five minutes before Castra and the rebels would be under intense fire. His gaze darted to Iagorth. He had been unsure whether the primary was on Achnea or with Crux. Now he knew.

*A curious thought, Crux said. You know more of the moieties than most. Yes, the primary is here. You should be honored to be his next intended host, Caleb Card.*

Caleb focused his mental energy, putting more effort into fighting against Crux. It was no use. Crux held a vice-grip hold on Ishek and him, and only by his own volition would he ever let go.

*If he's going to do it, then he should do it. I don't have all day.*

Crux chuckled in his mind. *Exactly the attitude I've been warned to expect. Before that, you still owe me an answer on Ham.* He shook the pilot by the throat. *It's a shame he'll never see his wife and child again, isn't it?* Caleb nearly lost his cool, frustrated that Crux was digging through his mind. "It is interesting," Crux said to Iagorth in Caleb's voice. "Card defeated Arluthu."

"Arluthu was a pathetic weakling," Iagorth replied. "Even so, that is an achievement for a human. Put the other one down. I want him to witness my evolution."

Crux released Ham, who fell to his knees, gasping for air and clutching his throat. "There is something else," Crux continued, delving deeper into Caleb's memories. "One of his crew members, an engineer named Tae, has solved the wormhole equation."

Iagorth's eyes widened, his interest peaked. "Is that so?" He stepped up to Caleb, reaching out to cradle his chin. Crux rested his head in the Ancient's hand, allowing him to do whatever he wanted to Caleb. "I gave you a chance to join me willingly, Caleb Card. You could have been at the vanguard of my victory over my brother. But you'll still be there, bringing up the rear in my flagship. Watching it all unfold through your eyes. Through my eyes. A prisoner in your own mind. And

after you watch me defeat Shub’Nigu, you’ll witness the destruction of Earth, the destruction of Proxima, and the downfall of all of humankind.”

“Cal...” Ham said softly, voice trembling. “I won’t let you hurt him!” He lunged at Iagorth, only to be thrown back and pinned against the wall, where the black ooze wrapped around him, holding him secure.

*Go on, Caleb screamed defiantly in his mind. Tell him to get it over with. I’m not afraid.*

Crux laughed internally. *You should be, Caleb Card.*

Iagorth’s host opened his mouth as wide as he could before falling completely still. Caleb watched a large, dark green mass crawl up out of his throat and emerge from between his lips, a single tendril still holding it to the host. He wanted to escape it despite himself, but with Crux in control of his body, there was no way he could move.

*Now you understand your fate, Crux said.*

The moiety moved to the tip of Iagorth’s chin before pouring down onto Caleb’s forehead, sliding down between his eyes and beside his nose toward his mouth. Crux opened his mouth,, allowing the moiety to enter his body. Caleb could sense the weight of the moiety on his tongue. The taste of metal, blood, and sulfur. As the last of it crossed over to Caleb, the original host collapsed to the floor, dead.

*This is where I leave you to my Master, Caleb Card, Crux said. Our Master.*

The moiety moved into Caleb’s throat, as Crux retreated from Caleb’s mind, giving him his autonomy back. It only lasted long enough for him to fall to the floor, his breath cut off by the thing sliding down his throat and into his lungs. He didn’t know how it would gain control of him from there, only that it would.

At least, it would try.

His hands balled into fists, his anger rising as the moiety settled within him. Iagorth thought he could claim his mind, body, and soul without a fight.

He thought wrong.



## CHAPTER 47

Once more, Caleb found himself in a shifting landscape of ooze, the darkness returning, similar to the first time Caleb had interacted with Iagorth. It undulated around him, morphing constantly, changing shape to match locations from Caleb's memory. Outside his childhood home. The training grounds at Camp Pendleton. Los Angeles three months after the trife began their unstoppable assault on the planet, and more.

At first, he was there alone as he watched the scenes shift and change, nearly surprising himself with his patience. Iagorth hadn't come to him. He had gone to Iagorth, pushing his consciousness into the moiety the moment it made contact.

And it seemed the Devourer had gone into hiding.

"Not hiding, pardner," a familiar voice said. Caleb turned slightly, eyeing Iagorth's simulacrum of Sheriff Duke. "Learning all about you. Your strengths and weaknesses. Successes, failures, fears, joys. All of it. I have lived your entire life like that." He snapped his fingers. "Baron Kagata lied to you, but I'm sure you already know that. You're here because you know you have no other choice but to be here. I feel sorry for you, Caleb Card. You were a standout among men. Soon, you will be nothing but a slave."

"That I'm here at all proves Kagata didn't lie about everything," Caleb replied. "I can feel you trying to gain control, but you've realized that you can't. Not without a fight. If you've lived my life as you say, then you've also realized that I have no weaknesses you can exploit. No failures you can throw at me to put me off-balance or break my resolve. You've

seen all the hells I've survived, both on Earth and out in the universe. And you know I will never, ever quit." He smiled. "Just like another man I know. Another standout among men. You're nothing but filth to shape yourself into his form."

"Do you prefer this one?" a familiar voice asked. Caleb's attention shifted to Riley Valentine. Even molded from dark ooze, her smug expression rankled him.

"Or this one?" another questioned, the hulking form of John Washington rising out of the goop.

"Or this one," a simulacrum of Jii Kwon said.

Caleb remained static as Iagorth continued, forms rising from the shifting ooze into so many people from his memories. His parents, his sister, his first drill instructor, General Haeri, and more, until nearly thirty forms had arranged themselves in front of him.

One last figure rose at their head. Castra.

"I'm going to die," she said. "But not yet. Crux won't attack until I give the order. I want you to watch me perish, Caleb. You never quit? You never give up? By the time I'm done, you'll beg for release."

Caleb held fast to his anger, using it like a protective shell against the moiety. He set himself, rejecting the intimidation and fear. "Bring it on."

The simulacrum of Washington charged him first, lunging at him, his long reach an advantage. Caleb ducked beneath his grab, turning and bringing his leg up to kick Washington in the chest as he stumbled by. If the Washington simulacrum were human, all the air would have gone out of his lungs. Instead, he absorbed Caleb's leg into his body, holding it as he grabbed it and picked Caleb up to throw him across the darkness. Caleb hit the remains of a wall as the landscape shifted to another war-torn city, picking himself up quickly as Washington approached.

He went on the offensive, meeting Wash halfway and going at him with a series of kicks and punches that forced the simulacrum to raise its hands in defense, backing up in

response to the onslaught. Pushing Washington's arms wide, Caleb cocked back to deliver a solid uppercut, only to freeze when he sensed Iagorth's amusement. His hesitation allowed Washington to land a blow of his own, once more sending Caleb to the ground.

"There's no sense in resisting," Iagorth said. "You'll only extend the pain and delay the inevitable."

Washington wrapped an oversized hand around Caleb's head, lifting him off the ground. Putting his hand against Caleb's chest, the ooze started sinking in.

"No!" Caleb growled, chopping at Washington's throat with his hand. At the last moment, he imagined the ooze that composed the big man's throat as if it really belonged to his friend. Instead of sinking into the goop, the strike landed, cutting off Washington's non-existent flow of air. He let go of Caleb, who stumbled back.

He had yet to regain his balance when the sharp sting of bullets sent waves of pain through him. His gaze landed on the Sheriff Duke simulacrum, six-guns drawn and emptying bullets into his body. Looking down, he saw the impacts of the black ooze bullets sinking into him, trying to claim their prize.

Caleb refused them passage. He took a deep breath, stretching out his arms and roaring in defiance before charging at Sheriff Duke. The Sheriff tried shooting him again, but this time Caleb didn't even flinch. Reaching Duke, he grabbed both hands holding the pistols and squeezed until they melted under the pressure. Then he balled up one hand and punched it through the center of the man's face, which hardened at his thought, allowing him to land a solid blow. The Sheriff melted into the landscape, only to reform a short distance away.

"You can't win, pardner," the simulacrum said. "Perhaps you might have overcome a lesser moiety. But you cannot overpower this one."

"I'm not dead yet," Caleb growled back. "And like you, I'm learning." He charged forward again, ready for another confrontation.

The ooze shifted beneath him as he ran, causing him to stumble and fall to his knees in front of Castra. She smiled down at him, a rifle appearing in her hands. She pointed it at his head. "I can do this until the end of eternity, Caleb. What about you?" Her finger squeezed the trigger, the bullet sinking into Caleb's forehead. He fell backward to the ground, looking up at Castra. "Not so defiant now, are you?" she asked.

He pushed against the ooze trying to sink through the bullet hole into his mind. He could feel himself getting weaker, Iagorth's moiety making progress within him. He fought back, mentally and metaphysically, struggling within the moiety but still getting back to his feet.

"Impressive," Iagorth said in his sister's voice.

Caleb turned to face her. "You don't know what impressive is." He charged again, his weakened attack failing. His sister threw herself on him as if in an embrace. The moment their bodies made contact, they sank inward, her body becoming part of his. She twisted inside him, wrapping around Caleb's organs before exploding out from his chest, tearing it open and leaving him exposed.

He fell to his knees, clutching the gaping wound with one hand while using the other for balance. Dark ooze poured from the hole, merging with the ground beneath him. He looked up at Castra, surrounded by the other simulacrum, through bleary eyes. "Is that all you have?" he asked weakly, fighting against the pain and increasing weakness.

He was losing, and they both knew it.

Still, he dragged himself back to his feet.

"You will be the most powerful host I've ever claimed," Iagorth said. "When the day of apocalypse against Shub'Nigu comes, you will be not host to a moiety, but host to my source. My center. And my brother will die. The universe will be mine. And I will destroy everything within it."

Caleb glared at Iagorth's forms as he summoned enough strength to reconstitute his body, healing the damage done. He didn't know how much time had passed since Crux had taken

control of him on Achnea. It felt like hours, though he doubted that could have been possible. Every minute was precious and every second counted, especially if Castra hadn't yet surrendered or died. And he would never stop fighting as long as he still had a shred of energy to fight with.

He charged forward again, barely making two steps before falling face first into the ooze. His head came up enough for him to see a new simulacrum rising out of the darkness. Penn. But not his Penn. She sauntered toward him with pitying eyes. "Cal," she breathed. "Just give up. Accept your fate. It's over. You lost. There is no more Caleb Card. There's only Iagorth."

Caleb lost that last shred of energy, collapsing to his knees in front of her. She was right. He couldn't fight it anymore. He had tried and failed.

A knife appeared in her hand, and she reached down to grab his hair and lift his head up so they were looking eye-to-eye. "It's time for you to end, Cal," she hissed. "It's my time now." She drew the blade across his throat, opening it wide. Ooze poured from Caleb's neck, but not enough to kill him right away. He fell forward, struggling to get up again while the darkness sank deeper into him.

"You're stronger than any human has ever been," Penn said. "But even your mind can only take so much."

The darkness began fading around Caleb, turning blacker still until he couldn't see anything at all.

*Caleb.*

Ishek's voice roused him, a single point of light at the edge of eternal darkness. *Ish?*

*I finally found you. I'm here.*

*Ish, it's too late. We aren't strong enough.*

*Are you giving up on me? I'm pretty sure we aren't dead yet.*

The statement rebuilt some of his fire. The blackness faded from his vision, returning moiety to him. Caleb stood up once more.

“Impossible,” Iagorth growled, his voice emanating from every simulacrum.

Caleb felt the Ancient’s anger, but also his fear.

*Caleb*, another voice said. A new form rose from the ooze beside him. His Penn. *I’m here. Vraxis too.*

*Of course, I didn’t come alone*, Ishek said. *That would have been foolish.*

A third form expanded from the ooze.

*Jack*, Caleb said.

*I heard you needed a little help. Sorry I’m late. I brought Amali with me. Hope you don’t mind.*

She rose from the ooze, the fourth of the bonded pairs, all standing against Iagorth together.

“You will die!” Iagorth roared through all of his simulacra. “You will all die!”

His group charged forward, rushing Caleb and the others, screaming wildly, Iagorth’s fury and fear complete.

None of them moved. They didn’t need to. Iagorth had already lost. His moiety was stronger than Caleb alone, but not more powerful than all of them together. With a thought, Caleb froze the simulacra in place, statues jutting out of the ooze. The goop shifted around him, forming into spikes that stabbed at all of the statues from every side, except for the faux Castra. They splashed to the ground, disabled by Penn and Jack.

Caleb stepped forward, the ooze hardening beneath his feet. He walked up to Iagorth’s Castra, looking her in the eyes. “Have you felt fear before, I wonder?” he asked. “Or is this a new experience for you?”

The simulacrum’s eyes shifted, but she couldn’t speak until Caleb allowed it. Which he did.

“This is only one moiety of many, Caleb Card,” Iagorth said. “One galaxy of many. You will find my defeat is not so simple. Only distance spares you from my full wrath today. The same may not be true tomorrow. I have been since the

beginning of time, and I will be until the end of time. I am nothing, if not patient.”

Caleb bid the moiety still again. Reaching out, he touched his finger to Castra’s forehead. The simulacrum softened back into ooze, collapsing into the deck.

He sensed Iagorth’s retreat from the moiety, the Ancient’s presence diminishing to the edge of his mind but not vanishing completely. The moiety remained with him, connected to others. It couldn’t be fully severed.

But it could be controlled.

Caleb turned back to Penn, Jack, and Amali, a grin splitting his face. “We did it.”

“It’s not over yet,” Penn replied. “The fleet is still on the verge of attack.”

Caleb nodded. His moiety couldn’t be cut from Iagorth, but neither could his moiety’s connection to all the others it had created within the Spiral be altered or removed. He sensed every one of them simultaneously, hundreds of partitions spread across thousands of light years. And plenty nearby as well. One stood out to him, the second link in the chain that started with him.

“I think I can do something about that.”

## CHAPTER 48

The ease by which Caleb shifted his consciousness from the darkness of the moiety to the bridge of Crux's Specter left him in awe, even as his unaccustomed eyes focused on the man—in truth, a mutated Relyeh—in person for the first time. Lord Byron Crux, who called himself Emperor of the Manticore Spiral, sat at the command station immediately to Caleb's right, staring at the huge viewscreen that wrapped around the entire front of the Specter's bridge, around the side walls, and overhead. His hands rested on the arms of his seat, body upright, jaw set as if chiseled from stone.

He didn't look back at Caleb. As far as he was concerned, the man before him remained a part of Iagorth, whose victory over Caleb, followed by the resistance fleet, was all but assured. Caleb looked away from the man, joining him in staring out at Achnea, where Castra and the others floated in a defensive formation, as ready as they could be for Crux's attack. The few remaining Specters from the original defenses flanked them nearby, having retreated after watching too many of their sister ships destroyed. Ishek's plan for the Splinters had worked well. It was just a shame so many of his crew had needed to die to carry it out. At least they had died heroes.

Caleb looked around the room. Twelve Legionnaires occupied the stations on the bridge. Would they do anything to stop him? Could they? He could tell right away that controlling the moiety wasn't the same as controlling a host through a khoron. He hadn't simply inherited a different human body.



He'd inherited a portion of arguably the most powerful Relyeh in the universe.

He sensed that power, both in his consciousness and through his host, whom he knew had come from Atlas. Colonel Timothy Procter of the Royal Marines. Intelligent, confident, strong, with a sharp mind. Now, little more than a puppet. His insides buzzed with energy, an innate understanding of what he could do with that energy at the forefront of his current attention. He felt the consciousness of the colonel trapped in a dark place within the moiety. He could communicate with him if he wanted. Or set him free. And he would.

But not yet.

“Crux,” Caleb said, turning back to the command station.

Crux looked over at him. “Is it done, Master? Shall we begin the attack?”

“No. It's over.”

“What do you mean? The rebel fleet is still intact. The princess lives.”

“Yes. It is as I will it to be.” Caleb did his best not to smirk as he toyed with the man.

Crux's eyes narrowed, and he jolted up from his seat, turning toward Caleb. “You!” he growled, quickly realizing Iagorth no longer controlled Procter. “How?”

Caleb finally let himself smirk. “Grit, determination, and a little help from my friends. You probably don't have any, so you wouldn't understand.”

Crux stared at him in silence, leaving Caleb certain he was calling for reinforcements. Through his other moieties, he also sensed the commands Crux sent to the rest of the fleet, ordering each of the moiety infected Advocates serving as commanders of the Specters to launch their attack.

Of course, Caleb didn't pass the order onward. He did, however, notice a sudden pinprick of pain that seemed to

emanate from the primary moiety itself. “Nice try,” he said. “But you aren’t in control anymore.”

“How long do you think you can hold onto Iagorth’s moiety, Card?” Crux asked defiantly. “That kind of power is more than a human can handle for very long. Don’t you think I would have challenged him myself otherwise?”

The pain had already increased enough for Caleb to know Crux was right. His mind couldn’t handle being partitioned into so many pieces for very long. He could control the moieties for now, but he could never become Iagorth.

“Fortunately, I don’t need much time,” he said, passing orders of his own through the Advocates. Their Lord and Master, Iagorth, had made a bargain with Princess Castra. They were no longer needed here. He would set the coordinates himself.

The effort of controlling so many of the moieties directly at the same time increased the pain exponentially. Unless his head exploded, he was determined to see this through.

The doors onto the bridge slid open as the first unit of guards arrived, rifles already leveled toward him. Before they could open fire, Caleb released some of the pent-up energy he felt. Sending it through the moiety, he wrenched the rifles from the hands of the guards; the weapons clattering on the deck at his feet. A thought threw the Legionnaires from the bridge, their impact against the doors enough to kill them outright. At the same time, Caleb froze Crux’s hand before he could pull the blaster on his hip. Another thought jerked the blaster from his hand and sent it flying toward him. He caught it and turned it on Crux.

“Surrender,” Caleb said.

The bridge crew rose from their stations, drawing their guns and pointing them at Caleb, hesitant while he had Crux at gunpoint.

“I said, surrender,” he repeated. Shifting his finger to the trigger of his blaster, his expression unyielding.

Crux's grotesque face twisted in rage. "Never!" he shouted, body shaking as he tried to move against Caleb's hold.

Their leader's defiance convinced the bridge crew to shoot, but Caleb reached out, using the moiety to turn them away from him and toward one another. A hail of energy blasts filled the bridge, none aimed at him. The injured Legionnaires dropped their weapons and sank to the deck. Given a chance, Caleb was certain he could convince their hosts to seize the moment and regain control.

He wasn't convinced he would get that chance. The pain from his partitioned consciousness exploded, his hold over the moieties beyond the primary slipping for long enough that Crux broke free, tackling Caleb. They landed on the deck with Crux on top, pinning Caleb's arms.

"I may not be strong enough to hold all the moieties," Crux hissed, glaring down at Caleb, "but I'm sure I can manage this one." He shifted position, using his legs and one hand across his throat to hold Caleb still. He pressed his hand against Caleb's gut as if he could tear the moiety from him. Mutated by sanctification, maybe he could. He was stronger by far than Caleb, who didn't have Ishek right now to flood him with adrenaline.

Caleb turned his head to look at the viewscreen. A hyperspace expansion field formed around the first of the Legion's Specters. A moment later, the field began to bend space around another, then another, then another. "You won't stop me, Card. This galaxy belongs to me!" he cried, his fingernails like talons, scoring Caleb's armor.

Caleb's pain, through his consciousness, continued to intensify, hurting as badly as anything he had ever felt. But he refused to let go. He needed more time. Once the first of Crux's ships began vanishing in hyperspace fields in wave after wave.

"I would have married Castra and made my rule legitimate," Crux continued, ripping at Caleb's flesh. He couldn't feel it at all past the pain in his mind. "Then I entered

your mind and saw her face. Pitiful thing. She's better off dead. And I will kill her, Card. Right after I'm done with you."

Caleb watched the ships continue to disappear. "You...and what...army?" he spat.

Crux paused, looking over the viewscreen. When he saw his fleet vanishing, his fury became white hot. He paused from trying to tear into Caleb's gut to punch him in the face, the force like a jackhammer. "You!" he screamed, turning nearly feral in his rage. He punched Caleb again, and again, breaking his jaw, splitting his lip, and pulverizing his cheekbone. He cocked his hand back to punch him again.

Suddenly, an energy blast hit Crux in his side. The bridge crew were back on their feet. Those who'd opted for a chance to be free traded fire with Crux and those who still stood by him. A second hit knocked Crux off Caleb and sent him sprawling. He rolled behind the command station, out of the line of fire.

Caleb closed his eyes tight against the pain burning his senses. It subsided slightly as the Specters he had sent away—by overriding their navigational computers—collided with the corona of the star he had intentionally sent them through. The moieties on those ships were instantly vaporized, proving Crux's statement true. If he couldn't handle so many moieties, the next best thing was to destroy them.

But Caleb didn't need to send them all into the star. They were a part of him and would do as he commanded.

Aware of Crux emerging from cover to resume his attack, Caleb quickly started cutting the connections to the moieties as quickly as he could, severing their control over their hosts as they became inert.

The pain in his mind lessened even more.

Crux rallied, picking up one of the Legionnaire's dropped rifles. He put the muzzle against Caleb's forehead. "I know this won't kill you, Card. But it will make me stronger. This fight isn't over, and you've won nothing yet. Nor will you." His finger pressed the trigger.

With a thought, Caleb pushed the weapon aside, the shot hitting the deck beside his head. A second thought tore the weapon away. A third sent Crux flying upward. His head slammed against the ceiling with a sharp crack. When he fell back down, he didn't move again.

## CHAPTER 49

Caleb finished releasing the moieties. All except Proctor's and the primary. The pain in his head had diminished to a manageable buzz, his strength returning. One of the bridge crew approached him, her blaster pointed his way. Their eyes met.

"Are you Caleb Card?" the woman asked.

Caleb lifted his head and smiled. "For now. But I can't stay. This man's name is Colonel Timothy Procter. He needs medical treatment. Afterward, take him down to Achnea. Someone will meet him there."

"We have the bridge, but not the rest of the ship."

"Release the Legionnaires you have locked down. My people can help you deal with any who don't want to change sides. Make sure they know Crux is dead, and Iagorth has retreated."

The woman grinned brightly. "Yes, sir. We will."

"We'll be in touch soon." Caleb rested his head back on the deck and closed his eyes, leaving the colonel's body and returning to the primary moiety. He let go of the only other remaining partition of Iagorth in the Spiral before returning to his physical body.

When his eyes opened, he found Ham cradling him in his lap almost as if he were an infant. Orin crouched nearby, beside Haruka, holding her hand. He turned his head toward Caleb, as if sensing he had awoken. "You are back," he said, smiling. "It is good to see you, my friend."

Ham grinned down at him. “Captain. Good to have you back.”

“Haruka?” Caleb asked, more concerned about her than himself. “Usef?”

“She will survive,” Orin replied. “But perhaps she will never engage in a knife fight again. It is true.”

“Usef didn’t make it, Cap,” Ham informed him. “I’m sorry.”

Grimly, Caleb nodded. He hadn’t liked Usef that much, but he hated losing anyone.

“What happened with Iagorth and Crux?” Ham asked.

“Iagorth is gone. Crux is dead.”

Orin reacted by howling. Ham whooped, and then both of them laughed at the same time.

“So it’s over then,” Ham said. “We can go home.”

“I would say it’s only the beginning of the end,” Caleb replied. “Castra has a lot of work ahead of her to return stability to the Spiral. There are still Specters of Legionnaires out there, loyal to the Relyeh.”

“But there aren’t any Relyeh bosses here to manage them.”

“Exactly. We need to find them and root out the ones who refuse to stand down.”

*Jack, Amali, and Penn can take care of that,* Ishek said, flooding back into Caleb’s senses. *You need to rest.*

*You sound like you care,* Caleb answered.

*Only because your fatigue is my fatigue.*

Caleb smiled. *Did you spread the good news?*

*The crews of the resistance ships are celebrating at this very moment.*

“As comfortable as your lap is, Ham, I need to get up,” Caleb said, shifting out of Ham’s cradle to sit up. Ham rose to his feet and pulled Caleb the rest of the way up. Jolts of pain

reminded him of his own injuries. At least Ish could heal them now.

*There is a sanctifier in here somewhere, Ishek said. You could do more than heal these surface wounds. I believe our separation may even be possible while under the treatment.*

*Is that what you want, Ish?*

*I am an Advocate. A symbiote. I have no purpose without a host. But it may be what you want.*

*And you would do that for me?*

*Perhaps I would.*

*I never thought I would think this, but I kind of like having you around.*

Ishek's laughter echoed in his mind. *I almost feel the same.*

Caleb went over and knelt beside Haruka. Orin had removed the blade and wrapped the wound, but she still looked pale and weak. Her eyes were open, at least.

“It was a valiant effort, wasn't it, Captain?” she asked.

“Absolutely.”

*We can put her in the sanctifier, Ishek said. Make her better than new.*

*We still have Legionnaires outside this compartment to deal with.*

*Not anymore. Penn and Jack got the ball rolling. Without Iagorth and Crux, most of them have already turned. There are no other greater Relyeh in the galaxy, and without a master, their symbiotes have no purpose.*

“Orin, Ish says the Legionnaires in the facility have been freed. Can you find out from them where the sanctifier is?”

“Aye, Captain,” Orin replied. He hurried from the room.

“Don't worry,” Caleb said to Haruka, laying his hand over hers. “We can use the sanctifier to make you better than new.”

*That's my line.*



“No, Captain,” she replied. “I want nothing to do with anything that comes from the Relyeh. I will recover naturally.”

Caleb nodded. “I understand completely.” He contacted Damian on Gordon, instructing him to send down a shuttle for her.

“Thank you, Cap.” She closed her eyes to rest. He sat down on the deck, remaining there with her for the next ten minutes, when Orin returned. He had Castra, Damian, and Penn with him, along with a group of freed Legionnaires.

“Caleb!” Castra cried, tears in her eyes as she rushed over to embrace him. “You are...” She trailed off, momentarily unable to find the words as she peered up at him. “... something else.”

“I can help you with some better adjectives,” Ham said jokingly.

*So can I.*

“Cal,” Penn said as she went to him, relieved to see him. He continued to hold Castra in one arm, opening the other to embrace her as well.

“How did you know how to get into the moiety to help me?” he asked her.

“Ishek found and guided us. It wasn’t as easy to get through as it probably looked from the inside.”

*We only made it because you held out for so long, Ishek added. Your determination won the day.*

“Thank you for saving me,” Caleb said.

“I’ll always be around to save you,” she replied.

“I can’t stay in the Spiral, Penn,” he answered, peering solemnly down at her. “Not forever. I promised Ham I would bring him back to his family. And with what I did to Iagorth here... He has moieties on Earth. My home is in greater danger than ever now.”

“Then I’ll go with you. I don’t have any reasons to stay here, and we make a good team.”

“I imagine Iagorth may also seek to return to the Spiral,” Castra said, drawing his attention from Penn. “Perhaps once we settle our affairs, we can work together to see that both our galaxies are safe. I owe you that and so much more.”

“All I ask of you is to be the fair and just Empress I know you can be.”

“I have located the device I believe is the sanctifier,” Orin said. “It is like a dark tomb, is it not?”

“Yes.” He looked at Castra. “The sanctifier can heal all of your scars, both new and old.”

She stared up at him, absently touching the burn-scarred side of her face before shaking her head. “No. I earned these scars. They’re a reminder to me of what sacrifice and devotion mean. I don’t need to be perfect to rule.”

Caleb smiled. “You never disappoint me.”

“I think we should destroy this entire facility,” she continued. “It doesn’t need to exist.”

“I agree.”

Haas, Draco, Istari, and a medical team followed a few more free Legionnaires into the room. The trio greeted and thanked Caleb while the medics attended to Haruka, moving her onto a gurney and whisking her away.

“So, you still control Iagorth’s moieties, right?” Penn asked.

“Only one,” Caleb replied. “My brain couldn’t handle any more than that.”

“Iagorth threw me into the wall with his mind,” Ham said. “Can you do that?”

Caleb shrugged. He had a vague sense of the same energy he’d felt inside Colonel Procter, but it was much weaker. “I don’t know. Do you really want me to try?”

Ham laughed. “Maybe later.”

“What do you say we get out of here?” Caleb suggested. “After all, General Haas has a coronation to plan.”

## CHAPTER 50

ONE MONTH LATER...

“Well,” Castra said, looking past Caleb to the shuttle parked on the great lawn of the Imperial Palace on Atlas. Her Imperial Palace. “I guess this is goodbye.”

“Not goodbye, Your Majesty,” Caleb said with a smile. “More like, I’ll see you later. I’ll be back before you know it.”

Castra nodded. “You’d better. And please don’t call me Your Majesty. It’s fine for my subjects and when we have to be formal. But it’s no way for friends to address one another.”

“I’m just trying to get you used to hearing it.”

“Trust me, I’ve heard it so many times in the last few weeks, I’m already forgetting my name.” They smiled at one another before embracing. When Castra pulled back, she had tears in her eyes. “I’m going to miss you, Cal.”

“I’ll miss you too,” Caleb said. She moved from him to Ham as General Haas approached Caleb. Dressed in a fine uniform covered in all his grand hardware, he looked much more regal now that he’d settled in the Imperium as the head of the entire Royal Armed Forces.

“Captain Card,” Haas said, putting out his hand. Caleb shook it firmly as they locked eyes, respect beaming from both their gazes. “I know we didn’t meet under the best of circumstances. I’ve never been more wrong about anyone than I was about you, and I apologize.”

“Please, General. That’s ancient history. You didn’t know me, and with everything Crux put you through, your reaction was completely understandable.”

“Even so. I want you to know how grateful I am to you for everything you’ve done. Finding Castra was no easy task. Neither was taking on both Iagorth and Crux at one time. If you ever need anything, whether in the Spiral or beyond, you will always have an ally in me.”

“And me, of course,” Castra said from over his shoulder.

“I can’t promise you things I don’t have, like ships or armies,” Caleb replied. “But I swear that if you ever need me, in any capacity, just say the word and I’ll get here as soon as I can. Jack and Amali can always reach me, as can Jeff.” He glanced over Haas’ shoulder, to where the Free Legion commander waited with Jack, Marley, and Damian to see him off. He’d already said his goodbyes to the rest of Gorgon’s crew, and in a somewhat somber ritual, had turned command of the pirate ship turned rescue and recon vessel over to his first mate.

“Thank you, Captain,” Haas said, moving on to give the next in line a chance to say farewell.

“Captain Card,” Jeff said, also shaking Caleb’s hand. “I’m not speaking in hyperbole when I say that I owe you my life, as do the other members of the Free Legion. We’re all incredibly grateful to you.”

“I’m glad I could help you,” Caleb replied. “I wish I could have done as much for more Legionnaires.”

“You did the best you could. There are still over fourteen thousand of us left in the Spiral, and while some have returned to their prior lives or moved on, many have stayed to help form the backbone of the Empress’ new Royal Marines. It’s an exciting time for us.”

“I’m excited for you,” Caleb agreed. “And happy so many agreed to sign up. With any luck, I’ll be back within the next few months with enough synthetic pheromone, as well as the recipe, to keep you all satisfied indefinitely.”

“We appreciate your efforts in that arena as well. Her Majesty also has some ideas on how to provide us with sustenance in a neutral manner. She said Ham introduced her to a concept known as a Haunted House?”

Caleb laughed out loud, looking back at Ham. “I don’t know why I never thought of that. It’s ridiculous, but it just might work.”

“I’m glad you agree. Thank you again, Captain.”

Jeff and Caleb shook a second time before allowing Jack to approach.

“Captain,” Jack said. “Caleb. I...” He paused, struggling to find the words, before throwing himself at Caleb and wrapping him in a powerful hug.

“You’re welcome,” Caleb replied, clapping him on the back.

Jack drew back. “Rita, the new leader of the Consortium, offered me a position on the board,” Jack said. “To replace my father. I know the Consortium is still kind of a gray area for the Empress, but I’m hoping my influence can help keep them on her good side.” Jack’s face paled as he looked past Caleb. “No offense, Your Majesty.”

“It’s Castra to you,” she shot back. “And if you don’t start calling me that...” She turned away, so the damaged side of her head faced him.

“Oh, burn,” Jack teased, both of them laughing. For the moment, Castra looked more like a mischievous teen than an Empress. She and Jack were friendly before Iagorth’s defeat, but they had really hit it off afterward.

“To be honest, I’m surprised you’re leaving Atlas,” he said, sliding a knowing look at Castra.

“I have no idea what you mean.” Jack’s face reddened, and he made a face, scratching anxiously at his neck. “I... uh... well... she’s the Empress, and I’m.”

”Your father was King of the Pirates, right? That makes you royalty of a kind.”

“Technically, I suppose,” Jack answered, grinning. “We both have a lot of other responsibilities right now. But I guess you never know what might happen. Gareshk certainly has his opinions.”

“I bet he does,” Caleb replied. “I’ll be in touch.”

“You always know where to find me, Cap... Cal. I’m never more than an alternate universe and a few billion light years away.”

They shared a laugh as Jack moved away, allowing Marley a moment.

“Marley,” Caleb said. “Nice uniform.”

She glanced down at her dress uniform and the hardware on her chest that marked her as a starship helmsman. “If you had asked me six months ago where I thought I would be in six months I would have said, dead. Not at the helm of a Specter.”

“If you had asked me the same thing six months ago, I would have said home. So I guess one of us was right.”

“I’m glad it was you.” They hugged one another. “Don’t be a stranger, Cal.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

She made way for Damian, who grinned happily as he approached. “My Captain,” he said, nodding his head in respect.

“I’m not your captain anymore,” Caleb replied.

“You’ll always be my captain. And my friend.” They clasped wrists. A handshake of brothers. “I knew from the moment you started killing people in Gorgon’s hold that you were something special. And you didn’t let me down. It’s been a mostly fun ride.”

“Except for the time I thought you abandoned me,” Caleb said.

“The hardest part for me was watching the volunteers go out in the Splinters,” Damian said, the moment quickly turning

somber. “I still see their faces in my sleep. I hope the stars forgive me for the fate I handed them.”

Caleb’s chest tightened. “They chose their fate, Sarge. They died heroes, all of them. Their names are being inscribed on the tower of the Imperium as we speak. They’ll always be remembered.”

Damian nodded. “I know. I guess the hard part is that I feel I should have been out there with them, but I couldn’t volunteer because I was in command. I would have, though, Captain. I would have given my life for the Empress. For Gorgon’s crew. And for you.”

“I know that. And I think the rest of the crew knows that too. “

“I hope so.”

They said goodbye with a long embrace. With no one else waiting to say goodbye, he turned toward the shuttle. Castra stepped in front of him. “Duke Draco sends his regards, and his thanks,” she said. “As does Istari. She’s extremely grateful to both of us she didn’t have to become Empress.”

“I appreciate that they comm’ed in,” Caleb replied. “They have their hands full rebuilding what the Legion destroyed.”

“A lot of the Spiral does. But we will rebuild, better than before. And you’ll come back to see it, right?”

“I already told you I’ll be back.”

“You’d better. You renege and you’ll get on my bad side.”

“And then off with his head,” Caleb joked.

Castra’s smile faded. “What?”

“It’s a joke,” Caleb reassured her, explaining the origin from Alice in Wonderland.

“Oh. The next time you use it, I’ll laugh. I promise.”

“Cap!” Ham shouted from their shuttle’s open hatch. “Are we going, or what?”

“We’re going!” Caleb shouted back before returning his attention to Castra. “He’s excited to see his wife and daughter again.”

“I’m sure he is. He’s not worried about Tae’s algorithm?”

“No, but he doesn’t know Tae that well.”

Castra laughed. “I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

“I have to go,” Caleb said. They hugged one last time, and he hurried to the shuttle, climbing on board and sealing the hatch behind him. “Penn, we’re ready to go.”

“Aye, Captain,” she answered, smiling back at him from the flight deck.

“How come you didn’t want to say goodbye to everyone, Penny?” Ham asked.

“I said goodbye to the Edgers on Gorgon,” she replied. “Other than that, I’d rather just slip quietly away. Unlike you. You don’t do anything quietly, do you Abraham?”

“I quietly watch my little girl sleep,” he answered. “That’s about it.”

Penn activated the thrusters and gravity plates, lifting the ship off the grass. They hovered a few meters overhead for a moment, the people on the ground waving to them. Caleb waved back, conflicting emotions of eagerness and trepidation passing through him. It only increased as Penn lifted them fully away from the palace, pointing the bow upward and pushing him back in his seat when she opened the mains.

*It will all be well, Ishek assured him. The moieties on Earth are linked to a different primary. You shattered the chain, and by doing so are undetectable by them.*

*I hope you’re right. I don’t want to put Earth or Proxima in any more danger than they already are.*

*Besides, we’re not returning to Proxima empty-handed.*

Caleb looked up at the outline of the Specter coming into view where it rested in orbit with Gorgon, a gift from Castra.



He had tried to refuse the ship, but she'd insisted, and he'd already learned it was futile to argue with her.

"The Wild Card," Ham said, following his gaze. "She's a real beaut."

"She looks just like all the other Specters," Caleb replied dryly. He didn't really like the name, but Castra had christened it because she'd heard Mathis call him by that nickname, so he'd kept it in honor of the man's sacrifice.

"No, she's better looking than all the others. She has a certain... I don't know what. Something."

Caleb laughed. It felt good to laugh so freely and be so relaxed. The trio bantered the entire way up to Wild Card, truly enjoying the ride.

They bypassed Lo'ane and another dozen Free Legion Specters positioned in low orbit, along with a mass of civilian ships, the number unlike anything Caleb had ever seen. With Crux out of the picture and Empress Lo'ane's bloodline restored, plus the threat of the Free Legion looming over any dissenters, the territories of the Spiral had quickly sworn fealty and were working hard to reestablish relationships both with the Empress and the other territories. This was the main reason Draco and his daughter weren't on Atlas. Istari had agreed to a position as a Royal diplomat, while Draco worked the military angle, ensuring the transition didn't lead to more violence.

The shuttle touched down gently in the Specter's hangar bay. A pair of Nightmares also occupied the bay, gifts from the Free Legion to the government of Proxima. There were samples of Legionnaire combat armor in one of the holds as well, sent as trade for the promised synthetic pheromone and with the hope Proxima scientists could help improve the technology.

No one waited for them when they landed on Wild Card, which was no surprise. Beyond Caleb, Ham, and Penn, only Tae, his cat, Johan, Orin and Haruka, her wound still tender, were on board. It was a huge ship for such a skeleton crew. Just the skull, as Damian had called it. With any luck, they wouldn't need to venture much beyond the officer's quarters

and the bridge, except of course, for Johan who'd likely have to visit engineering.

When they reached the bridge, Caleb angled for the command station, while Ham crossed to the helm. Penn sat down to take care of the comms.

"No Jiba-ki has ever crossed so much of the galaxy," Orin said from the tactical station. "I will have many beautiful stories to tell my young when they are born. If I should ever find a suitable mate."

"It's kind of hard to find a Jiba-ki mate when there are so few of you beyond Jibaki," Tae commented.

"It is true. One day I will return to Jibaki. But not today. Today, I am a beautiful galactic explorer," he declared with infectious laughter. That he had said nothing the others found amusing only made them laugh that much harder.

"Ham, what's our ETA to the wormhole?" Caleb asked.

"Four days, Captain."

"Lock in the path and initiate hyperdrive as soon as you're ready."

"Aye, Captain."

*Farewell, Captain Card, Amali said through the Collective. Caleb looked to Lo'ane on the viewscreen, where Amali was likely sitting at a duplicate station to his. Thank you for restoring my freedom.*

*You're welcome, Amali, Caleb replied. Be well, both of you.*

*And you, she answered.*

"Initiating the hyperdrive," Ham said. Immediately, space began curving around the compression field.

"All systems are nominal, Captain," Johan announced from his station. "Everything's purring like a kitten."

"It should be," Tae said. "I directed the techs in the maintenance routines."

“And you know you’re the best, right Tae?” Penn regarded him critically.

“Well, I developed the wormhole program. That’s why I’m here.”

“Not to mention you volunteered,” Caleb supplied, chuckling.

“Who could turn down the chance to see the Milky Way. I think that’s the coolest name.”

“It is true,” Orin threw in.

“Of course you would like it, furball,” Tae said.

“Is this more feline humor? My resemblance to your cat begins and ends with our beautiful coats.”

“You keep telling yourself that.”

They all shared another round of laughter. It was so easy to laugh. Now.

“Compression complete,” Ham said less than a minute later. “And away we go.”

## CHAPTER 51

“Expansion complete,” Ham said.

Caleb looked out at space through the Specter’s viewscreen. Galatin sat on their starboard side, the large dwarf star dead ahead. They had come out of hyperspace near the close edge of the variability sphere. It figured they’d get it right when their positioning wasn’t critically important. He hated to waste a good drop spot.

*It’s completely random every time. The probabilities remain the same with every jump.*

*Don’t assuage me with logic, Ish. I won’t have it.*

They both chuckled silently. The trip from Atlas to the wormhole had been some of the most relaxing days for Caleb since the trife had come to Earth. Not that he had a problem with the journey from Proxima to Trappist with Ham and Jii, but he enjoyed both the larger crew and the additional space on the Specter.

“I see nothing out of the ordinary with that star,” Penn commented, scanning the field for signs of the wormhole.

“It’s there, even though you can’t see it,” Tae replied.

“Interesting. Do you know why it’s drawn to the star?”

“I can show you the mathematical reasoning for it, but I can’t really put the why into words. I still think it’s an artifact of a different technology. A side-effect.”

“That would mean we aren’t the first ones to pass through this part of space,” Ham said.

“And whoever did were much more advanced than us,” Johan added.

“It wasn’t the Axon,” Caleb said. “I know that much. If there’s some other race, maybe as ancient as the Relyeh, I’ve never heard of them. And it seems the Relyeh haven’t either, or Ish would know.”

*I don’t know everything.*

*I’d think you would know that.*

*A valid point.*

“It may be millions of years old. Maybe the race went extinct, or evolved into a higher form of matter, or something,” Tae said. “Whatever. The wormhole is here. They aren’t. Their loss. Our gain.”

“How long do you need to prepare the algorithm?” Caleb asked.

“I’ve been prepping it since you broke Crux’s neck,” Tae answered.

“You had help,” Johan threw in.

“You checked the math. I wrote it.”

“Benning wrote it.”

“Fine, I improved it. The point is, the code’s already locked into the system. When we approach the edge, the sensors will measure the cycle of the energy flow and automatically adjust our rotation and velocity to match. We’ll drift right in the same way as we’re drifting now.”

“And you’re sure your calculations are good?” Ham asked, obviously getting more nervous now that they were so close.

“We’ll be through the wormhole in no time,” Tae replied. “We’ll have to follow the same path back you took from Proxima to Trappist to make sure we don’t hit anything along the way, but we can run the circuit in a few hours, rather than the months you needed to get out that far.”

“So I should be home in time for dinner.” Ham grinned. “I can taste it now.”

“You sure dinner’s the first thing you’re looking forward to?” Tae questioned with a raised eyebrow.

“Of course, I want to see my girls. More than anything. I can’t wait till my wife sees how trim and fit I am.”

“You’re still as homely ever, my friend. Why did she ever pick you, anyway?”

“It’s my scintillating personality, you buffoon. Not everybody can be as pretty as you.”

“Or me,” Orin interjected. “I am the most beautiful of all. It is true.”

Caleb smiled. “All right,” he said, smiling, “let’s get down to business.”

“I’m bringing us in.”

Ham guided Wild Card toward the star, aligning with the center of its mass and increasing velocity. They all remained mostly silent in the nearly hour-long approach, the tension on the bridge building with each passing minute. When a tone from the helm echoed across the bridge, Only Tae and Johan didn’t flinch.

“That’s the sensor confirmation,” Tae explained. “The ship has located the wormhole.”

“Orin, bring it up on the tactical grid.”

“Aye, Captain,” Orin said, activating the projection. The spiral shape was almost dead ahead, just in front of the star, deep inside its gravity well. If the sensors were wrong and the wormhole wasn’t there, they wouldn’t be able to avoid cooking in the star’s corona.

“Everything’s looking good so far,” Tae continued. “It’ll beep again and request control of the helm once it has a lock.”

That beep followed less than a minute later. Ham accepted the request and removed his hands from the control board. “I hate being a passenger of an algorithm.”

“Algorithms can’t make mistakes,” Johan replied.

“No, but the people who write the algorithms can.”

“Relax,” Tae said. “Look at me. Do I look worried?”

Caleb glanced over at him. He sat there, sprawled casually out in his chair, his arms folded loosely across his chest. “I assume if you were worried, your shirt would come off.”

“You know me so well, Captain.”

The Specter shifted heading and velocity, vectoring thrusters pushing it into a steadily increasing rotation. Like a top, starting in a spin would allow it to break into an expanding spiral more easily.

“Entering the wormhole in ten,” Tae announced, watching the progress of his algorithm. “Nine. Eight...”

“Should we vaporize on contact, it was most beautiful knowing all of you,” Orin said.

“You too, Orin,” Caleb replied. “And all the rest of you.”

*Even me?*

*Yes, you most of all, Ish.*

“Three. Two. One...”

Wild Card entered the wormhole.

They were going home.

THE END.

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Be careful what you wish for.

They say Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. They have no idea.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M.R. Forbes is the mind behind a growing number of Amazon best-selling science fiction series. He currently resides with his family and friends on the west coast of the United States, including a cat who thinks she's a dog and a dog who thinks she's a cat.

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