

DANDELION-UTILITARIAN

PRESENTS
A DENOUEMENT NOVEL



OF
GODS
AND
VAMPIRES

OF GODS AND VAMPIRES.

A Denouement Novella.

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DEDICATION

I wrote this novella with a chihuahua on my lap, while it hindered progress, it was nice to have Backup while I worked.

MISSION 1

STEP ONE: DIE IN A FIRE.

"Are you two okay?" I asked.

Ta'ra had a bruised face and a ripped jacket. Raf looked like he was having some trouble standing, leaning against the crate.

"We're better than most. What happened to Libby and David?" she asked.

I considered my answer; considered that they may have been listening in on us.

"Libby's body was destroyed. David was shot." I left out the part where I thought there was a chance he was still alive. I wasn't sure, but there was a good chance. -

Denouement

My name is Ta'ra Kl. I was never much into adventure or danger. I was happy with numbers and scans. I had spent my life studying the forces which make the universe work. I never expected to die like this...

The ship was falling. The fire around me was hot enough that I had lost feeling in my skin. My nerves were burning away. The engine had exploded already; our little shuttle was not at all equipped for this kind of landing. Humans always thought of the number Thirteen as unlucky. My people, *Vampires*, didn't believe in luck. But right now, I really wished the ship was numbered twelve.

My dear friend Raf wasn't in a good way when we came aboard. He was next to the door when the shield generator

blew a few seconds earlier. I couldn't tell for certain because of all the smoke, but there was basically no chance he had survived. I was actually pleased that I couldn't know for sure. At least I would die thinking there was a *chance* he had lived. I knew it was a false hope. I knew because the drones were still shooting at us and the hull was failing, there wouldn't be anything left of us when we impacted the planetary surface shield in about three seconds.

If I were being honest, I had always assumed that I was going to live a long life. Until today, I had never considered my profession to be dangerous. This was supposed to be a research project, not a war zone.

The console made one last sound and for the briefest of moments, I saw the blue glow of the shield as the shuttle was pressed against it with enough force to turn it to dust. The drones hadn't stopped firing. I used to feel safe when I saw the police drones in the sky. Who would have expected them to be the things that killed me; killed us.

I blinked.

I screamed.

I died.

It hurt less than I had expected.

I was a little surprised when I slid to a stop on a sandy floor screaming, though I don't know why. I was immeasurably better off than I had been a moment ago. You would think that I would have been grateful for that virtue at least. The sand was all over me, stuck to me with the sweat I was caked in. I rubbed by arms. No burns!

"What!" I exclaimed as I stood up on shaky legs.

I was on a beach. The water was crystal clear. I could see the bottom with ease, so much so that the single leaf floating in it looked like it was hovering. I looked back to the land, there were odd, slightly blue palm trees and a red mountain

visible in the distance. I looked up, the sky had an almost bronze sheen to it. Not a cloud in sight.

"Help!" I heard the voice call from the tree line. "Is anyone there?" it called again.

"Hello! Yes! I hear you!" I yelled back, running towards the voice.

My mind was working faster than it ever had before, adrenaline, stress, relief, confusion; there was enough emotion surging through me to make me fall on my knees and cry for a year.

Then I saw him, sitting on a rock, nursing his leg. Raf was a tall thin elf with shaggy black hair and a beard to match. His eyes contained the sparkling yellow stars which were unique to his species, his ears sported discrete points. He looked by human standards to be in his early forties, though, like me, his species had no natural limit to life.

He was over fifty years old, and me barely an adult at forty, but he had the fortune to have stopped aging when he looked like the seasoned and experienced biologist that he was.

I, on the other had had spent my life studying. I was the most qualified person in my field, on any planet, but I looked like a twenty-year-old, sporting the pale skin and red eyes of my race, I was usually thought to be his bloody intern.

"Raf!" I exclaimed. There he was, distinctly, not dead. My oldest and most annoying friend. He was really here.

"Ta'ra! You're alive!" he said with joy.

He gestured to stand, but his leg gave way and he sat back on his rock.

"Raf, how are you here? You died!" I asked, with a sudden distrust of my old friend.

"I don't know. I was in the shuttle, the door exploded. I... I think I remember burning, but... I think... I'm fine, other than this leg, obviously."

"Raf, I think I died too. I think we both died in the shuttle.

The drones shot us down and we hit the planetary surface shield," I said, trying to get my brain to slow down so I could figure out what was happening.

"I don't know how we got here. But we're not dead. So, we're missing some memories, I assume," he said with his annoying calmness.

"Raf. My skin was burning. I should be in a hospital, but other than a few cuts and bruises, I'm fine. I was still moving when I got here. The momentum from the shuttle. I think I was teleported or something."

He nodded thoughtfully. He had a knack of making me feel like a child. Why was I having such issues keeping my thoughts focused? What was happening?

"There's a beach, I think. I should help you get there. Won't be ideal but we can clean up, figure out how bad the leg is," I said, trying to keep mind on the task.

"See if there's a branch or something I can use as a stick, would you?"

Typical, Raf. All this, and he still made me feel like he was in charge. I had to fight the urge to listen to him.

"Raf, I'm a Vampire. I'm more than strong enough to carry your weight."

He shrugged. "Sorry. I always forget; you're so small."

I grumbled to myself in response to his absent minded belittlement.

It didn't take long to help him to the beach. He slung an arm over my shoulder and we carefully limped him to the shore. He wouldn't let me carry him. Too proud.

I tore his trouser leg off and cleaned it in the water. I casually wiped sand from my face and caught a taste of the water on my lip. "Raf, this water, it's fresh, not salt," I said with realisation.

"Oh... but this *is* an ocean, isn't it?" He asked, dipping a hand in.

We used the fresh water to clean his wound. It already looked better than it had when we got on the shuttle. He had been beaten and then had the misfortune to catch a plasma round as we escaped. He had said that it was lucky he got shot in the leg he already thought was broken. Luck was a strange concept that always seemed to work as a coping mechanism for the species that believed in it. It was a beautiful little slice of faith that they didn't realise was divine.

My mind was wandering again. Why did that keep happening?

Night was crawling towards us and it was getting cold. I had gathered some sticks. Raf seemed to know how to make a fire. Elves were all taught how to live without technology when they were children; it was a matter of some importance to them. Even cranky old Elves like this one knew how to survive in nature.

He was struggling to twist the stick between his hands without his leg causing him pain. I had offered to do it but he said *explaining would take longer than doing*.

Twilight was almost gone and the fire erupted.

"Oh! Good job Raf! That worked faster than I expected!" I said, happy that I wouldn't be freezing as night took hold.

"It worked faster than I expected too!" he said, suddenly lit by the warm glow of the healthy fire light.

"It's the extra oxygen in the atmosphere that does it," said an ethereal feminine voice from all around us, echoing through the darkness.

"Who's there?" Raf yelled, pointing his burned stick into the air, like a tiny dagger.

I had looked around a little of the island earlier in the day. There had been no sign of other people, actually there had been no animal life at all, as far as we could tell, we were all alone.

“Where are you? Show yourself!” I demanded.

A sparkling light moved at the tree line. It was the outline of a woman; she took a step and covered the gap between us and the trees in a single motion that defied my brain.

She stood now, lighted by our fire, tall and dark-skinned with glowing white eyes and robes that seemed to contain space itself. She was elegant and regal, each movement looking planned, rehearsed almost.

“Who are you?” I demanded, though I had a feeling I had no sway over such a person.

“Aygah. I’m called Aygah,” she whispered as she warmed her hands. Though, from the way she stood it was more out of habit than need.

Raf didn’t lower his stick, not that he would really know what to do with it. He may have been raised on the hunting moons of Elf prime, but he was about as qualified to get into a fight as I was.

“How did you get here? We just sort of arrived here in a blink of an eye. We were in an accident. Were you in an accident miss?” I asked. Worried that she was in shock.

“Oh, me? No! Nothing like that. I don’t think I can have accidents. The idea is nice though. I stopped being careful too long ago. I think it’s when I stopped being what I was and started becoming what I am.”

The woman seemed distracted, like she was thinking about too many things at once. It was how I felt. I wondered if it was this place that was doing it to us.

“Miss, Aygah was it?” Raf said, she didn’t reply. “Do you have any idea where we are?”

She shook her head, as if suddenly remembering something. “Oh, we’re on Mars!” she said and grinned.

Raf and I looked at each other a little nervously.

“I know what you’re thinking. Not *your* Mars. Well, not the Human’s Mars, not the current one anyway. I saved this one

from about five hundred iterations ago. Or was it the last one? I forget. It's been quite an epoch for me."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, annoyed at her babbling.

"Give the dear girl a chance. We were confused when we arrived too," Raf said.

She laughed at him with glee. "*Dear girl!* Raf, this is why Ta'ra gets annoyed with you! You can't just assume you are more qualified for everything just because you look a little older!"

My whole body tensed. She knew our names! She also knew how Raf made me feel, something I had never told anyone.

"What are you!" I yelled in reflex.

"I'm Aygah. I'm the architect of reality. I am the great planner. I think I might be a god, but that seems a bit self-aggrandising doesn't it... is aggrandising the right word? I was never very good at Elder. Oh, and I have a job offer for you."

"What do you mean? *You're a god?*" Raf asked, still having his burned stick at the ready.

"Look. As strange as this may sound. I really am a god. I have the ultimate power over reality, space and am the only intelligence I know of who can also alter time. And, I have looked, believe me! I am, by every definition that I can find... a god," she said, with a tone that made me feel like explaining herself was annoying for her.

She sighed. "Look, there was a time when I would teleport us all to a cobblestone city in the middle of the night, or do a magic trick or show you a great machine. But, the truth is, I'm too old for all that now. You want proof? Fine, behold your proof," she said without changing her body language or waving a hand.

Raf's stick vanished. The fire turned green and the ocean

next to us froze still, like time had been stopped.

“VR! Were in a virtual environment, aren’t we?” I said, realising that it was the only way someone would have so much control.

“No, well, no more than usual. Look, it’s not that hard. I can see all the forces that make up reality. I just *will* them to change. You have to have a really good understanding of things, but you can influence them. It’s pretty easy. Very easy actually,” she was looking distracted again.

Raf was looking around with great interest. “Virtual Reality does seem like the obvious answer. I suppose we could be captives. But why go to the trouble? We don’t know anything, about anything really!”

The fire faded back to a normal orange and red, the sea slowly unfroze.

“It’s not what you know. It’s who you know, in this case,” the woman said.

“And who do we know?” Raf asked.

“Jon,” I said, with a penny dropping. “We know Jon. This is all about him, isn’t it? The people attacking the facility they kept saying his name. They had technology we hadn’t seen before. It *is* all about Jon, isn’t it?”

“I doubt our new project manager is even still alive, Ta’ra. I can’t see how he would be involved,” Raf said with his usual good-natured pomposity.

“Actually, she’s quite right. A long time ago, in the first iteration of reality. Jon and I were married.” She left a pause for us to gasp. I did, Raf didn’t. “I encoded that little nugget into the current reality. He really liked you two and at some point, he’s going to hold me accountable. I don’t want to have to tell him I let you die.”

Raf began grumbling, using the word *preposterous* and waving his arms around. He had started pacing. Not even realising that his leg was completely healed.

"You said you had a job for us?" I asked as Raf shook under the pressure of the woman's gaze.

She turned to me, eyes dimming. "Oh, yes. And it's exciting work. Step one was easy, you just needed to die in a way that no one would be looking for remains!"

"Great! Die in a fire! What a lovely first day!" I said, still wondering who this woman was.

STEP TWO: BE A BADASS.

It was no mistake that I was dressed like a burglar. It was part of my cover for this evening's adventure. The form fitting black hoody and signature backpack of the burglar suited me, quite well, actually. I smirked at my reflection in a window as I was lit by another streaking bolt of energy passing my head.

I was running.

Not the sort of running that you do to stay fit or catch a transport. This was the sort of running you do because energy bolts are flying past, things are exploding, and you're running out of time. It was dark, well, as dark as it ever got on Central. The neon fog permeated the darkness, even up this high.

I leaped and slid down the side of the angled roof of the tall building. The floor above had a rather nice balcony, I lamented that I didn't get to take a look around, *it was fancy*. The air was thin up so high. Not that it slowed down the three Elves chasing me, damned tree folk. *I swear, they didn't even need oxygen!*

The roof plateaued a little way down the angled side. I dropped down and found myself on a landing platform. No ship, sadly. I couldn't risk using my usual exit strategy as they were too close. I needed to keep my nature under wraps. As soon as it looked like I had extra abilities, they would know there was something else going on. The Elves dropped down about three seconds behind me, and another energy bolt whisked past my ear.

Elves were exceptional shots, but they kept missing me. Someone was stacking things in my favour today!

Thank the goddess!

The access door to the building was closed; there was no

ship to steal either. Not ideal. I licked my lips and pulled at my Circlet with a thought. Its neural interface was available to me almost instantly. I gave the mental command to link to Raf.

"Okay, you were right this time! I *may* need a pickup," I said in my mind.

"Can't you turn into a swarm of bats or something?" he replied.

"No, we need them to think it's a break in!"

"Ah, that's why you didn't just kill them, is it?" he asked with a laugh.

"I'm out of time. You had better be there, old man!"

I jumped over the safety railing with energy bolts hitting the air where my head would have been a moment ago. I was so high up that it was going to take me quite a while to hit the ground.

I looked across the city as I gathered speed. I could see the building Libby owned in the distance. The Followers had put a white neon rim around the top of it. The locals had started calling it *the Lighthouse*. I was pretty sure Jon would secretly like that.

The floor was getting upsettingly close now. *Where was the old fool?*

Just as I worried that I was going to have to take matters into my own hands, I felt gravity move as he scooped me up running across the side of the building.

"You took your sweet time!" I yelled as we vanished through a purple hole in the air.

We came in hot, hitting the loading field and instantly coming to a stop. The sense of weightlessness vanished as quickly as it had started; we fell onto the soft mat with a thump of air.

"You two need to get better at exits!" the bearded man said, looking down at us from the railing on the floor above.

The portal basin was just that, a basin about five meters deep in the middle of our operations room. Each side of the basin was a grey wall, which allowed us to have up to four portals at once, not that it ever happened, but we had the option. There was a metal staircase in the corner where we could leave, around the top was a rail, where people would look down and complain at us for ‘coming in too hot,’ or some other whine.

“I did my part. Raf screwed the location! I should have fallen right into the portal!” I shouted back, scrambling to my feet.

“You’re lucky that David isn’t here! He would chew you both a new one for all the showboating!” the bearded man said as he came down the stairs.

Raf was still lying on the crash mat, arms and legs spread out like a starfish. He was smiling, damned fool was always smiling! “I would have just reminded him that he’s *your* boss, not ours. We answer to a higher power, Summer!”

The bearded man, Summer, he was our commander when David was away. Because of his links to Jon, he was *always* away on some mad adventure. We stayed home, making sure Central stayed safe for his return.

“Okay, enough sparring. Did you finish your mission or not?” Summer asked.

“Assuming they didn’t see Raf, they’ll assume I was either an assassin or burglar who got caught in the act,” I said.

“They didn’t see me, or the portal. That’s why I had Týr move it out of their line of sight. I wasn’t showboating. I was working!” Raf said with his usual aloof tone.

“You think it’ll be enough for them to reach out to their contact?” Summer asked with a pensive rub of his gloriously well-kept beard. His light brown robes looking supremely natural on him.

“It was a solid plan. I think they will,” I replied.

The building I had just escaped from was a base of operations for a well-connected group of scumbags who were planning on blowing up a transport in a few days. Their plan was to kill the newly elected regent of an independent human colony called *New Essex*. The human tendency to add the word *new* to things rather than just naming something properly was annoying, but blowing them up over it seemed a step too far. They had somehow begun their plotting without us knowing about it, which was unusual. Unusual enough for us to take a personal interest.

We had made sure they saw a mysterious stranger running around their building in hopes they would assume someone was onto them and contact their boss, whoever that was. The cloak and dagger theatrics were essential to our work; we had a policy to stay invisible. There was no record of Followers having any kind of *active* force. We were ghosts and puppeteers working on behalf of Goddess herself.

"They're making a link!" yelled a stern voice from above. Raf and I dashed up the metal staircase to the top of the portal basin. I almost fell over, stopping at the large desk where Follower intelligence staff were bringing up encrypted data screens as floating holograms, moving them around above the map of the city.

"Can he break it? The encryption?" Raf asked.

Summer raised his eyebrow. "Of course he can!"

Týr, the non-organic life-form that acted as the main computer for all Follower facilities, was a remote intelligence. He was connected to our temple via an impossible transmission that had unlimited bandwidth and no latency. No one knew where he really was or how he was connected to us; no one other than the Keeper, we assumed. Týr was the most advanced intelligence in all of creation. Aygah had saved him, like she had us. The crucial difference was that we were saved from this reality, whereas Týr was from another.

And, it was one that had a great deal more advanced technology than ours.

“The encryption is quite complex. Give me a moment,” Týr said via his disembodied voice. Unlike most AIs or NOLFs Týr didn’t speak through panels of computer screens. He didn’t use an avatar either. He was simply a voice that you heard. He transmitted in a similar way to Circlet audio; his voice was directed into your brain via electrical impulses. Though, unlike Circlets, he did it without requiring hardware. Týr was just in there. Talking to you whenever he wanted and hearing you when you thought his name. It was genuinely creepy technology and borderline magical. We all half wondered if Aygah’s power enabled him, or was he part of her omniscience? Aygah had assured us that he wasn’t reading our minds and if you can’t trust God, who can you trust?

“They have very advanced technology indeed. That took me a few seconds longer than I had expected,” Týr said as the pieces of scrambled data that was above the map morphed into a video stream. Týr’s voice was deep and sincere. There was a vague twang of an accent that reminded me of an area of Earth called Ireland. He rarely allowed himself any emotional range. He was the poster-child for professionalism. Except that is, when he spoke to the Keeper. He and David talked like old friends, which bothered me more than I cared to admit.

The video on the screen showed a man talking. He was one of the men who shot at me earlier. He was a well-dressed Elf who favoured Human suits. *Gross!*

The man he was speaking with appeared to be human, by the looks of his ugly features. He lacked the symmetry and elegance of a Brick but had no other markings or differences to highlight him as anything else. He was also thuggish. There was no way this man was the one in charge. He was

likely hired help.

The audio faded in slowly. "She looked like a female. Vampire, I'm pretty sure," the well-dressed Elf said.

The thuggish man scratched his chin. "Wings?" he asked.

"No. But there was a confidence to her movement that was very, well, Vampire."

"What does that even mean?" the thug asked mockingly.

"Trust me, she was a Vampire," the Elf said, with no explanation. This wasn't an unusual exchange. Humans weren't good at picking up on these things, whereas the other Elder races could tell each other apart at a glance.

"You think someone is on to us?"

"She jumped off the building. Vanished without a trace," the Elf replied. "The team is a little jumpy. We're supposed to start the project tomorrow morning and now we got a strange Vampire running around the building. It can't be a coincidence."

The thuggish man nodded as the Elf spoke and then replied instantly, as if he was just waiting for the talking to stop. "Do everything as planned. The second team will cover you."

"So, this woman wasn't part of the second team? You're sure?"

"Just lock your fucking door and do your job," the man said closing the communication. The screen blinked off.

"Second team, huh?" Summer said, mulling over the information as he waved a hand to zoom in on the map of the city.

"We were aware they were part of a larger network, but a second team implies we missed something quite important," Týr said, seemingly mulling over the information himself.

"Did we get the location?" Raf asked.

"I was unable to track the signal, which is concerning to me," Týr replied.

We had a pretty good idea that the group we were targeting was working for someone in the EFE, in the Sol system. That's 'Earth for Earthlings.' They were xenophobic sociopaths with a remarkable amount of political power. We had confirmation now. We needed enough evidence against them so that if they ever took control of the Earth government, we could provide Jon's team with information about just how bad they were; they could make sure it was taken seriously. This intel was our insurance against a worst-case scenario. Or, at least, one of our insurances. Now Týr had said that he couldn't track them, I wondered if it went deeper than we first thought.

"Týr, do you have anything on this second team yet?" I asked. I knew how fast Týr worked. As soon as he knew there was a second team, he would be searching for them. Every file, every contact, and every link there was between the people in that building and anyone else. Even isolated computers weren't safe from his prying eye. If something was stored digitally, he could access it. Physics and logic did not apply to a NOLF who could transmit data with force of will alone.

"No. Which is also concerning to me. There is only one reason I wouldn't be able to find data on a group such as this..."

"Why?" Summer asked.

"They don't exist," Raf said.

"That would be another reason, I suppose. Not the one I was considering," Týr replied.

"It's not stored digitally... Because they know he could find it," I said.

"Quite."

STEP THREE: WHATEVER IS REQUIRED.

I sat at the bar. It was busy, but not packed. This wasn't the sort of place you went to dance, it was the sort of place you went to drink and talk to old friends. The sort of place that criminals liked to meet. I hated the missions that made me feel like a spy. I liked it when I had to do violence, and maybe science but not espionage.

I was dressed to attract attention. Low cut blue dress and holographic jewellery. I thought back to my old life. I had been well dressed; I had impeccable manners and was respected in academic circles. Now, I hung out in a bar dressed to look like I wanted a date, and seeking out evildoers.

Sometimes I felt ludicrous, like I was just playing pretend. Then I would have to use the skills Aygah gave me, and I would suddenly remember who I was now. The feeling of pretence would fade, and I would complete my mission. Because the plan was all that mattered, and I played my part, or I would die trying.

I saw him double-take me as he came in. He was nervous. He sat next to me and yelled for the bartender to bring him a bottle of wine. I could tell he was known. A few people took stolen glimpses of him. He was known to be a man you didn't fuck with. He was also a man who liked pretty girls he met in bars. I was his usual type, everyone knew it.

The bartender put two glasses out and filled them. He left the bottle, and a small envelope. I knew this routine well enough. The envelope would have two sticks of gum in it. The gum was laced with a drug that would elevate our moods. It was locally known as *Happy Hour* and was illegal on basically every Elder world. It was a chemical cocktail, a

firecracker that was designed for stimulating your pleasure responses. People who used it felt really good when they were on it, but had violent mood swings when they were coming down. It was a drug that men like him took before they screwed a stranger that they met in a bar and then went home to beat their wives. It was the drug of choice for the last remnants of toxic masculinity.

“You shouldn’t be here. They saw a Vampire bitch running around the building last night,” he said. His voice gruff and coarse. He took the envelope. “You should have sent someone else.”

The gum was already unwrapped. It had a light dusting of pink powder across its off-white surface. He put it in his mouth and chewed, taking a sip of wine to bring out the toxins faster.

The powder was unrelated to the main drug. It was a little extra coating, a drug that had similar effects to cocaine but was far more potent. This man would likely have built up quite a tolerance to it.

He, like the other men involved in his organisation, dressed like a human; a suit, with sensible shoes and a nice Circlet. He had short dark hair that was a little thin and he sported the tell-tale pointy ears of an Elf. His eyes had lost the usual sparkle that his kind had. He had spent too much time on drugs and out of the sunlight. This happened eventually with people who led his sort of lifestyle.

“Chew the fucking gum. People are watching,” he hissed through gritted teeth. “And pretend you like me, or you’ll make me look bad.”

I took the gum and chewed. *This was going to be an interesting evening.* I leaned in close and made sure my body language told the room that I was interested in this man. Hopefully, they couldn’t see my skin crawling at the very notion.

I took another sip of wine and he put an arm around me.

"Watch those hands," I ordered in a clearly out of character tone.

He put a hand on the edge of the stool and pulled it in closer, making it look like we were getting cosy. "Relax Vampire, I'm not dumb enough to try anything. You got what I asked for?"

I giggled loudly, for the benefit of the room. Or was it the drugs? I felt the *Happy Hour* kicking in. I needed to stay focused before it affected me. I had *Her* blessing, I was supposed to be immune to these sorts of things.

"I parked an orbital bike outside. There's two very valuable bags in the rear pack. We can go get them once you give me what *I* came for," I said, trying to make my tone stern but keep my body language friendly, very friendly. It wasn't even hard. Shit. The drugs. I had to remember the drugs I was on. *Stay focused Ta'ra. Stay focused.*

The deal had been cut by other Follower operatives. They had arranged to trade two Thinker built storage stones for solid information about the mysterious second team. Since the Thinker's died and took a lot of their technology with them, their storage stones were starting to become crazy valuable. We had already gathered quite the supply of them from their home world a few days after the fall. If we were careful not to flood the market, we could use them as financing for bribes for years to come. We weren't short of money. I wasn't actually sure how things were paid for if I was honest.

"I got the information. We were told to keep it off of digital storage. I have it all written down in my pocket," he said, patting at his side. *The idiot just told me where he kept it, even which pocket.*

"Hand it over and we can go our separate ways then."

"No! I asked for an attractive woman to meet me here to

make me look good! Won't look good if you leave without me, will it?" he said. I think he was trying to sound angry; his *Happy Hour* was kicking in and he just sounded petulant.

"Fine, I'll make it look good and then we leave out of the back door. That work for you?" I asked, finding myself suddenly excited by the idea. *Shit, I wasn't immune to this crap. Stay on mission, Ta'ra!*

"Sounds good," he said going in for a kiss. I turned my head at the last second, finding myself giggling at the very idea.

I slid from my stool and pulled at his jacket. I bit my lip and played with my long black hair. I did all those silly motions that people excited by chemicals did. I was a little ashamed how easily the act came. The drugs were stronger than I had expected, and I really hoped my team was watching over me. I had a feeling I may need them.

He embraced me and I felt his husky powerful arms around me. I smiled widely and pulled him by the hand through the back door. My end of the bargain complete. *That was a good act, considering how much I hated people like him.*

The alleyway was lit by the single light above the bar's door and the neon glow that beamed down from the tall buildings all around. It wasn't raining for once either, which was nice.

The door slid closed behind us, he didn't let go.

The neon lights looked so much more vibrant than usual; they had a chemically induced distracting quality to them.

"Your stones are in the bike's rear pack," I said, tapping my Circler to unlock the bike. Its lights flashed when I did. He knew where it was. "Now give me the information. I have things to do."

There was a giggling noise. *Damn it, that was me!*

"What are you so interested in these people for, anyway? You want to get in on their action or something?" he asked.

"None of your business. Take your rocks and leave."

He grabbed me by the shoulders with enough force to make me wince. Then, he had grabbed my face, or I was high enough that it seemed like it.

I was so messed up I couldn't even really remember what I wanted from him. *Did people do this on purpose, was this fun for them?*

I heard the sounds of footsteps in the puddles at the end of the alley. Wait, it was raining! It was pouring down with rain. *I hated drugs, they made everything so confusing.*

"Turns out I'm not giving you shit, and just taking the stones works better for us than giving you anything."

I felt the echo of my own body move as he slammed me against the wall. This wasn't going to go well for me. I needed my team. *I just had to say the name... the nice computer man. If I thought his name, he would hear me, and the team would portal in... what was his name? They were waiting for me. Why was I wet? Was I on the floor?*

Screw subtlety, I had a mission to do.

I stretched out my soul and turned to a swarm of bats. It was a lot of fun being a swarm of bats while on mood elevating drugs. There was so much information coming in, I could see everything from every angle at once, every bat, all at once.

I knew I needed to clear my head and being a swarm of bats wasn't the kind of thing a normal person did. I pulled myself back together in the air above the alley and dropped down onto two Elves in suits.

I drew on my power, the power that was fuelled by blood, the one AYGAH had put inside me, and increased my speed. I was moving fast enough to dodge a plasma bolt, but still felt too slow. I felt myself distracted by an afterimage of my own arm. *Drugs are annoying!*

I hit both the Elves at once and they hit the walls each side

of the alley. The prick from the bar was heading for the bike. I had turned off the security, he would be able to escape. I couldn't let him get away. I used a little of my power, added it to my voice and whispered distractions into his ear. It was effective at the best of times; he was as high as I was. It scared the shit out of him.

He started getting angry. Not petulant or grumpy, but angry. Violently angry. I had unsettled him well enough that the drug had been moved on to the next stage faster than expected. He wanted to fight me. *Oh dear; was I in any state to fight someone?*

I felt my blood boiling. I wasn't sure why he thought he could beat me in a fight, but he wanted to try. By the Goddess herself, I wanted to fight him!

I needed him alive. He ran towards me. I turned to smoke as he lunged. I broke a bone in his shoulder in a single motion.

He screamed and grabbed at me again. I caught his hand and snapped his wrist. He screamed, I kicked him in the kneecap and it crunched as it bent backward. The bone tore through his trouser leg. I back handed him hard enough for him to hit the wall. I wanted to kill him; I wanted to kill him because it was fun. *I was on drugs. I needed to remember the drugs*

One of the other men made a noise and struggled to his feet. I used my speed again and appeared next to him. He tried to hit me, but I was too fast. I felt my teeth itch as they slid into his skin. I took just enough to clear my head. Then pulled away so I could make sure it was safe. The other man was unconscious and the prick from the bar was going nowhere.

I pulled the Elf closer and drank again. Once I had gotten back the power I had used in the fight I snapped his neck.

The other man was awake now, wide eyed and terrified. I

killed him before he had time to ponder his fate.

The drugs were out of me

"Týr," I said in my mind, loudly, if there is such a thing.

"There are no cameras covering you. I'm accessing your Cirplet," he said calmly.

"I need medical extraction for the target and removal of two corpses."

There was a pointed silence while Týr scanned the area through my Cirplet.

"The back end of the alleyway is a good spot for a portal. Drag the target out of view of the street," he replied with his usual professionalism.

"For the love of Aygah! Ta'ra, did you really need to make such a mess out there?" Summer asked, slamming his hand down on the table in front of him.

"Well, if someone had have told me I wasn't immune to the current party drug, things may have gone differently! I didn't plan on a double homicide when I got up this morning!"

"Followers do not kill! It's a fundamental rule of the order, Ta'ra!" he said rubbing his head. Summer was a Follower, he was a Follower through and through. He had only been left looking after us because the Keeper thought it would be good for him to see different ways of doing things. I don't think David would have left him in charge if he knew things were going to get so uncomfortable for him so quickly.

"You mind if I say something?" Raf asked from the back of the room.

Summer looked at him but didn't reply. Raf took this as his chance.

"We are not the same kind of Followers as you are, Summer. We are the weapon that enables your pacifism. You think the *Great Family* of yours is flying around war zones and getting mixed up with galaxy level conspiracies without

having the occasional body to hide?"

Summer looked like Raf had just slapped him in the face. He was about to lecture us on not assuming to know what Jon and his family did, when a welcome voice took the wind out of his sails.

"He's right, Summer!" David said as he came through the door. He marched in with a confidence and swagger that told everyone he was in charge. He was the Keeper, even Raf and I respected that position.

"Keeper," I said in greeting as I bowed my head.

When I had first met him, he was Doctor Atkinson. Computer expert and lady's man. Something happened to him, we don't know what, but he was different now. He was the Keeper of *Her* secrets. He was the only person alive who could claim knowledge of Her plan. We had met Aygah, when she recruited us, but it was short and confusing. Rumour was that he knew her better than almost anyone. That he had even seen Her home. He had been taken out of time and taught his role. He never spoke about it. He knew things we didn't, that was his job.

"Ta'ra! Wonderful to see you again. You have blood on your chin," he said, giving me a friendly hug.

"Raf! How are you?" he asked, clasping arms with him. "May you forever walk in the sun," he added. This was an old Elven greeting. Sometimes I forgot Raf was an Elf. He was more like a Vampire, with his endless pondering and cheerful aloofness. Though, most interaction with him ended in sarcasm.

"Summer, I hear we have a guest?" he asked.

Summer straightened his robes and stood a little taller. "Despite Ta'ra's violent tendencies, the mission was completed. We have the target sedated in our medical facility."

"Oh, Summer, don't be so dramatic! She was drugged out

of her senses! She just did what came naturally to her," David said, throwing a half smile my way.

"Keeper, that level of violence does not come naturally to anyone, never mind a Vampire!"

"You forget, she's not like other Vampires. Aygah herself changed her!" David said in support of me, and as a reminder to Summer.

"In *Her* we trust," Summer said in reflex, though this time it made sense as an answer.

"Yes, we do," he said, as if it was the end of the conversation.

David asked how many doctors we had, and about the state of the guest. He seemed to know more than he should about things, but he always did. I think he liked not having to explain himself to us. I had heard that aboard *Basilica*, when he travelled with the Great Family, he had to hold back, pretend he was surprised by things, or else he would catch the interest of Jon.

"Keeper, do you know why the drug worked on me?" I asked. I had been doing this job a while now and every drug, toxin or gas I had encountered since being changed had simply failed to affect me.

Aygah had enhanced me. She had actually done it in-between my death and rebirth on Mars, not that I knew. She had said I was as close to the original Vampires as she could make me. I had all their powers and a few of their weaknesses. I could access speeds that defied physics, though only for short bursts. I was agile and strong, more so than others of my race. I could split myself into what everyone perceived as a flock of bats, though to me I was a... I don't know... but I wasn't a bunch of flying rats though. I could also turn to smoke, but it happened as reflex. Not something I could control. The downside was that I had to work at night and had a tendency to bite people when I got angry. My

abilities cost me energy which I drew from blood.

As a doctor I knew that my abilities would have an answer in science, but as a Vampire, and a romantic, I hoped they didn't.

Raf had a similar gift to me. He was fast and agile in ways that even I couldn't come close to. He could bend gravity around him, allowing for some interesting acrobatics. The most impressive thing about him was his senses and as a result, his aim. He could shoot, throw and spit with more accuracy than most tactical computers and his vision was acute enough to spot a nanite in a sandstorm.

"Summer, could you ask our doctors to pop up here and scan Ta'ra while the guest is sleeping, please?" David asked as he looked at the hologram of the city which we always had on the main table.

He zoomed into where my fight had taken place.

"Týr, you couldn't see down this alley?" he asked.

"No!" Týr replied.

The hologram faded and a green overlay covered it, showing all the sensors and camera angles he had access to. This was literally the only blind spot for three miles.

"Did you think I was sleeping?" Týr asked.

"Sleeping? Never! But did you *really* fail to notice the blind spot before the meeting?" David asked.

"I saw it. I didn't pick the location. The target did."

The two doctors came into the room, scanners in hand. David greeted them by name. He knew every Follower by name, somehow.

They were excited to be asked to the operations area. Usually, we would go to them, but David asked for their attendance and they were happy to come.

I saw David purse his lips. A lot of us did this, speaking in your head wasn't as easy as it sounded. He was talking to Týr. I wondered what he wouldn't be able to say aloud,

around us. We were the most trusted of all Followers.

The alarm rang and the facility shook, just a little. The lights flickered and then gained a red tint as our backup kicked in and the emergency lighting fired up.

"What happened?" Summer asked in a yell over the alarm sound.

"Our guest just exploded," Týr said calmly.

"What? How?" Raf asked with shock.

"There was a bio-weapon embedded in his chest and it was designed to release when the containing membrane was hit with scanner frequencies," David said calmly, turning off the alarms.

"I had Týr close the blast doors and flood the medical bay with temporal wave energy. The resulting vacuum caused a small explosion. It's contained. Little bit of damage to the building. If the bio-weapon had have gone off, it would have killed everyone in the facility in a few seconds."

Raf was looking around, almost suspiciously. He sometimes did this when he was using his senses. It was akin to the distracted head tilt, which was common among NOLFs who were using sensors.

Summer looked stunned. We all did, but he looked especially stunned.

"I... I'm sorry. It was my decision to bring him here," Summer said.

"Don't worry. It was a learning opportunity. No harm done, really."

David may have said there was no harm done but the medical rooms were fucked. I wondered something, for a moment; sometimes it's best just to ask.

"Keeper?" I asked. He looked up from his map at me. "This is the first time a drug has affected me, which is why you asked for the medical team to come up here. And the, err, guest, was left alone. Allowing you to isolate him and deal

with the problem.”

“Was there a question in there?” he asked.

“Well, was this the reason that *She* let the drug influence me?”

He smiled. “I could have just ordered the medics up here without a pretence. Why go to the effort?”

He was right. I was overthinking this. It didn’t make any sense. Unless...

“Keeper, if you hadn’t arrived, they would have wanted to scan me anyway. Probably *before* scanning the guest.”

He grunted for a moment. “Well, I was almost late getting here. There was a plasma storm en route. Maybe *She* wasn’t convinced I would make it here in time and put a backup in place.”

I was suddenly shocked. Had Aygah herself taken precautions to protect us? This was quite a compliment; she didn’t get involved directly very often. Seeing the way in which she worked was always an honour.

“How did you know about the bio-weapon?” Raf asked, suddenly interested.

“I know lots of things. That’s my job, Raf.”

Raf went to the hologram controls at the large table and switched from the view of the city to the building’s internal scanners. Sure enough, the replay showed a massive release of organic particles a moment before the room was flooded with temporal wave energy. The wave of energy left no trace of it. It had removed a large area of matter and even the air from the centre of the room. The resulting fallout had pinched the walls in and ruptured a few cooling tanks, causing the explosion. The replay made it clear he had made the right call. Even with the medical rooms evacuated, it would have taken us a few seconds to respond to this sort of attack.

Summer finally regained some composure. “Someone attacked us via a mechanical device, and they don’t keep

their information digitally? Doesn't that seem... very targeted?"

"That's why I'm here, actually," David said. "It would seem that someone knows our little sub-division exists. More worryingly, they know Týr exists."

STEP FOUR: SAVE A LIFE.

Raf and I stood on the roof of a building inside the spaceport complex. It was dusk, and we were far enough from the main city that the neon glow reminded me of a mountain in the distance. It looked beautiful from here. The buildings around the spaceport were covered in the usual shroud of fog that encompassed it at this time of night. There were ships coming and going from it, but they looked like fireflies or sparkling stars.

Raf, of course, could probably see the rivets on their hulls, even from here. His vision defied what I knew about the limits of biology, and physics. That said, I could turn into a flock of bats, so there was probably no point trying to rationalise our powers.

The transport that we were keeping such a close eye on was right below us. It was small, only housing about fifty passengers. It was an Earth built design, meaning ugly, functional, and noisy. The grey and blue box was covered in pipes and vents. It looked like it was missing an outer layer, but this was how humans designed things, everything was accessible and easy to replace. The ship was modular, built to be fixed, not built to last.

Our job was to wait, nothing more. There were Followers on the transport. Some were in the cabin crew, the catering team and even one on the security delegation. The new regent was safe, so long as the ship took off.

We were to be nearby if this mysterious second team hit. We knew that the original group of thugs were going to intercept the transport in space. Our people had arranged for that ship to be intercepted before they even appeared on scanners.

We just had to be here as a contingency. Our plan was solid.

"This isn't very interesting. We should really have just called the authorities on this one. They should be qualified for it," Raf said. One leg hanging over the edge of the roof while leaning back against a ventilation unit. He hadn't taken his eyes off the city in the distance since we arrived. I was fairly sure it was stunning to his eyes. I wished I could see even a little of what he did.

"I know you stopped paying attention a while back, but you do know why we didn't? Right?" I asked.

Raf had come to the conclusion when we started our new lives that it was his job to complete missions, not care about the reasons. He was so stuffy and self-obsessed in our first life. He had annoyed Aygah when we first met her, and she looked at him for too long; something inside him found a new sense of youth that day, and sarcasm. I liked the new Raf but his lack of interest in the reasons for our missions was annoying at times. So long as he knew where to go and who the bad guys were, he didn't much care about the rest.

"If the Sol government finds out there has been an attack on the new regent of an independent human colony, they won't allow it the promised freedom. They'll use it as an excuse to retract the autonomy," I said, realising I sounded like I was reading from the mission brief.

He made a noise like a bored child. "But why is any of this our problem?"

"Because Jon, *Her* Champion, cares about the freedom of the human colonies. So, *we* care about the freedom of the colonies," I explained.

"I know, but..." he stopped mid-sentence. His body language changed from annoyed child to soldier, in a flash. He hopped to his feet.

He looked around the rooftop with his keen eyes, which

almost glowed with an amber sheen of power.

“Raf?” I asked, readying my own abilities. I knew he had spotted something. His vision was too acute to be fooled by a little darkness. He usually made out he saw less than he did, to maintain the surprise. I watched his eyes, knowing him well enough to read his stern looks, his gaze would tell me where to attack.

I zipped up my black jacket and slowly put my hand on the handle of my gun. He was looking slightly to the right of me.

He moved to grab a throwing knife; I spun around as motion came out of the shadows toward me. I turned to smoke as it passed through me. As I regained my form, I tried to grab whatever it was. I failed.

Raf threw a knife and movement in the shadow stepped into the light for moment as it was hit in the arm. It was a short stocky figure, bipedal, but animalistic. One of the Younger races, one I wasn't familiar with. It was fast, strong and mean. Its head was low on its shoulders, a physically powerful and confident species.

It growled like a dog and ran directly at Raf, who was happy to let it come. It grabbed him and pushed him off the roof. I wasn't worried about Raf as much as I was witnesses. It was supposed to look like this transport had a perfect, easy, incident free take-off. A super powered Elf fighting with a wolf man on the landing platform would not help us sell the incident free part. I jumped from the roof and landed on the ground twelve levels below, reforming from bats to woman again.

I had beaten Raf and his friend to the floor. One of the things Raf was able to do was change the effect of gravity around him. He had stalled the fall to let me get there first.

The wolf-man was swiping and grabbing at Raf's face. He was calmly blocking each movement and pushing the claws

away. They hit the floor. Raf rolled away like a tumbleweed; the wolf-man cracked the concrete floor.

The transport's underbelly lit blue, and a jet of gas blasted downward, concealing us. This was convenient. I assumed something to do with Týr's influence.

"What *is* this thing?" Raf complained as it barrelled towards him with rage. The fall had hardly phased it, whatever it was.

I flicked my Circlet scanner on without bothering with the screen. "Týr, what are we looking at?"

"Processing scans."

Rather than waiting for the results, I pulled my gun and fired at the furry arsehole's back. Usually, the safest way to shoot someone.

This time though, this wasn't the case. It actually turned around and batted the plasma bolt out of the air. I loathe to admit it, but it was really, very cool. The hair on its hand was singed, but it didn't react. It just turned back to smacking Raf around like he was a rag doll. Raf, like me, was built to last.

"Týr!" I yelled in my mind as I shot again. "Whatever species this is, it seems to be immune to plasma rounds."

The hairy alien didn't bother trying to deflect my shots the next time. It tanked them with ease.

"Ta'ra, this creature seems to be undocumented, however its likeness to certain universal Elder legends implies a common theme..." Týr was still talking but Raf had pushed the creature clear, and I was shooting it as fast as my weapon would fire, mostly as suppression. I missed a lot of what he was saying.

Raf, getting his breath finally, answered him, aloud, so I could hear. "It's a fucking werewolf!"

I had a feeling that this was where Týr was heading with the information before I got distracted.

The transport that was almost directly above us glowed

blue as it prepared for lift-off. I was reminded that this was a Sol transport. There was no way it would have basic considerations like pressure relief disrupters and floatation systems. It would push down with enough force to give it lift. This wasn't a good place to be. Not at all.

"The authorities have seen you. They are heading towards you," Týr informed us.

The werewolf burst out of the gas cloud, and as a reflex, I felt myself burst into smoke for a moment. It passed through me and swiped back on itself, and I reformed. I caught its arm and burned blood in exchange for speed. I punched it hard and fast.

Strength is an overvalued force, overall. With enough speed and precision and you can punch clean through a limb. I hit the wolf across its elbow so fast that I went through the joint like a knife. It howled in pain. Raf, not missing his chance, launched two of his small knives his perfect aim guided them into the creature's eyes as he turned his head back. It was masterful, really. Raf elevated throwing things to the level of artistry.

The wolf stumbled, not sure if it wanted to nurse its arm, or pull the blades from its eyes. Raf drew his gun and fired at the already broken arm. The wolf made an animalistic sound that was almost language. I used my speed and spent a few drops of the energy in my blood, I almost felt the moment my eyes turned red, and my teeth grew, just a little. I punched the werewolf with the palms of both hands and let the energy of the blood fire out of me. The creature was blown back, its flesh ripped from its skin and blood trailing behind it in the air.

"We need to leave," Raf informed me. There were beams of light coming in through the smoke and gas, the blue lights from above getting intense enough to appear almost white now.

I burst into bats and flew with all the speed I could muster. Raf had his own methods of escape. Gravity lost its hold on him and he leaped forward, shooting himself like one of his knives.

I reformed myself at the far end of the landing area. I stumbled to the ground as I did. Being bats for more than a few seconds left me exhausted, and I had overspent on blood energy when I hit the wolf.

I watched as the transport lifted into the air and gathered speed. Within a few moments, it was rocketing its way to the upper atmosphere.

Raf hit the ground next to me, though, with far more control than me. He rolled and pulled two knives as he came to his knees.

"What *was* that?" I asked, panting and weak.

"As I told you, I believe it may have been a Werewolf," Týr said calmly.

Raf stood to his full height and shaded his vision with one hand.

"Týr, we need a portal. Now please," he said with an uneasy tone in his voice.

He put out a hand and helped me to my feet, not taking his eyes off the dock. It was just out of sight to me.

"What do you see?"

"The wolf, it was crushed under the pressure of the transport."

"Yeah, I know. That's why I pushed it into the lift zone. That was the point, Raf," I said, brushing myself down.

"It just stood up."

I felt my already porcelain skin lose even more colour at the implication.

"You sure?" I asked.

He looked at me with a raised eyebrow and a purple ring

cut the air open behind us. We backed into the portal, instantly appearing back at the operations room.

“Lock it down!” I yelled, keeping my gun pointed at it.

I saw movement in the darkness. Two red eyes looked at me as the ring blinked away and we were standing, ready to do battle, with a wall.

“Werewolves! There are Werewolves!” Raf yelled at the floor above. David leaned over the rail, looking down at us.

“I know! Exciting, isn’t it?” he said with glee.

I sat in the vehicle garage, one of our surface shuttles had been removed, to allow space for the medical team to set-up, since their usual spot was rubble. I was hooked up to a machine that was delivering Cure-all suspended in plasma directly into my veins. Apparently, I had overspent with my escape. I had flown a lot further than I had realised and already used a lot of energy. I had felt like I could have done better, but this wasn’t the time for performance reviewing myself.

Strictly speaking, I didn’t *need* the drip but I *would* recover faster with it than without, and we had no idea if I would be needed in the field again that evening.

Summer and David stood a little way away. Raf stood next to me, pretending not to be reading their lips.

“Knock it off, you know David knows when you do that.”

“Then he should have his back to me, shouldn’t he?” Raf replied.

It was a good point, I couldn’t help but agree. A medic handed me a flask, I could tell from the smell that it was filled with blood. They always passed me blood in flasks, it made them uncomfortable to see me drink it. While I had a flask to my lips, they could pretend it was water or something. It didn’t bother me, whatever made them more comfortable.

David came over to us, Summer left, and he looked quite

put-out.

"So, Werewolf!" he said with that same sparkle of glee he had earlier.

"Yes, but who sent it?" I asked.

"Why would anyone have had to send it?" David asked. I was always stunned by his knack for understatement. He always looked relaxed, and a little entertained. Somehow, he made his Follower robes look like a fashion statement and there was a nonchalance about him that was alluring to everyone.

Raf was less impressed with David, generally speaking.

"Keeper. You should be honest with your Heroes," he said.

I always hated the designation 'Hero,' it felt conceited. Týr had once told me that, that was the point. To be a constant reminder of the standards which we were expected to live up to.

"Been lip reading again, have you Raf?" David asked with a wink. "There was no attack ship at the coordinates. There were no assassins on the transport either. Actually, it rather feel's like the whole plot was a setup."

"A setup for what?" I asked.

"For you."

Raf and I exchanged concerned glances.

I took a drink from my flask.

"Týr and I believe that someone knows about us, or at least, a little. I think the entire plot was designed to flush us out. Gauge our resources, and your abilities." David scratched at his neck as he spoke. He always scratched his neck when he was worried; it was his only tell.

"Why not ambush the team at the coordinates then?" Raf asked.

"Because they can't mobilise ships without using digital storage and Týr was scanning the area, he would have backtracked the ships to a source, or lifted a registration

number to find out who purchased them. Whoever this is, they seem to have a good idea about our secret weapon.”

I took another drink. “Who has Werewolves? How do you have Werewolves without anyone knowing?”

“There are many unmapped worlds in what was previously Thinker space,” Týr said in our ears. “It will take many years to map worlds and catalogue the Young races within. It is entirely possible that this species was an active force for the Thinkers before their fall.”

That was a chilling idea. An army of werewolves. “Why use them though?” I asked.

“A force that can take on our Heroes without using weapons, or technology. Eyes likely as good as Raf’s and noses that probably come close to Circlet scanners. If I was going to take on Týr and you two, I would use a species like that too,” David explained. I felt that he may have given this too much thought.

We had no contact with other Heroes usually. We had only encountered one other team in the past. They were, like Raf and I, enhanced. It was a woman, and a man, who had exhibited strange powers, not like we had. They were both human, but they were oddly good at not getting shot. That’s another story though.

The idea was to keep the teams small and quiet. Not to attract attention. We were, after all, basically spies and assassins. Though, I had wondered from time to time if that was true of all the teams, or just Raf and I.

Týr spoke again, this time his words sent a shiver down even my spine. “I believe that before their extermination, the Thinkers may have been arranging to do battle with our entire operation. I think that the analogue approach may have been only one aspect to their plan.”

“What do you mean, entire operation?” Raf asked. I had been readying the same question.

"There are certain scenarios where a large enough force with enough planning and technology could gain access to The Cave."

"Oh, oh dear," Raf said, in a now unusual show of engagement.

The Cave as it was known, was the where we assumed Týr was physically located, not that we knew what form that physicality took. It was also assumed by most Followers to be the place that AYGah herself called home. In our faith, it was the most mythical, most holy place. It was *Her* citadel, the seat of power and many Followers thought that it was also where she stored the things she saved from other iterations. If only half of what people said about it was true, anyone taking control of a place like that would be very powerful.

"Wouldn't *She* have something to say about that?" I asked.

David chuckled. "Ta'ra. Only the most arrogant God would assume themselves *all* powerful. AYGah has limits, just not the kinds *we* can understand."

"As I said, *certain scenarios*. It is our job to make sure they don't arise." Týr said with a little more emotion than we were accustomed to.

MISSION 2

STEP ONE: IT TAKES TWO.

The tallest of the towers had already fallen. Without the gravity-fields to keep them standing, they had simply crumbled under their own weight. Thousands would have died in that moment; I was glad I had arrived here too late to see it. There would have been nothing I could have done except bear witness. Maybe there would have been a small justice in that simple act. - In Her, we trust

Occasionally, my former life would surface in my memories. There was rarely a reason for it. This evening it was an odd comfort to me. I felt the corners of my lips turn up, in the most subtle of smiles. I looked over at the tower. It was miles away, its peak sitting above the cloud line, roughly even with my own tower. These were the two tallest buildings on Central. The term 'sky scraper' was a human one, originally referring to the masts of boats. But, in the case of these two buildings it was true. We really were on the cusp of space. If it weren't for Elven engineering running the power to the Vampire made gravity manipulation technology, neither of these buildings would stand for more than a few seconds.

My Circlet chimed for a moment before it automatically answered and routed the call through a neural link into my brain.

"What are you smiling about?" Raf asked.

"Oh, come on! There is no way you can see me from there!" I replied, silently, via the almost magical link to the device on my wrist.

“Your radiance is hardly that blinding, Ta’ra,” he snapped, with a chuckle that he tried to suppress.

Raf’s eyes were good. They were good in a way that defied physics, biology and logic. They were given to him by our boss, Aygah. The architect of reality. We once joked that we were angels in service of god. There was more truth to it than either of us cared to think about.

“Why didn’t I get a cool power like magic eyes?” I asked. Sticking my tongue out at the other tower.

“Cool power? My dear, you can turn into a flock of bats. All I can do is watch you do it, from really far away.”

I heard a shiver in his voice as he spoke. It was cold, he didn’t do well in the cold.

“And throw knives at me. You could probably hit me too, you freak,” I imagined him sticking his tongue out in reply, though, it was more likely that he would roll his eyes and go back to looking at the city below. He loved to look at the city. To his eyes it was beautiful. He could see colours that I couldn’t even imagine, and pick out reflections in grains of dust in the air.

“How long have we been up here?” He asked, after a moment’s silence.

I mentally summoned the time display from my Circlet into my vision. The mentally embedded interface had taken me months to get used to, but now I was as proficient with it as I was with the wrist projected version that everyone else used.

“Three hours.”

“That’s it. No one is coming... I vote we call it a night.”

It was five in the morning, it was too late to call it a night, but he was right. The mission was a washout. We should have been pleased. Our intel had lead us to think that someone was planning to blow up one of the needle towers this evening. We had informed the local authorities of this,

via Follower channels, and fortunately they had taken the threat seriously. They were guarding the buildings closely. They didn't have the foresight or resources to guard the low atmosphere levels though. The upper plateau's housed communication systems which were integral for interplanetary links. No one knew this of course. The official story was that the towers were built to 'look really cool,' which they did..

But, the fact that they were being targeted, meant that someone likely knew about the transmitters. It was a closely guarded government secret. Someone knowing about it was worrisome.

That's why Raf and I had taken a tower each. Guarding the un-guardable, on the off chance it wasn't just some prat with a rocket launcher pointed at the base.

I pulled my leg back from the edge and stood up, brushing myself down. I needed to stretch. It really had been a long night. I needed to wake myself up.

"Where does all this dust even come from?" Raf asked.

"We're right at the edge of the atmosphere here. We would be weightless if it weren't for the tower's gravity manipulation field. I'm pretty sure it's attracting ash from all the crap that burns up in the atmosphere.

"Space ash. That's dumb," he said. He was getting grumpy. He always did when he was bored.

I had taken to wearing a form fitting black hoody when I was on missions like this. I liked the sleek, urban spy vibe it gave me. I didn't need a breather, neither did Raf. For reasons which science had failed to explain, we were able to breathe no matter what was in the air. I had always wanted to see if we were comfortable in space too.

I didn't have to worry about the cold either. It was a gift my own race had lost, but whatever Aygah did to me had

returned it. I was no good with fire though. Raf on the other hand was wrapped up in a ridiculous coat, personal shield with a heating system and a thermos full of coffee.

“Ta’ra. I think we have a problem.”

I froze, mid stretch. “Go on,” I replied.

“You have a white hair on your shoulder,” came the chilling answer

As odd as this line may have sounded if anyone could have heard it, it told me a lot. My hair was black. A few weeks ago, we had fought a very concerning foe. A single member of a furry bipedal species which, according to our dear friend Týr was a shapeshifter of sorts.

“You see him?” I asked, still using the neural link. I backed away from the edge, and tried to look as casual as I could about it. I slowly bent down, and made sure it was obvious that I was pulling a canteen out of my backpack, which was on the floor next to me. I glanced around as I did.

“There can’t be more than ten meters of platform, Raf. I’m not sure we can be snuck up on here,” I said.

The plateau I was on was quite literally just a circular platform which housed the last three meters of the needle structure and the last gravity generator. It didn’t even have an access ladder. It was meant to be serviced by a shuttle. It was not the sort of place which I expected to meet new friends. We were on the lookout for shuttles and missiles. Not Werewolves.

I realised it had been too long since Raf had replied. I took one more glance around the platform.

“Týr!” I said loudly in my mind. Skipping my Circlet link.

“I’m listening,” came the stern and professional reply. Týr was a nonorganic who somehow interfaced directly with peoples brains. He was, the most advanced digital life-form I knew of and his abilities were unique.

“Raf said I had a hair on my shoulder, he hasn’t replied for

about twenty seconds now. I think I need a portal," I said. Týr liked concise communication. I didn't bother with pleasantries or exposition. Just facts.

"I have patched into the tower. I don't know where this hair came from but you are alone. I can't get any data on his tower though. I'm opening a site-to-site portal now," he said.

I slipped my backpack on and check my weapons. I had a small pistol on one side and a dagger on the other. Both were unbuckled and ready to use.

The air in front of me tinted purple for a moment before it burst into form. I could see a very similar plateau as my own through it. There was, of course, our portal basin in the middle. All portals needed to start or end in the basin. But the wall opposite had my destination dialled in. I burned some of the energy in my blood and entered the portal, almost the moment it was fully formed.

I stepped out of the portal and was still using my speed. I looked around, there a large brown Werewolf holding Raf's neck, from behind. His legs were dangling a little. Behind him was another, a darker Wolf, squatted down, meddling with the gravity emitter which was at the base of the needle's tip which protruded from the centre of the plateau. It was a frozen moment for me. I had preloaded a second of speed in total. Something which cost me quite a bit of blood and not something I would be able to repeat for a little while, at least. I needed to make it count.

As I passed the Wolf holding Raf, I drew my blade and threw it towards the side of his neck. The moment I released it, it froze in the air. Then, I stepped to the other side of the needle and drew my pistol.

My speed ran out.

I felt the wobble ripple through my perception as my mind slowed and my muscles returned to a normal state. A second

was a lot of time for that power. I would feel it in the morning.

The dagger, carrying a hyper charged dose of kinetic energy shot into the Wolfs neck. It screamed. The other one looked up from his work as the purple glow of the portal blinked out of existence.

The Wolf had barely had time to scream before Raf, realising the grip was loose, drew a knife.

Raf's large coat was torn, and the mere fact that that the Wolf could hold him meant his shield was damaged or dry from kinetic fare. The shield had only been turned on to keep him warm. He wouldn't be very useful for long in this cold.

Raf's blade impacted the wolf, in the eye, which, as far as we knew was one of the few weak spots these things had, save for hyperkinetic impacts, but that was just physics.

The wolf screamed, or barked, to be more accurate.

I stepped forward and fired my blaster at the one which was only now noticing that he was under attack. My blaster, while small, was configured to fire a short range wide spread of energy. Raf had called it a pocket-shotgun. It was an accurate description. This was a new model too, I was impressed at how it shredded my target who slid from the rooftop, limply. He would likely heal from the shot, but not the impact of hitting the street-level shield at terminal velocity.

The other turned to glare at me with his one good eye. He pulled the blade from his other and tossed it on the floor.

I briefly thought he would have been smarter to have kept it, that is, until I realised that the claws on his fingers made it look like a thumbtack.

He lunged at me. I turned to smoke. He fell through me. As I reformed, I turned around and the moment my gun was solid again, I fired it into his rear. It gave him just enough of a poke for him to fall from the edge. I have to admit, I wanted

to watch him fall. Instead I turned, ready for the other one, which, in a rather nice turn of events was still lying on the floor, not moving.

"Did I kill it?" I asked. Raf, who was now too cold to answer, pulled my dagger from it and sat on the huge corpse.

I grinned. We had won!

There was a flash in the distance. I squinted. The other needle exploded and crumpled. The large point at the top was floating upward as the disconnected gravity generator went wild.

I looked at Raf. He shook his head.

"Týr, we're ready to come home," I said.

A portal opened behind me.

STEP TWO: GET A LIFE.

Raf and I walked through the relatively quiet open air eatery on the city side of Canto. Canto was the largest park on Central. The magenta grass and sweet smells of the native blossom trees were a stark contrast to the epic neon city which filled the skyline in every direction.

Our operation was housed under the Follower temple, which lay on the east side of the park. As far as anyone knew, it was where Followers told stories about the Goddess to anyone who wanted to listen. Followers were a strange and friendly bunch. Despite the temple being 'cover' for the basement complex, none of the occupants made any effort to keep a low profile. As secrets go it was pretty open. When Raf and I had left, Summer had somehow agreed to take a bunch of school kids on a tour. We just hoped it didn't include our facility areas.

It was almost three in the afternoon and my muscles still hurt from the night before.

"Týr is certain that it was the metal in the blade. He won't even consider the temperature or pressure as a factor. It's infuriating. I know we beat things up for a living but I think he forgets I *am* a biologist!" Raf complained.

I wasn't really listening.

"How do I look?" I asked, turning to him, eager for a reply.

"Not very much like a Follower!" He said raising an eyebrow at me.

He was dressed in the usual off-white robes of our order. He even wore it with the hood up.

"You're only dressed like that because it's warm. You look stupid!" I chastised. When he got too cold, it could take him days to get warm again. I couldn't criticise, not really. I had

similar issues in the other direction. Which was, in part why I was dressed in a way which was the polar opposite to him. I was in a cropped red tank top and denim shorts. I had my hair up to keep it off my neck.

"You look like an extra from a music video. You know, you're a scientist, right?" Raf said. "And a Follower. Members of religious orders don't usually dress so... secular."

"Speaking of which, my date is here. Go away, *like you promised.*" I said, shooing him, in hopes he would vanish before he ruined my day-off.

"Tara?" came the voice from behind me.

Raf raised an eyebrow and sternly said, "Ta'ra. Don't connect the 'a' and 'r' like that. She's not a Human!"

I turned. There was my date. Wide eyed, and a little taken back to have been told off by a man in robes.

I had met Peter a few weeks prior at the coffee shop. Which was where I was supposed to be meeting him. It was where I was heading. And I thought early enough that he wouldn't cross paths with Raf.

"Peter, hi!" I ignored Raf and hoped he did the same. I hugged him. We hadn't gone on an actual date yet and I instantly worried if the hug was too much.

"I'm so sorry. Have I been saying your name wrong?" He asked, looking genuinely concerned. Peter was a tall, athletically built Human with an intentionally bald head and a clean-shaven chin. He favoured rugged clothes. He worked for the government, in as much as he was essentially the manager of the Canto park. Though he had told me that he spent most of his time checking on the businesses, and pointing groundskeepers at anything that was less than picturesque. Today he was wearing cargo pants and a thick flannel shirt. I think, in his mind, it may have been an attempt to make a good impression on me. Peter was exactly my type.

"Please, ignore Raf. I don't expect Humans to learn

Vampire naming conventions!" I said. Instantly I saw the pang of hurt at being described as 'a Human.' I had to remember that. For reasons which baffled me, a lot of Humans did not like being reminded that they were, well, Human. It was indelicate of me. At least we were even now, I considered.

"Raf?" He asked, pointing at Raf quizzically.

"Oh! Yes. Sorry. Peter, this is Follower Rafio of Silva. Raf, this is Peter, my date."

I made sure to introduce Raf as Follower. Followers had two ranks, Follower and Initiate. It had become a custom to use the full title with any introduction. Though, his robes made it quite obvious that he wasn't an Initiate, to anyone who had even the vaguest knowledge of the order.

Peter stuck a hand out; Raf shook it. He was intending to behave himself, which was a relief.

"So, how do you two know each other?" He asked.

"We're both assigned to the Canto temple," Raf replied. And, in fairness to him, it was our official line and he wasn't *trying* to be a pain in the arse.

"Assigned? Tara, you're a Follower?" Peter asked, in reflex.

We had met in the coffee shop a few times, and exactly none of those times had I mentioned being a Follower. And, because of how warm the robes were, I never wore them. Not that any Follower was actually expected to. It was just something most defaulted to. Most Followers wanted to be recognised. And, why wouldn't they? It was a noble lifestyle.

"I am. I didn't think to mention it. Is that a problem?" I asked.

There was a silence. It wasn't a long silence but it *was* a hesitation on his part. Not a good start to a first date.

"Well, it was nice to meet you, Pe'ter. But I have to go worship the goddess now. Oh and, tell stories about the goddess... and something else goddess related... I

supposed." Raf smiled widely and left in the direction of the temple.

Peter looked at me a little awkward for a moment. "I need to come clean. I don't really know what a Follower *is*," he said, apologetically shrugging.

"You don't?" I asked. We were after all, on Central Prime, the one place in civilised space where being a Follower was actually quite normal. And we were literally ten minutes walk from the most well known Follower building on the planet, Libby Michaels' building, *the Lighthouse*.

"No. Honestly, before the Thinker war, I assumed Followers were just oddballs. I'm sorry. I just never looked into it."

I liked his honesty. It was good. Maybe this wasn't going to be such a bad first date.

"Well, if it's any consolation, no one thinks of me as a particularly good Follower," I replied with a smile. This was true. All the people at the temple who didn't know I was a *Hero of Aygah* thought I was a freeloader. Which I had no problem with.

He smiled back. "Coasting by on your good looks, huh? I do the same, to be honest!"

I got back to my apartment building after dark. I had, in the end, had a lovely day. Peter walked me to my building and I kissed him. He had put his hands on my waist with just the right amount of manly firmness to make me feel butterflies. I almost invited him up. But, I had work in the evening and as much as it would have been great to have company leaving at one in the morning may have raised one or two questions, for which I did not have answers.

"Good night, Peter," I said. Desperately wishing I didn't have to.

"Good night, Ta'ra," he replied. He didn't let go of my

waist. "Can I Screen you tomorrow?" He asked. A little apprehensive.

"Absolutely. But not before three."

"Oh, service?" He asked.

I nodded. Though I had no idea. Truth was, I planned on sleeping until then, after the work I had ahead of me was done.

He let go, grinning like a kid. I stepped through the Glass energy barrier, into my apartment building. He watched me until I stepped into the elevator. He was still exactly my type.

I showered and changed. I was ready for work in less than half an hour.

"Týr," I said, in that tone which always got his attention. He wasn't always listening, but his name, when said with purpose, almost always got an instant reply.

"Good evening, Ta'ra," he replied with his disembodied voice.

"I know it's earlier than planned, but I'm ready for work."

The portal opened almost before I had finished speaking.

Týr always opened a portal for me to get back to work. As much as it wasn't far to walk, I had chosen to keep an apartment instead of living at the temple. It wouldn't benefit anyone if my neighbours started asking me where I went at all hours of the evening.

"Did you dump him yet?" Raf asked, as I appeared in the portal basin. He was cross-legged on the floor, balancing a ball on the end of his finger. It kept falling off. I decided not to ask what he was doing.

"No," I said, looking around. There were people there in the basin, new people, and some engineers I recognised. The new people were in dusty brown initiate robes. "Hi," I added.

There was a sound from above. David Atkinson, The Keeper, looked down at us.

"Keeper!" I said, instantly taking on a more formal demeanour.

"So, did he dump you then?" Raf asked.

"No. Why are there initiates in our basin?" I asked.

I glanced up, David had retreated behind the rail. "Why didn't you mention that the bloody Keeper was here?"

Raf shrugged. He was still wearing robes. "Dunno. Sometimes there are people, I don't question it. David's here, so it's his problem, I figure." Raf glared at the two initiates for a moment, they looked as confused by him as I usually was.

"Hero, Ta'ra. Hero, Rafio. If there is anything you require, we are at your service," said the shorter one, she was a Vampire, *and she had wings*. The other-one was a bear-like species, I had no idea how to tell the gender of a bear. I was more interested in the Vampire woman anyway. The wings, told me that she was of a higher social class than me... Usually. If this woman *was* a believer in the old Vampire social structure, it had just been trumped by the Follower structure.

"What are you doing here? I believe initiates are barred from this level and below."

I heard the rail above creak and David looked down again. "They're with me," he called down. "You two get up here. Other two, well, also up here but then out the door, please. Summer is meeting you on the next level down for the rest of the tour." There was a pause and his head appeared again over the rail. "Engineers, you're doing great, whatever you're working on, carry on! It's wonderful."

The three engineers laughed and carried on messing with the open panel. I assumed it was something to go with the loading-field that slowed our 'hot' returns.

Raf and I headed up the stairs. Raf stopped a few steps up and turned back. "Raf, none of this Hero Rafio stuff. Just Raf. No 'Hero,' No 'io.' Got it?"

The initiates, looking suitably intimidated nodded in agreement. He continued up the stairs.

The operations room was unexpectedly well lit and the doors, were, unexpectedly open. There were a lot more people than we usually saw. It looked like there were at least five people measuring and adjusting things. This was quite unusual indeed. The initiates scurried out without saying anything else.

“Remodelling?” I asked.

“Playing fast and lose with security, and getting the lights fixed at the same time,” Raf said, loud enough for David to hear.

David was sitting at the briefing table, close to the rail which was how he had wheeled over to look down at us.

“Oh calm down Raf, I emptied the temple of everyone except well established, full-Follower’s, all of whom have kept bigger secrets than this,” he said without looking away from the screen which was floating in front of him, projected from a Circllet which was sitting on the table.

“Oh, in that case, you should know, the initiates are the ones in the brown robes, Keeper,” Raf said, pulling over an office chair and dropping down onto it.

David turned off his Circllet with a wave and picked it up. He slipped it back onto his wrist and turned. Putting his feet up on the desk. Raf copied him. David looked entertained, rather than annoyed.

“Sit down, Ta’ra. There is no need to stand to attention,” he instructed.

I pulled up my own chair, as instructed. “I wasn’t aware you were staying on Central, Keeper.”

He turned to me and leaned forward. Raf ignored him and put his hood up, feet on still on the desk.

“Ta’ra, some thing’s are happening. Jon is dragging us all out on another research mission. He thinks he may have

found one of Aygah's secret worlds. I have no idea when we are leaving or how long we will be gone for. I have decided to get you some more help. Some things are going to be happening here too."

I was worried. The Keeper always knew more than he was willing to say. Keeping secrets for Aygah was his job.

"What sort of help?" I asked.

He smiled in that charming way that always made things seem exciting. "The initiates are going to be interning here. The Vampire Ola'an is a gifted strategist, really special, and she has a family tree you may be interested in. The other one is called Angela, she's going to doing all the stuff we usually forget, drinks, lunch, internal security and whatever else I forget. She's an organisation expert. Can you believe there are organisational experts? I'm having the operations centre's security upgraded. A lot of the other staff are being transferred out to Basilica, with me."

Raf's attention had been summoned. "Medical team?" He asked.

"I'm getting you some AI-doctors. The last two people-doctors wanted out of here after the, well, after we almost got them killed." David made that 'grim' face and mimed an explosion with his hands. "Also, the fact that you two have physiology which makes no sense, freaked them out."

"And Summer?" Raf followed up.

"He has learned all that he can about how things work in *the real world*. He doesn't have the stomach for it. He's still helping with the running of the temple but he has been relieved of responsibility for you two."

"Keeper?" I asked. "Who's going to be in charge command here?"

David smiled again, this time he looked like he was up to something. "I have a friend, who's going to be running things. For now, Týr has the final word, if you two need a tie

breaker, okay?"

I nodded, Raf looked over at me, terrified that he may actually have to start paying attention to things.

"So, what, none of the usual staff are going to be here?" Raf asked,

"No, we're using temple members from now on. We have a lot of skilled people here who are going to waste. All Followers can be trusted. It was only Summer's paranoia that kept this place such a secret from them." David stood up and straightened his red robes. I had only then realised his robes were red. Red robes were the uniform of Basilica. He was leaving soon.

"Go do violence or something. I'll let the temple leaders know all about what goes on in the basement."

STEP THREE: PRETEND TO BE AN ADULT.

“What does this mean?” Raf asked, though it was hard to hear what he was saying through the scarf he was wearing.

“I think it may have been a promotion, of sorts,” I replied, scanner in hand.

We were back on the top of the now singular needle tower. Raf had once again worn a personal shield, which was heated, with two coats and thermal boots. He had also, this time, added a scarf, one which was ludicrously long, and trailing on the floor behind him, under his coat, because, of course, he had.

“It doesn’t feel like a promotion. I think we scared Summer away and now no-one wants to be in charge of us,” Raf said, through his scarf.

My scanner was heavy. It looked like a toolbox with an antenna. Whatever scan it was doing was making me feel nauseous with every pulse. There was no screen on it, which meant I had to keep walking around with it until Týr told me he had found something.

“Maybe now Libby can support an extra avatar she will be told about us? That would make sense,” I said, excited at the very idea of it.

“Sure, and maybe Aygah will come down from the clouds and command us herself!” Raf said, rolling his eyes. I wished there was even a possibility he was right, but she had told us herself that she couldn’t function in ‘normal’ space for more than a little while. Still, it would have been nice to have Her with us *in person*. We knew she was with us, in her abstract way as she occasionally stacked the odds in our favour. It was the only reason we were still alive.

“What do you think about him telling the entire temple

about us?" I asked.

"Means they will finally stop thinking of us a freeloading wasters."

I shrugged. "Yeah, now they will think of us as sociopaths instead, much better."

"Honestly, Ta'ra, it makes sense. He's right, there's a lot of skill in that temple that we have left untapped, and have you ever met a Follower who couldn't be totally trusted?" Raf said, being uncharacteristically wise.

I thought for a moment about all the rolled eyes I had received whenever I declined going to religious services or helping with the charity work. At least they would know my worth now.

"Týr, have you got anything yet? It's bloody freezing!" Raf yelled at the sky.

"Please stop complaining. Your vitals are well within reasonable criteria. No, at this time there is nothing on the sensor. Keep scanning. They didn't *climb* up the needle. There will be some clue to find." By Týr standards, that was outright chatty. Raf pulled a snooty face and sat down on the gravity generator indignantly.

"Lea, maybe?" I idly wondered. Lea, was the pilot on Jon's team.

"Not unless someone gives Central an engine. That's the only way she'll settle down. Besides, I didn't like her," Raf considered as he adjusted his gloves.

"The woman we met is hardly the same person she is now. It's been years, and she has been through hell and back!" I said, annoyed that Raf had changed so much, but couldn't even consider someone else could have.

"Stop," Týr said sternly.

"We're just chatting, Týr. It's hardly a security breach to chat. You're not *actually* our commander, you know!"

"No. Stop moving. The scanner picked something up. I

couldn't care less what you two are gossiping about," Týr replied, again very chatty.

I stopped strolling around the plateau and moved the scanner in wide arcs.

"What is it?" I asked.

There was no reply. Maybe his chatty phase was over. I carried on waving the scanner around. Raf shivered and stared at me, waiting for an excuse to leave, and hopefully get warm.

After a few more seconds of scanning, I was feeling abandoned.

"Týr, you want to give me a little more to go on, maybe?"

There was no reply.

"He's probably dead. I bet he's dead, or at least his batteries are. Do you think he takes batteries?" Raf pondered as he adjusted his scarf to cover even more of his face. "I'm glad he's dead, actually," he added, with a lot more sincerity than I was comfortable with.

I was about to answer, but Týr interrupted me.

"If I were dead, Raf, you would have long and very cold trip back to the temple, given that you are technically in space right now."

I couldn't help but grin. I liked Týr's new surliness. I still wondered what had changed.

"Ta'ra, the scans are complete. It took me a few seconds longer than I expected to cross-reference the data. Apologies. Please return to the temple."

The swirling blister of energy popped open and Raf almost ran towards it. All his layers made it more of a high paced waddle. I took another deep crisp breathe and looked out over the city below me. It was what we were fighting to protect. I just wished there had been a little more excitement this evening.

"Ta'ra, these portals cost me a lot of processing cycles."

* * *

We sat down at the briefing table, at the top of the portal basin. It seemed oddly quiet without Summer waiting to complain about something. I glanced at Raf who was still wrapped in his coat, though I think he had loosened his scarf a little. He looked back at me. He didn't like change any more than I did.

After a few moments, an Initiate came in. It was the bear one. It had a partially human face and dark brown fur with the occasional grey fleck. It was as tall as Raf and stocky. It was still in grey initiate robes which made it hard to assess its physique. It was carrying a tray of drinks.

"Hello Heroes!" It said with a markedly chipper, female voice. "We didn't get chance talk earlier. My name is Angela. I have been assigned to be your concierge," she said, putting the tray down on the table.

"Hot wine, sir!" she said, handing Raf a mug of something steaming. He took off his gloves and scarf and grabbed it, gleefully.

Angela, picked up a glass tankard with a large straw sticking out of the top. "Warm blood, miss."

I was a little surprised. "Blood? In a glass?" I asked, taking it and giving it a sniff. It was body temperature within a degree or two. "No one ever gives me blood in glass. I usually get a water flask and a dirty look."

Angela smiled. "The Keeper knows many things. He chose Ola'an and I to assist you because of our temperaments and skills, miss. My species are not squeamish. Your preference for blood does not bother me, nor does the levels of violence which you engage in, miss." Angela's demeanour did not match her words. She spoke like a teenager desperately trying to be polite around the adults but conducted herself like an old hand at this. I was pleased. I had worried that David had just grabbed the first batch of Initiates he had seen

walking around the temple.

"The other one?" Raf asked.

"Ola'an, has other duties."

Ola'an was a Vampire name. A classic name, like mine. "Please ask Ola'an to come and meet with me tomorrow," I asked, politely. I wanted to assess her.

Raf took a swig of wine and grinned. "I like having a concierge."

Angela grinned back at him. I had never seen a bear grin before. Actually, I had never seen a bear serve drinks either. I knew there *were* bear-races, but I had never met one.

"As uneventful as this evening was, I am happy to have an early night," I said, sipping from my straw.

Týr interrupted our congenial chat with an urgent tone. "Change of plan. The sensor data you gathered for me contained a specific energy frequency. One which I have traced to a Sol pleasure cruiser. It's in orbit and scheduled to leave Central in twenty minutes. It's at the edge of my portal range. Please investigate *now*."

Raf and I stood up, almost instantly. Raf began shedding his layers.

"Environment?" I asked.

"It's a pleasure liner," Raf said, with a raised eyebrow.

I pointed up, our shared signal for Týr.

"The cruiser is returning to a dock registered as belonging to Victoria city and themed as such. I would suggest quickly changing into appropriate attire," came the reply.

"Smart arse," Raf said.

Angela turned to leave. "I will inform the wardrobe department immediately and express the urgency."

Raf and I exchanged impressed glances.

"Do you think she shows that the wardrobe department is two robots and a delivery hatch?" Raf asked.

"Nope. I like her though. She's efficient!"

“The ship came from Victoria. Does that mean we can’t take weapons?” Raf asked, already knowing the reply.

“Just harsh words and a nice skirt!” I sighed. Humans were safety conscious and paranoid. There would be weapon sensors all over the ship.

“I’m not wearing a skirt again,” Raf said, sternly.

I finished my drink. I had a feeling I was going to be spending a lot of energy this evening.

STEP FOUR: DO THE JOB.

The portal opened in the pleasure cruiser's yacht bay. We stepped out. I wobbled for a few seconds while I waited for the room to stop spinning. Týr's portals were static, relative to his generator, which was in the basement of our temple. The ship we had just arrived on was in motion, the side effect was that, from our perspective, we had exited into a spinning room, with slightly different gravity, a fifteen degree difference in orientation and a totally artificial mix of atmosphere, which tasted like a dentist's office.

Raf's abilities had let him stay perfectly stable. He held me close while I adjusted. It only took a few seconds, but I was grateful for him.

"You good?" he asked, looking around to make sure we were alone.

"Yep... Yeah. Its stopped spinning. I'm okay," I said, as my body and my perspective synced to the ship's subjective stillness.

I flicked open my Circlet. Týr had downloaded the ship's layout to it.

"Who are we?" Raf asked.

"We're married. Reclusive socialites from Luna. All access keys and there's a note on our file to point out to all the staff that we're very important. Real first names. Last name is 'Ty,' oddly."

"Related to president Ty?" Raf asked.

"Missing from the data sheet. Intentionally, I assume. Oh, and we follow the normal Vampire culture, we're not Followers."

Raf nodded. "So, you're in charge?"

I nodded back.

The culture of my people was very much rooted in social subtlety. Vampires were, for the most part a nice bunch of people, but the last name on our cover identity was a Vampire name. This would tell anyone who knew that my *husband*, who was not a Vampire, had taken my name and they would know that despite my lack of wings, I had a dynasty to protect. I would be respected.

Týr would make sure all the database searches people would instantly perform would check out, for the next few hours at least. Týr generated full personas when he created a cover for us.

I was wearing a tartan yellow miniskirt with matching jacket and a slightly less yellow vest. I had finished the outfit with large laces on baseball boots and white knee-length socks. We had little time. I had put my long black hair up in a ponytail and fixed it with a thick yellow ribbon. I looked ridiculous and clashed with my own pale skin; but this was the fashion of wealthy humans, and this *was* a ship for wealthy humans.

Raf had done a little better with an oversized red tee-shirt and an equally oversized black dress-shirt on top, left open to look 'cool.' He had rolled up the sleeves and put on a large plastic Circlet. He wore flared blue jeans and trainers. Okay, maybe he didn't get off any better, but at least his comparatively tanned skin let the whole thing look, at least reasonable, whereas I looked like a sexy banana.

"Okay Týr, what's the plan?" I asked. We had gone from the briefing table to the ship in under ten minutes. We hadn't had time to talk about what we were even supposed to be doing once we arrived.

"The sensor data has led me to believe that whatever shuttle was used to get the wolves to the Needle Tower undetected is currently at the top level of the cruiser. There is nothing about

it in their records, so head up," Týr instructed. We slipped on sunglasses and used our Circlets interfaces to generate an overlay map towards the closest stairwell out.

"Why did you open a portal here? If this is the recreational vehicle bay, it's on the bottom deck, isn't it?" Raf asked.

"This was the only place you would likely not be seen at this time of night. This is the peak socialising time for the cruise."

"What about the top deck shuttle bay?" I asked.

There was moments silence. "There is no record of a secondary shuttle bay. I have checked all the schematics of the cruiser and the live internal sensors. There is a void in my data on the top deck." Týr sounded worried.

We opened the double doors at the far end of the yacht bay and were instantly bathed in the dazzling lights of the corridor. There was *very human* pop music playing through all the speakers. We closed the doors behind us and headed for an elevator, which was marked on our map as directly ahead.

"No people. That's good. Makes it easier," I observed.

"No people here because they are all partying," Raf replied.

"Good, not our problem."

Raf laughed. "Check your map."

We stepped into the elevator. The music was louder.

"We have to go through the observation deck. That's fine, isn't it?" I asked.

"It's a cruise ship. Where do you think the parties happen?" Raf asked, looking at me like I had never been to a party. He wasn't wrong.

I pressed for the observation deck, which logically *was* going to be close to the top deck.

Raf started tapping his foot to the terrible song.

"I think I've heard this one," He said.

The doors opened.

A redhead dressed like a go-go-dancer was making out with a short, unattractive man in the corridor. They saw us, giggled and vanished into a room. We ignored them.

I checked the map again. Some people walked past laughing and carrying bottles of wine. "Come on, we're getting trashed before the stars smear!" one of the drunk men at the back yelled, waving for us to follow.

Raf adjusted his sleeves and took my arm. "Got a character in mind this evening?" He asked.

"Less than faithful marriage of convenience with a dash of resentment?" I suggested.

"Mid argument!" Raf added.

"Wondering eye?"

"I'll stare at every pretty girl I see!" he replied. He loved this part of our job. He was good at it, too. Raf was likeable, dry and funny. I was better at aloof and cold, but that could have just been because I was a Vampire.

We followed the party of, well, partiers out to the observation deck.

I could almost feel the awe hit me as I stepped out there. I knew this was a premium cruise, but I did not expect the observation deck to be open to space. There must have been three hundred people out there. There were tables set up all round a dance floor. Which lit up in neon blue as people walked across it. I assumed it was a Glass energy shield, which kept the air and heat in, but it looked amazing. I really felt like I was standing on the outside of the ship.

"Wow!" I said, looking up at the planet. The purple glow of Central Prime hanging in space like a precious gem made for a daunting and imposing vista.

"It's beautiful!" I said, quite awestruck by it.

There were people dancing and sitting at little tables with white cloths covering them. There were multiple ornate robot servers who were made to look mechanical with moving cogs

and wheels. They had bow ties on, too, which just looked silly. They zipped around with drinks on trays. The pop music was still playing. The speakers must have been concealed under the dance floor.

"You know, it's up there every night. You can just look up," Raf noted.

"We don't all have your eyes. Where's the door?"

Raf checked his Circler. A group of men came in behind us. They looked like they could have been in a boy band.

"Hey there! How did I not notice you before?" one of the men asked. The others stopped and turned. I felt like a shuttle being surrounded by attack drones.

"You want to party?" He asked me.

Before I could answer, there was a klaxon sound and a click as a voice spoke through the speakers. "Attention travellers. This is your captain speaking. We are now making the transition to T.D speeds. Please enjoy the show and remember, we will be exiting Vampire controlled space in half an hour." There was another klaxon. Everyone, including the predator who was trying to chat me up, looked to space. The ship rumbled, in a quite concerning way for a moment and then the stars spread across space. As they did, they rotated around us as and blurred a purple and green.

Týr's voice whispered into my ear. It was choppy and filled with static, which was not only unusual, but totally new. "Heroes. Please be aware, I can not maintain a reliable link with you while you are travelling at faster than lights speeds. I'll resume monitoring as soon as possible."

That was interesting. I wasn't aware he had such a limitation. It was worrying, but, not as worrying as those stars.

"Raf, stars are supposed to shift, or at least tint red or blue at T.D speeds?" I noted to him. He was still looking at them. I had a feeling he was using his magnificent vision to get some

additional information for me.

"Oh, she's smart too!" The predator of a man said. I had almost forgotten about him.

"I'm with my husband, and despite his lack of faithfulness, I have no intention of bedding any of you! Now shoo, go away," I said, in a snooty nasal tone. I had copied it from a rude lady I once overheard complaining about her coffee in an art gallery.

"Fuck you, copse! You're not my type anyway!" he shouted, gesturing at me in a less than polite way. One of the other men was checking his Circlet. After a few seconds of me staring him down, his friend got his attention and showed him the screen. They scurried off. They had checked the passenger manifest and our cover story had identified us as rather impressively connected in a way he hadn't expected.

"Thanks for the backup there partner," I said, lightly punching Raf in the arm.

"What?" He asked. Whatever he had been looking at had got all his attention.

"He called me a 'corpse,' I've not heard that one in decades! Even Human *slang* is retro," I said.

He didn't answer me.

"Never mind. What did you see?"

He screwed up his face thoughtfully. "This isn't a T.D Drive. The energy is almost ethereal. It's not like anything I've seen before."

That was worrying.

"Where now? Before we get any more attention?" I asked.

Raf was good with maps. He could memorise them with little more than a glance. A trait common to Elves.

"Týr plotted a route that takes us up from here, to the private viewing area, then through a service tube up and out of his mapped area," he said, gesturing to a door to the side of us, marked as 'restricted.'

I took off my sunglasses and wished I had a blaster, or at least a knife, with me.

Rather than trying to slip out through a restricted door and hope no one was looking, we opted for the camouflage of arrogance.

"Robot, excuse me, Robot!" I yelled, snapping my fingers at the closest server. I didn't like being rude to robots. If they ever emerged into lifeforms, they would remember me.

"How may I help you?" it asked as it came over, lowering its tray. I took a glass, so did Raf.

"My good man, bot, thing. My wife is mad at me and I told her I would make it up to her by getting her access to the private area above. Can you open the door, please?" Raf asked. I recognised this character he was trying. It was a perfect impression of his old self. The one before Aygah had changed him. *That* Raf was infuriating, and pompous. I didn't like this character.

I giggled and pretended to be a tipsy. "We want some privacy, mister robot!" I gulped whatever was in the glass and returned it empty to the tray.

"I am sorry, but that area is restricted to the captain and his guests. It is not publicly accessible."

"Well, I suggest you make sure you know who you are talking to, and perhaps check with an actual person!" Raf said, in an almost threatening tone.

The robot tilted its head, which was a common gesture. It was how they told people they were 'thinking.' It was likely scanning us and relaying the message to the security office.

The door popped open behind us.

"Good," Raf said, sternly.

"Oh, and mister robot, please tell whomever you tell these things to, that my husband and I expect some privacy. And we expect privacy from scanners too," I added prodding his head with one hand and grabbing Raf's rear with the other.

After a second or two the robot replied. "Your privacy has been guaranteed, Mrs Ty. Please enjoy your evening."

We stepped through the door. And closed it behind us.

We arrived onto a luxurious, small mezzanine which overlooked the dance floor. The moment we had closed the door below, a Fold had teleported us upward. Convenient *and* impressive. This was likely to impress the VIP guests. As well as prevent unauthorised visits. We had done there right thing not trying to sneak in.

"Did you hear what Týr said?" I asked, referring to us being without him for a time.

"Yeah, I heard. Worrying isn't it?" Raf replied.

We may have been in tight spots before, but we always had his watchful eye, getting ready to generate an exit for us. Also, we hadn't had a mission take us off-world before. Central was our home.

I think we were both a little unsettled at being so far from the neon soup that we had grown to love.

We automatically checked the area for surprises. The overlook was only about fifteen meters across. There was a large hot tub sunk into the deck and four reclining chairs. Not that you would sunbathe in space. There was also a table surface slightly off the floor with a delivery hatch in the centre. The back wall was white, like the rest of the ship's walls, but it had a holographic beach projected onto it. Cute, fake and annoyingly Human.

I sat at the table and ordered a bottle of wine and chocolates.

"Now is not the time for snacks, Ta'ra!" Raf said as he checked the wall for sensors and cameras.

"If someone is paying attention, I want it to look like we're going to be here for a while."

"Oh, that's actually a good idea! Check the timed delivery

option for drugs," he said. "Should be available in just under half an hour. That should sell it."

"Raf, this is a Human pleasure cruse, not a... never mind, you're right!"

Raf laughed. "Humans live on the safest planet in the galaxy. The only reason they want to travel deep space is to get away from safety. That's why the captain's announcement was so specific about it."

I was impressed. I wouldn't have picked up on that.

"You see any cameras?" I asked. Noticing that he had stopped staring at things intently.

"Yeah. There are twelve. They are all powered down. They are honouring our privacy," he said, looking over the padded rail down to the main observation deck we had just left.

I wasn't sure how he could 'see' if a camera had power or not, but I knew he wouldn't go into great detail even if I asked him. He had always been oddly evasive about his powers, and their specifics, but I believed him.

"Okay, and can you *see* if the service hatch is alarmed?" I asked, gesturing to the area of the wall where I assumed the hatch to be.

"No need. It's not covered." He said, sticking his arm into the vista of the beach about a meter up the wall.

That was a very Human solution to a problem. Why add a hatch to a wall that always had a hologram on it? I respected Human utilitarianism. It was just the rest of the culture I loathed. The drinks and glasses appeared on the table. I moved them off the table so they wouldn't block the delivery of drugs in a little while.

"Well, get in there. I'll be right behind you," I poked.

STEP FIVE: FIGHT A DRAGON.

The service tube was longer than either of us expected. There were other crawl spaces forking from it in multiple directions. We turned a few times and followed the 'assumed' map that Týr had preloaded into our Circlets. The tunnel eventually opened a little wider to give us room to stand and access a ladder.

The climb felt like it was taking us up a lot further than the couple of decks which were on the schematics. It would likely have been quite a slog if it weren't for Raf's friendly relationship with gravity. As it was, it felt like a glide more than a climb. We went on in total silence. We were in the mood to work now, not play. We would only be speaking if it was related to our work. I had a bad feeling in my gut and I was pretty sure that Raf did too.

The climb ended. We continued across a tunnel, which we could almost fully stand in, until the walls receded, and we were entering the access walkway at the top of a hangar. Týr was right. Before we entered, we stopped and checked the map. The actual route we had taken varied a great deal from the 'best guess' that Týr has made. It was very unusual for him to be this wrong. We were well inside the area that was 'probably a secondary shuttle bay,' on his notes.

The area opened up and it took me a moment of looking to understand what I was seeing. There, below us, was a large shape. It was moving in a coil and had a lot of wires and conduits attached to it in what appeared to be quite brutal ways. I stared for a moment longer. We were at the top of a large room, on a maintenance catwalk. Though, I may have realised sooner had it not been that I was distracted by what was below us.

"Raf," I whispered softly.

"Yes, Ta'ra," he replied, without emotion.

"Is that a fucking dragon?"

"You know, I think it may be."

"Well, fuck."

I don't know what I was thinking at that moment. It was probably, 'run,' or perhaps, 'get a photo, then run.' What never once crossed my mind was, 'fight a dragon, with no weapons, no backup and no exit.'

"It's seen us!" Raf said, at almost the same time that the coiling motion I was observing sprung into an attack. It was fast, so fast that I had burst into smoke before I had even processed the movement. I felt it pass through me for a few seconds before I reformed, falling through the air.

The dragon was huge, it was dragon sized. from where I was looking, which was the air above it, and falling fast, I could tell a few things about it. It was all body. Like a snake and it was as big as a mid-sized starship. Its legs were short comparatively, and the front ones were about ten meters down its large greenish body, on its back where wings small, small being the size of ancient ship sails and, despite my knowledge of physics, were actually *not* too small to be of use. They had lifted its front portion off the ground enough to attack our walkway with ease. Its back portion, I noticed, was still coiled below me. It was clear now that the next of cables were attached to that end. The rest of the room was a bare cargo space, which I briefly considered being inhumane for a dragon enclosure.

I had then realised that the fact that I had time to chronicle all of these dragon facts was proof that my partner in action was still very much alive and, thankfully, not dragon food.

I burst into bats a moment before I hit the ground. My

swarm spread across the body of the dragon. I could see all of it from thirty different angles at once. I picked the side of the room by a door to reform. The dragon ignored me.

After being smoke, then bats, I was already low on energy. I tapped my body for more of the power in my blood.

It was snapping in the air at Raf, who was quite literally running around the top of the room, I assumed as a distraction. He would be able to see where I was, and knew I would need time to get the door open. I flicked my Circlet out and a mighty roar almost burst my ears, I glanced back to see that the furry mane which ran down the head and neck of the green and grey beast was glowing red. I scanned the door. The interface software wasn't very useful. Usually Týr would assist the hacking and any door I pointed it at would open after just a moment. This was actually showing me a counter and some data points which I had never bothered learning how to interpret. I missed Týr suddenly.

There were clangs and bashing sounds that I was vaguely aware of. The dragon was smacking its body on the walls, trying to crush Raf. I ignored it. Raf was scrappy and, likely, far more dexterous than a dragon.

A dragon. I was in the same room as a bloody dragon! You don't expect that on a pleasure cruise!

"Ta'ra!" Raf yelled. I knew what that meant. I leaned forward against the wall and lowered down, I pushed with blood assisted strength and slid myself away from the door. The dragon's sizeable mouth filled the space where I was a moment prior. Its mane now glowing like a fire across its back.

I instinctively reached for a gun I didn't have. There was a gentle tap on the floor next to me as Raf landed.

"I didn't expect a dragon!" He said, out of breath.

"I was just thinking the same thing," I replied as he helped me up.

"Bio-energy is accumulating for a release, and that door isn't going to open any time soon," he replied.

"Bait it and let it make an exit?" I suggested.

"Worth a try," he replied.

We ran in opposite directions as the dragon's body shot towards us like a missile. I burned some energy to keep up with Raf and we met back by the door. The dragon was lining up for a new attack run. It's glowing mane now smoking.

"Ready?" He asked.

"I got you, old man. Don't tense up."

The dragon shot towards us and I burned a lot of my reserve. Time slowed to a crawl in my perception. I let it get close enough that I could touch it before I moved. I punched it in the nose, with as much power as I could spare. The nose, which was as big as a shuttle, rippled in slow motion. I then used the last moment of my speed, grabbing Raf by the scruff of his jacket and jumping out of the way.

My perception snapped back to normal, and the fatigue hit me like a truck, or dragon, I suppose.

Raf pushed on gravity and put an arm around me as we accelerated across the room.

The dragon's charged energy was released in front of it, in reaction to the epic nose boop which I had given it before it had realised we were gone.

The area which contained the door melted under its fire. Whatever was on the other side of the door was likely also melted.

The dragon shook off its confusion, assumed it had got us, and slithered forward. Stubby legs complying behind it. It tugged its back end as the cables attached to it tried to anchor its escape. After a few seconds the cabled ripped free with a spray of unexpectedly orange blood, and then it finished its egress out of the hole it had created. The hole had not only removed the person sized door but also most of the larger

cargo door which it had been fixed in.

There were fresh sounds to worry about but not ones which we were prepared to deal with.

“Ta’ra, I can see Wolves. We need to move!” Raf almost screamed at me.

While I could stay in a normal fight longer than most people, between hyper speed, bats, smoke and a nose boop, which would have cracked a mountain, I had run out of stamina. Also, our lack of weapons made me consider it was time to make like a dragon and leave.

I forced the last drop of energy I had out and gave myself enough of a shot to function. I was tapped out.

Raf gave me a nudge with his abilities and made me lighter, which helped more than I think he realised. I always wondered how his abilities never seemed to run dry.

The white hot edge of the cargo door began to cool and the glow died down.

There was a lot of movement and probably toxic metal fumes in the air. The other side of the door was a lot nicer than our cargo bay. It was an operation centre of some kind. There were tables and workstations and people. Or at least there were those things before we let a dragon out.

The frantic movement was not that of panicked civilians though, it was the battle-cries of wolves, and a dragon, locked in combat.

One thing was for sure, the dragon liked the wolf people even less than it had liked us. It wasn’t playfully murdering them in the way it was trying to with us. It was biting and snapping and roaring in ways which told me that it meant business.

“Wait for it to kill them!” I suggested.

“What about all the rich humans? a few decks down?” Raf asked.

“Collateral?” I asked.

Raf gave me a disapproving look. We headed through the doorway.

It was a massacre. There eight meat piles that I assumed were previously Wolf people. Five more were crawling over the dragon with claws and teeth wildly in play.

We need to find a way to stop this," Raf said sternly.

The Wolf shaped splats of meat began to twitch and reform into less splat-like, more Wolf-like shapes as we watched.

Now we had a better look at the room we could tell that it wasn't just a control centre. There were beds across the left wall and an ornate table with strange collections of rocks to the right. The middle section was clear, aside from a row of wooden statues strewn across the floor. Each statue was about a foot tall and the dragon had taken a lot of care to knock them over. I followed the line across and realised the far wall hosted a device of some kind.

"There," I declared and started heading towards it. One of the Wolf shaped meat piles was starting to form a face. The dragon must have filled a quarter of the room. The wolves had obviously seen us, however, they quite literally, had bigger problems than the two of us.

If only you could explain to a dragon that you had to mash the bloody wolves to kill them, a simple beating wouldn't to the job.

"What is it?" Raf asked.

I leaned against the wall and started looking at the odd collection of stones which were set up on a table. The large device on the wall above us looked like something reminiscent of a shield generator, but it was made of glass and filled part way with blue liquid.

"Did you notice the dragon hasn't attacked the wall?" I asked as I tried to work out what the strange magical looking devices were.

The dragon's tail flicked past us. It recoiled a little as it

came near the wall.

I inspected the glass structure again. Its ornate glass tubes were connected, it appeared sealed. There was no power to it, or control mechanism. No visible technology at all. The device, *and I was sure it was a device of some kind*, was created from five glass tubes all coming together at a point, attached to a large metal disk which was reflective. It looked like an antique, but it was clean and the liquid had a slight glow to it.

The Wolves were persistent. Eventually, the dragon would charge its bio energy again and fry them, *or* it would be overwhelmed by the repeated waves of seemingly un-killable enemies.

Raf was standing guard behind me, not that anyone or anything was interested in us, yet.

"Raf, the dragon," I realised, "There must be a relation between the dragon and this artefact. Its door is directly in front of the thing's only exit!" I said, suddenly convinced that it was related to how they got it into the ship.

"We don't want to stop the dragon Ta'ra, it's the only thing keeping the dogs entertained," Raf yelled back at me, over the screams and howls.

"Well, we have to try something!" I replied.

"No, we don't! We need to find a way out!" Raf replied, eagerly staring at a door which had a dragon, and many wolves in the way. "We can make it. I'm pretty sure we can make it!"

I pulled my Circlet off and set it to overload. I shoved it into Raf's hand and pointed at the glass device, "Throw this, at that!" I demanded, with no room for arguing.

He looked unconvinced, but did as I asked. The Circlet landed on the thin point where the arms of the glass met. It was a good throw, even for Raf.

"Was yours set to scan?" I asked.

"Obviously," he replied, calmly using his powers to push

away the energy blast which exploded from the overloaded Circlet. I saw him wince. He was using a lot of energy. Whatever it was which powered him, his battery was likely going to be low after generating enough gravity to push away an explosion.

The blast only lasted a moment before the energy changed direction. It was being absorbed by the base of the structure. Red and blue energy swirled between the arms of the glass. The liquid turned from blue to green, briefly, before it pulsed out of it.

Something very much like a portal opened in the middle of the room. The moment it stabilised, it cleared into a gaping hole in the air, the hole showing space. Everything around us started being sucked into it. Everything except us. Raf's hands were out to each side, the strain on his face was clearly visible.

There was a 'whoop' sound as each wolf was torn from the back of the dragon. Then, the furniture and the wooden statues were sucked into space. After a few seconds, once all the air was out of the room, the pulling stopped as the pressure equalised. Raf released his grip and fell to his knees. I looked at the dragon, which looked back, confused for a moment and then almost swam out of the portal.

A second or so after, the swirling hole lost its stabilisation and blinked shut. The life support system adjusted and things in the now empty room stabilised.

"What the fuck just happened?" Raf asked.

I lay on the floor and looked up at the cracked and broken glass device.

Raf lay down next to me.

"Are you two okay?" Came Týr's voice in our ears.

"Oh, finally ready to lend a hand, are you?" Raf snarked.

"How are you talking to us?" I asked. Exhausted.

"A shift in pressure caused the cruiser's captain to drop

out of T.D speed, into normal space. You have travelled a lot further than I expected. As soon as the ship stopped, I hacked the ship and disabled its star drive," Týr announced.

"Couldn't have done that when we were still around central, no?" I asked.

"We had a cover to maintain. I assume from the sudden pressure issues, you have retrieved intel for us?"

Raf and glanced at each other. "Sort of," I said.

"Excellent. If you would care to locate an escape pod, I will arrange for a follower transport to come and collect you, the cruiser will be on its way again soon, I assume."

"Wow, thanks, that sounds luxurious," Raf said sarcastically.

MISSION 3

STEP ONE: YES, DRAGONS ARE REAL.

We finally made it to the group of arguing people. Though they had dispersed a little, an Elf man and a Vampire woman with no wings remained. They were getting quite heated.

"Excuse me?" I said.

They continued the arguments.

"Hey," I tried.

They ignored me. - Denouement.

I woke up, in my own bed. I had thought I heard something. Light was streaming in through the window. I hated the light. I could tolerate it; It wasn't like I would burst into flames if direct sunlight touched me, but I didn't like it. It unnerved me in the same way the darkness affects most other people.

I slapped the button on my nightstand and the windows tinted dark enough to make me feel better.

I sat up, despite the blood top-up and cure-all, I still felt like crap. It had taken us hours to get back to Central undetected. The whole way, we had to listen to Týr rabbit on about how he didn't know dragons were real. It was nice that he was talking to us more, but also, I had a feeling it was more so that we would realise what a big-deal it was. Eventually we were collected by a Follower transport and as soon as we were in range of Central, Týr opened a portal for us.

We dropped off Raf's Cirplet, with its detailed scans, and I went home to bed. I reached for my own Cirplet to check the time, then I flashed back to the events of the previous night. I sighed to myself, it had been a close call.

The bell chimed again. That would have been the sound

which woke me, I realised. I grabbed a robe and wandered to the door. I picked up a small sidearm and held it behind me as I barked, "Open,"

The door did as it was told. I put the gun down again.

"Hello, Hero Ta'ra," Ola'an said. Her voice lacked the usual crispness of accent. It was uncommon for my people to lose their accents. She sounded like she had been raised off world; her tone reminded me of the Brick people.

I sized her up as she stepped into the room. She had the elegance and poise of someone from the more refined Vampire families. From the way she held herself, and specifically the lack of control she had on her tightly tucked wings, I assumed she was younger than me.

She was delicate looking, like me. She was shorter than average, like me. She seemed to be already judging me with her pale red eyes. Mine were deeper than hers. Her hair was short; mine was long. She was pale though, really pale. Her skin was perfect, milky and smooth. She wore her Initiate robes with a sash, making sure to highlight her figure as well as she was able. This was the confirmation I needed to be certain that she was from the upper echelons of Vampire society. She was still judging me. I could feel it.

The door slid closed behind her.

"Ola'an, take a seat. You want a drink?" I asked. I didn't wait for an answer, I had already pressed the button on the food hatch for my usual breakfast coffee, black and far too strong.

She sat on the stool next to the counter which divided the living area of my small apartment from the more kitchen themed side. I never assembled my own meals; this was Central and the Follower temple paid my bills. I had the food hatch deliver everything I wanted.

"Coffee is fine, Hero," she replied. Yeah, that accent was Brick, I was sure of it.

“You don’t need to be so formal. Ta’ra is fine. None of this ‘Hero’ stuff, it’s not like Followers have ranks. Milk? Sugar?”

She adjusted her robes. She wasn’t used to wearing them. She was a new Initiate, it would seem. “No, just as it comes, please.”

I tapped for a repeat of my own coffee, it appeared in the hatch a moment later and I handed it to her.

She put it down in front of herself on the counter and looked at it with great interest. I had a feeling she was avoiding looking at me.

I ruffled my hair. I probably looked a mess. I was covered in bruises and scratches from the fight, and I hadn’t yet spent any energy on healing. The silken black night-gown I was wearing was draped around me, open, and she had no doubt noticed my functional undergarments. I didn’t care. After the night I survived, it seemed unimportant.

I sat down on the other side of the counter, not quite opposite her.

“Angela told me you had requested a meeting with me,” she stopped herself before addressing me as ‘Hero.’

“Well, I wanted to meet with you, but I didn’t expect you to turn up at my apartment, Ola’an.”

I sipped my coffee with both hands and took stock of her.

“Well... Ta’ra... I hoped you would allow me the small favour of privacy, if you are going to banish me,” she said, without looking up.

“Banish you? Why would I banish you? I’m not even sure I have that much authority!” I was stunned by the very idea.

There was silence.

“Well, fill me in, or do I have to order you to?” I asked.

Ola’an looked up, tears pooling in her eyes, her dignity not letting them release. This was likely as emotional as someone with her breeding would get.

“Ta’ra, I have only been an Initiate for six weeks. I gained

many skills before I joined, but the way of the Follower is still very new to me. I had the privilege to meet the Great Family, purely by chance, the day I put on the robes. The Keeper stopped and looked at me with great interest. He told me he knew I was coming, and that my history with, *well, I won't go into that*, would be useful. He transferred my training to the Temple. Then I was briefed about you and your mission and told I was to work with you. I don't know why he would do this, I told him, as soon as I read your file, that it wouldn't work."

I was no less confused than I was before she started speaking. It was odd that David would bring someone who wasn't even a trained Initiate to the temple. But David did a lot of strange things. It was his job.

"And why would I banish you? If the Keeper wants you here, I can't really argue with him, even if I did have a reason. He's the boss."

Ola'an looked terrified still. "Because... My name is Ola'an KI!"

I looked at her blank. I had a rough idea what that meant, but I didn't really know how to process it.

She obviously knew I wasn't quite following yet. Her tears leaked from her eyes against her will. "You have not spoken with your father since he and your mother parted ways. Your father re-married twenty-six years ago. I am your half sister, Ta'ra."

I was stunned. Stunned for so many reasons. Firstly, my dad was an arse hole. Second, I was legally dead, and had been for many years now. I was not allowed to contact him, or my mother, who wanted nothing to do with me when I was legally alive, anyway.

"Who is your mother?" I heard myself ask, with spite and suppressed anger.

She hesitated. I understood why. I wasn't just 'Hero Ta'ra,'

I was cold as ice, killer by design, Ta'ra. And I was chosen by the Goddess herself for the task of violence; violence which most Followers felt was unthinkable.

"Reb'ca Qk," She said, with an apology in her eyes.

"Get out."

"I don't see the problem," Raf said, as we walked into the main door of the temple.

Usually we were a bit more guarded about our entrance, but now everyone in there seemed to know what we did. We had to face them sooner or later. We had decided that the longer we left it, the more awkward things would be.

"What do you mean, you don't see the problem? My dad left my mom, then shacked up with the single most infamous criminal that my planet ever produced! And had a kid. A kid who I now have to work with!"

Raf wasn't wearing Follower robes, for once. He was wearing a pair of orange jeans and a green thin-weave jumper. I had meant to ask him about that. I was in jean-shorts and a tank top. We had stopped for iced coffee on the way. We did not look at all like Followers, which was likely some subconscious rebellion to our first day not being pariahs.

"I don't see how you didn't know about this, to be honest Ta'ra," Raf said as we were interrupted by the sight of the temple leadership, lined up outside the large domed building.

The holographic fire was set to white, which signified important visitors.

Five figures looked menacing in their white robes. The red stitching on the edges being the only real signifier of rank, if you could call it that. They had more responsibility, really, not any extra clout. Followers only followed the Keeper and the Goddess. The rest was out of mechanical necessity.

We stopped in front of them. I briefly wondered if I would need my gun. The late afternoon sun dimly lit the scene like it was about to be the start of some kind of mad ritual.

"Follower Ta'ra Kl. Follower Rafio of Silva," a commanding voice said as one of the leaders stepped forward.

We both stood up straight. We didn't know what else to do. A crowd of Followers began appearing around the entrance.

"The Keeper has informed the wider temple of what goes on in our basement," the booming man said, as he unhooded himself to reveal a bald man. He was a member of the Brick race and sported a rich beard, which denoted that he had been alive for a long time, in Brick culture.

"We, the leaders of this temple, want to make clear to you. We do not endorse your methods."

Raf leaned towards me a little.

"Say something," he said out of the corner of his mouth.

"Why me?" I mumbled back.

"You're in charge, aren't you?"

"I thought *you* were," I replied as he shoved me forward a step.

"Yeah, sorry about that," I bellowed, more by accident than intention.

The man nodded at us, "While we don't like it. It is the will of the Goddess, as given to us by the Keeper. Keep your mess in the basement," he said. He turned, the leadership stormed off behind him. *Very theatrical.*

"That went well," Raf observed.

I slurped my coffee at him.

As we headed into the Temple, we were surrounded by Followers, all looking at us in awe. We stopped in the entry hall.

"What?" Raf asked. Looking at them all with his best *annoyed* face.

The bulk of the Temple was underground and the entry hall was a church-like wooden structure with a curved staircase leading down to the lower levels, where there was a very big door leading to the wider Temple. This was the public face of the Follower religion. I had never seen so many people in there. Usually it was just outsiders asking what we did and sometimes children of Followers playing.

After staring at us for a few seconds, they started clapping.

"What's happening, Raf?" I asked.

"I think they like us now," he replied.

The clapping died down.

"Is it true that you can turn into bats, Hero Ta'ra?" a woman asked.

I motioned to answer.

"And you drink blood?" another added.

"Raf, you can fly?"

Raf laughed at that one.

"Well, I think it may be story time, Ta'ra," Raf said, sitting down on a wooden bench seat. They all gathered around as Raf began telling them about our exploits. It all looked quite odd. A bunch of people in robes gathering around a man who looked like fell out of a night club, still sipping iced coffee from a straw.

This was not the validation I was looking for. But I didn't want to seem like I was being difficult, so I burst into bats and flew down the stairs. They whooped and clapped.

I reformed as soon as I was at the bottom. It looked cool, but I didn't want to burn through all my stored energy on showing off.

There was a single follower sitting at one of the tables in the room below. The door to the wider complex was open, which was unusual.

The figure looked up. It was Ola'an.

"Can we talk? Properly now. I think I can be more

reasonable," I asked.

"I would like that very much," she replied.

STEP TWO: ZOO VISIT.

Týr had traced the lineage of the cruise ship, the one that contained the dragon, and he had some interesting notes for us.

There were some questions about the ship's construction logs. The company that manufactured the engine had records of sending a complete flight system, but the dimensions of the shipment were far larger than Týr thought they had any need to be. While the ship had been assembled in the Sol shipyard, the Central system had the largest manufacturers of advanced flight systems. The manufacturer kept offices on the south coast of the second continent of Central Prime.

We sat at our briefing table as Týr explained the scope of the events to us. Angela brought us snacks and listened with great interest.

"So, this is going to be a recon mission? Get in, see what we can learn and leave?" Raf confirmed.

"I simply deliver information to you, I am not your commander, Raf," Týr said, for the third time since the meeting began.

"And when *will* a new commander arrive? Me nor Raf are qualified to make these decisions. Can we get Summer back for a bit?" I asked.

Angela made a noise.

Raf and I looked at her expectantly.

"Spill, or I get a new rug!" Raf demanded, pointing a cake fork at her.

She hesitated.

I glared.

"Follower Summer was the one who briefed the leadership about all the violence which is a part of your calling. They

were *as* unsettled as he always has been. They have demanded that the Keeper deal with you." She looked apologetic. "They have given Summer light duties to make up for all he has been through."

"All that he's been through! Honestly! It was that idiot that brought a bomb back to operations!" Raf grumbled.

"Týr, is the new commander on the way?" I asked the air.

Týr sounded annoyed. "I have been told that a commander is assigned. However, whomever it is, is taking longer to arrive because they are trying to get here without my knowledge. I have been looking at the records of all Follower movements closely and as yet, I have been alluded."

"Why?" Raf asked.

"The Keeper wants to know how hard it is to avoid my oversight. This is an experiment. He said that I should think of it as a learning experience."

"Exciting!" Angela added. Despite her entertained grin, we ignored her.

"Okay Týr, open a portal as close as you can. We'll scope it out," I said, checking I had my sidearm and dagger. Raf checked his throwing knives. We strolled down to the portal basin.

We were already suited for action by then. Me in my tight black jumpsuit, hair tied up. Raf was in combat leathers and had knife belts in about every place that was practical. He had a high-precision sidearm on his belt, something more sophisticated than my pocket-shotgun. He was certain that it was the silver plating on my blade which killed the one wolf we had defeated and as such, he had sourced knives of different alloys, in hopes of finding a 'really killy one.'

"Your actually hoping for wolves aren't you?" I asked as we stood in front of the portal wall.

"Oh, like you're not! After the last fiasco!"

I shrugged. He was right.

* * *

The offices were on the south of the planet, warm. Not too warm, but warm. It was an hour before dawn there. Our city was a much more north of where we were. This one was too warm most of the time. This place would be like an oven once the daytime took hold. It attracted a lot of Elves. Elves liked warmth. There were no real delineations in the cities. They were all just addresses. It was so quick to travel that planets as dense Central didn't bother with anything more than district designations.

We had exited our portal on top of a building reasonably close to where we were investigating.

"Really? You couldn't get us any closer?" Raf complained.

"It is as close as I could deliver you. Do you know how much of an energy spike portals cause? I had to disable over twenty scanning systems on three different local structures to get you this close," Týr replied.

"Why do we never arrive a top of the building we want to get into?" he chimed back.

"Because I don't want you missing details on approach."

Raf shook his head in annoyance. I was still entertained by Týr's recent attitude shift. He was far more willing to engage in this mild sparring now. It was like he had decided he liked us... or didn't. I wasn't sure.

We looked over the edge of the building. It was a business park, of sorts. There were very few people milling around, and those that were looked to be the evening security and janitorial staff. There were also a few automated drones zipping around. Týr made sure we were invisible to them. It was just people we needed to worry about.

"What do you think?" Raf asked.

"No reason to overcomplicate things. We want to look around. Let's just hit the ground level and take a walk."

The buildings were not close together. There was a small

shuttle parking area between us and the closest one. Had it been more dense, we would have gone from rooftop to rooftop to reach our destination.

Raf took an long, careful look around as a surface shuttle left the parking area below.

"Okay, it's clear. Stay close," he said.

We stepped over the edge of the building. Raf adjusted the gravity. It felt like we were running down a slope. Stopping was always a problem; as we got close to the ground level, I got close to him. He put his arm around me and pushed away from the building's face while pushing back against the natural pulling of gravity. I burst into smoke just before we hit the ground and reformed a moment later next to him.

"We weren't even going that fast! That wouldn't have hurt Summer!" Raf complained.

"You know I can't help it. It's a reflex," I replied.

Turning to smoke happened whenever a large impact was about to hit me. It was quite literally automatic, and a source of some annoyance when I didn't need to spend the energy. Though it never cost me a lot. Bats I could control. Smoke, that was a mystery to me.

"Can anyone see us?" I asked.

Raf took another look around. "No. Assuming Týr has all the cameras under his watch, we should be fine if we stick to building perimeters."

The buildings here were a lot smaller than the ones on our side of the planet. Our's was a port; people were coming and going all the time. This was was just a bunch of offices and very little else. They were all ornately decorated with curated trees and water features, each company trying to look as well-to-do as possible. Most of the buildings were labs, data centres, and meeting rooms. High-technology labs were some of the only things that still required people. No matter how much AIs and NOLFs took over, there was a flair of creativity

which only people could muster, with a few exceptions of course.

"It's a nice night," Raf said as we strolled.

"Yeah and if we weren't both armed to the teeth, and up to no good, maybe we could enjoy it."

"I bet Pe'ter would like a nice walk under the moonlight," Raf teased.

"Peter, probably would, yes," I replied.

"How is Pe'ter," he asked, nosy and snarky at the same time. Classic Raf.

"We have only had one date, and he seems very nice."

Raf stopped and crouched. I followed his lead. A security guard walked past, casually scanning the area.

"I have removed you from all local scanning devices," Týr said into our heads.

"Doesn't mean that fella can't see us," Raf whispered back.

The security guard was of a younger race. He was green and muscular. His shirt was unbuttoned.

"That was closer than I would have liked," I noted.

There was a scream in the direction the guard had just passed in.

"Not our problem," I said sternly. "We have a mission."

Raf looked at me, annoyed.

The guard screamed again. "Well, as you keep telling me you're not in charge," Raf said. He sprinted back around the corner.

"Týr, keep the exit primed. I have a feeling we may need it."

Raf was fast. I rounded the corner of the building; there was no security guard. His clothes were on the floor, torn. Even his shoes were ripped open. Raf was sprinting down the road, on the heels of something.

I sighed and laid chase.

"Raf, what's happening?" I asked through our link.

"Wolf, wolf saw us!" He said, sounding intense.

"The guard dead?"

"The guard *was* the wolf!"

I ran a little harder.

The wolf was going somewhere. It wasn't just sprinting away, it was heading towards the same building we were planning to visit. *Worrying, to say the least.*

"Týr, forget making it look natural, just kill all the local comms and sensors," I ordered. "We can't let it warn anyone. Raf, end this," I advised.

Without stopping, Raf pulled one of his knives and launched it with precision. Every light in the area went out as the power was cut to the entire block of buildings. The wolf-man hit the floor so hard that he flipped.

I caught up to Raf who was poised to throw another knife.

"Lightweight steel blade," he said.

The wolf pulled the blade out of its leg as it stood up. It threw the blade back with enough force that it actually made the air pop as it left its hand. Raf didn't flinch. He caught it and dropped it harmlessly on the floor. The wolf screamed at us.

Raf threw a new knife. "Silver plated," he said casually.

The wolf screamed again and stepped back.

"More effective," I noted.

It had the sense to dodge the next blade. He flipped in the air as he ran towards us. Just as a hunters logic dictated, he went for Raf. He was the one with all the knives.

I knew there was no point shooting it. I had seen them shake off bigger guns than mine. This was to be hand-to-hand.

Raf jabbed at it with a small blade as it came closer.

"Silver infused ceramic," he said, for science.

The wolf slashed his arm. He stepped back. It slashed

again and Raf's knife bandoleer fell from him.

Wolves were smarter than I had initially thought.

Raf pulled a knife from his arm holster and threw it at the wolf's eye. A tactic which had worked for us before. The Wolf lifted its hand to protect itself. The blade went into the wrist; it tossed it aside without acknowledging it.

"Elven silver doesn't work then. Shame I have loads of that," Raf said.

The Wolf unexpectedly leaped at me. It was a smart attack. I was almost a spectator. Now Raf was separated from his experimental knives and it knew that his standard set was no threat, it made sense to bring me into the fight. While Raf and I were both locked in combat, there would be no time for either of us to collect the actually dangerous knives.

I blocked a fist full of claws, then burst into smoke as the teeth followed it up.

Raf threw three knives through my cloud the moment he saw the opportunity. While his attacks all landed, they were ignored and a moment later pushed out of the target's skin by its impressive healing ability.

I countered the next swipe with a blood fuelled block. The arm that the wolf hit was as strong as a ship's hull, at least for the moment it hit. It recoiled under the pain of its own attack. I took my chance and finally pull my own dagger. I plunged it into its stomach.

The wolf fell down, dead.

"Vampire black steel," I said, pulling my blade from the corpse.

"Interesting, I need to look that up when we get back," Raf replied as he picked up his bandoleer. "Broken!" He said, annoyed. He threw the last of his standard blades from his arm holster and dropped them on the floor, replacing them with the ones from the experimental supply.

I looked around. We were outside of our target building.

"Forget the excursion. Týr we need an exit, right now please," Raf said, looking into the night a little unsettled.

I couldn't see anything. It was all darkness to me. I saw a flash of something under the emergency lighting inside of the building. Then another, and another. Wolves, lots of wolves.

I heard the swish of the portal opening and gratefully backed into it.

STEP THREE: OUT OF OUR DEPTH.

I entered the Temple through the front entrance again. This time, there were no robed leaders waiting for me. I walked down the curved stairs and a group of half a dozen Initiates stood up and bowed their heads to me as I passed. Unsure what to do in reply, I waved politely. Honestly, I think I preferred being ignored by them all.

Opening the inner door, I walked down the slope and got into the elevator at the end of the corridor.

"It's me, Týr."

The elevator zipped downward, more floors than there were buttons for. A few seconds later, it stopped on the basement level. I took a few steps into the centre of the room, which contained the heating pumps and power coupling for the building. There was a slightly off-colour tile in the middle of the room. I stood on it for a moment and a small Fold lit up below me. I appeared at the top of a marble staircase. There was an ornate design etched into the marble wall behind me. I didn't need to look at it. It was a star chart which didn't make a lot of sense; a map of the known universe, before the Goddess rearranged things. It was there because there was no reason to remove it. The plaque under it was old wood. In gold etching it said 'In Her we trust.' I had looked at it a hundred times when I first started my job. I wasn't as impressed by it any more.

"Morning miss," said an unexpected voice from the usually empty reception desk of the arrival hall.

I almost jumped out of my skin.

There was an entertained man grinning at me. He was a human. I was never very good with human ages, but he was fairly young, by their already short scale. He was unassuming

and wore a dishevelled blue shirt.

"And you are?" I asked, not at all used to anyone being there.

"I'm Ned," he replied.

"Err, okay. Hi Ned. What are you doing here?" Asked.

"Now that more people know about this place, it was decided that someone should man the entrance. Not many people come and go, but when they do, someone will be here twenty-six hours a day. Me, on week days."

The man seemed nice if a little rough around the edges. I accessed the Circler interface which overlaid my vision.

"Týr. This your work?" I asked silently.

"Yes.."

"Hi, Ned," I said. "I'm Ta'ra Kl. I work here."

Ned grinned widely. "And it's nice to meet you. I know who you are. All the people who are allowed to come and go are on my list."

He held up an physical piece of paper and showed me a picture of myself. The paper was crumpled and had a coffee stain on it.

"You a Follower, Ned?" I asked.

"Er, yes. I am, but I'm too cool to be impressed by you, if that's what you mean."

I didn't. Lots of Followers at the Temple were in the habit of wearing robes. It was unusual to see someone in a shirt. There was no rule to say Followers had to dress the part. It was just unexpected.

"Well, in that case Ned. It's nice to meet you," I said as I headed through the thick door to the operations room.

I sat down at the briefing table. Angela was already there, which meant the coffee was too, thankfully.

I was trying to remember how small-talk worked when I was distracted by a clattering in the corridor. A moment later,

Raf came in carrying a selection of knives, in the most unsafe way possible.

He dropped them strewn across the Briefing table.

"Hi Angela!" He said cheerfully.

"Ta'ra. I have a theory about the metal," he said, lining up the knives.

"And you can keep it to yourself, I have work for you," came a booming voice from the entrance.

"As I was hoping to inform you; the commander has arrived," Týr said apologetically.

The commander walked in with a swagger that told us he was in charge. He was svelte and tall, he wore a long brown crop-duster and old-fashioned dusty blue jeans. His boots were unbuckled. He looked like he could do with a shave and was a little older than I had expected, which told me he was human.

He sat down and put a large, old revolver on the table.

"I'm your boss now. There will be no theories, there will be no showboating and there will certainly be no excursions to unmapped office blocks in the middle of the night, or day trips on pleasure cruises," He said. His voice stern, and weathered.

Raf and I sat up straight and tried to look professional. Though neither of us likely managed it.

The commander eyeballed us. "I make decisions. You do the things," he said.

He looked at the collection of knives on the table with an annoyed glare. He held up his revolver.

"You'll both be getting one of these. It fires physical projectiles. You will be using these until we solve the Wolf problem. There is enough power in each bullet to turn Werewolf heads into vapour. Týr seems to think that should be enough to keep them down."

There was a crisp silence for a few seconds as he sized us

up.

"There's a nice and easy people trafficking issue that local law can't get involved in, because of some bullshit legal issue. We don't have that problem. You two will go in this evening and resolve it. Don't let the victims get hurt. Mission is on screen. Ola'an is bringing you your new weapons shortly. If you need me, go through Týr."

He picked up his gun and stood to leave.

I stood up, "Sir," I said a little too loud.

He stopped and turned back to us. "What?"

"Who are you? What do we call you?" I asked, genuinely wondering what his story was.

"My name's Jazz and before you ask, it's none of your business how I got this job."

He then left.

That was it.

"He's nice," Angela said as the door closed behind Jazz.

Raf and I looked at her with bafflement.

"I mean, what's his deal? Do we stand at attention? Wear a uniform?" Raf asked as we stepped out of the portal.

"Oh, shit!" I replied. Realising we were in the middle of the dock. The dock which was smuggling people to Central for who knew what.

Someone shouted. A drone dropped a spotlight on us.

"Who the fuck are you?" A large, very well built man asked. I wasn't familiar with his species. He was at least eight feet tall and built like a shuttle. He looked like he could snap us both with one hand.

Movement caught my eye and I realised we were in the middle of their unloading. There were people in chains, actual chains, being marched out of a small starship which had its engines still idling, for a quick exit. There were more people of assorted younger races all dressed in black jump-

suits, and carrying rifles. They also wore personal shields and did not look at all happy to see us.

"Nice trick. Who you with?" the wall of a man asked, referring to our portal, I assumed.

"Err," I said, realising I had no good answer.

"Never mind, I'll figure it out from your leftovers," he said, and pointed at us sternly enough that his people knew what to do. We were shot at from four different directions. The energy bolts lighting up the surrounding area in ways which I expected was useful to Raf's eyes. I turned to smoke and Raf jumped directly up. I reformed a few meters away and drew my new gun.

Ola'an had told us that the weapons projectiles had a drop after about twenty feet and could be affected by high wind and gravity. She also warned us that despite them being artefacts of the past, the projectiles themselves were 'modified' whatever that meant. We were also warned to hold them steady, as they had significant recoil. It wasn't something I was concerned about, I was stronger than most Vampires, which made me orders of magnitude stronger than Humans, who, I assumed, these weapons had originally been designed for.

I fired.

The bullet flew through the air, far slower than an energy bolt. I missed my target. The bullet hit the wall of the building behind the man I was shooting at. The wall reacted like I had hit it with a ship cannon. The resulting hole was big enough to walk through.

"What the fuck?" I asked in reflex.

"Did you do that?" Raf asked over our link.

"Yes, be careful of the civilians!" I said in reply.

Another blot of energy passed me by. In reflex, I shot the person who fired it. My target exploded. These weapons were too powerful for this kind of combat. Firing them endangered

the innocent people in chains who were unable to run to safety.

There was an audible click in my ears as the command communication system was activated. Something we hadn't used in a while now. I back-flipped away from a streaking bolt of energy.

Ola'an's calm voice filled the air. "Okay team, here's the plan. From the data Týr has fed in, we're going to do things like this. Raf run interference, be distracting and dangerous looking. Ta'ra, I need you to free those civilians. We have a second team coming in to pick them up. All you need to do is get them out of the gate."

"And you're in charge why?" Raf asked, though I noticed he was already increasing his weight mid air. He was going to land like a classic attention seeking badass and take all the fire. As instructed.

"Because she's a phenomenal strategist and has an overview map in front of her," Jazz said with no room for argument.

"There's a second team?" I asked.

"I have my own people," Jazz said, annoyed at explaining things. "You have your orders."

As cliché as it may sound, I liked having someone tell me what to do. An actual, for-real leader. Someone who was taking charge. We hadn't had that for a long time and we needed the overwatch that Ola'an was giving us. I knew it, and so did Raf. He wouldn't likely admit it.

There was a plume of dust and the gang started shooting at where Raf had landed. He was likely already in the air above them again.

I ran to the twenty or so people I could see chained together, spent some blood and snapped a few of the chains linking them. One of the gang members shouted. Rather than wasting time freeing the rest, I just snapped the chain which

was connecting them to the ship.

“Go, there are good people waiting for you outside!” I said, urgently.

I had to let my shield take a couple of blasts to the chest to cover their escape. I didn’t usually wear a shield, Ola’an had insisted it was a good idea. I was trying to get used to toggling it on and off as I used my abilities.

I burst into bats, flapping around distractingly while the prisoners escaped. A lucky shot hit one or two of my flock. I reformed with a burn smouldering on my lower back. That was going to sting when the adrenaline wore off. That happened from time to time. I was always pleased that no one bat seemed to contain my vial organs though.

I shot back and turned the lucky shooter into a pile of cooked meat.

“The ring leader is tooling up and the sensor data says the ship is priming to lift. Týr, can you assist?” Ola’an said calmly into our ear.

There was a whining and popping sound as the ships engine’s failed and the power cut to its shields and weapons.

“Done,” Týr said coldly.

“Raf,” I called, “Secure the ship. I’ll take the big guy.”

The com-link chirped in my ear. “Good plan. You sure you can take that mountain?” Ola’an asked.

“We didn’t all grow up, little princesses!” I yelled back.

I ran into the warehouse and stabbed a man by the door as I entered. In an instinctive back swing I took his head off with my blade.

“Shit, I’m sorry, that was overkill!” I said, realising that I was enjoying this fight more than I probably should. These were people, not Wolves or hyper dangerous unknowns. I could have incapacitated him. There was no need to kill him.

“No it’s fine. But it wasn’t all luxury, you know! Mom is a literal crime boss, and dad was a drunk, in case you didn’t

know!" Ola'na replied.

"No, I meant the killing," I replied.

I kicked a thug out of my path. There were no civilians in the warehouse, just boxes and the big guy, who seemed to think he could take me with an energy hammer.

"We eliminate targets, Ta'ra," Jazz said. I took it as an endorsement. I never *actually* felt guilty for the murder; I just didn't want anyone to think less of me for it.

"Raf okay?" I asked.

"There was a vague 'woohoo' in the distance and I heard an explosion. I assumed that meant he was doing okay, though at the same moment I burst into smoke as an energy hammer came down across my head.

I reformed behind him and sliced with my blade. A blue ripple of energy shone as it hit his shield.

He turned and swung his weapon expertly. I rolled out of the way. My dagger had shattered in the attack. I dropped the handle.

Raf would have been a good enough shot to get a bullet into the centre of the shield emitter. I wasn't. The exact centre of a personal shield was the only single point of weakness. My best option would be to drain his shield or burn out his emitter. I wondered if my gun was powerful enough.

Rolling again, I drew it. I could see from the back of the chamber that there was only one round left in it. *Damn it, I hadn't realised that it only held six projectiles, should have kept count. Hell, I should have filled it up! It's not like these things came with training manuals.*

I ducked as he swung. This man was big, fast, and strong. Whatever species he was, I enjoyed that this wasn't a boring encounter.

I spent blood to buy me speed. In my perception, he slowed as he swung. Spending more blood to buy me strength, I put one hand on the shaft of the hammer and with

as much force as I could muster, I punched him right between the legs, hoping his species kept their delicate parts in the usual place.

I pulled the hammer as my speed ran out. Despite the shield, my attack was fast enough to hit him before it flared up. He flew back in response to the force and let go of the hammer, the hammer which I was holding. There was blood on my fist. I shuddered to think about where that blood had come from and, without giving him a chance to right himself, I threw the energy hammer at his face.

The shield blazed with force as the hammer impacted.

Then, in a spark, the disk on his shoulder pulsed its last and blinked out. It fell from him.

He looked at me with the unique expression that someone often had when they realise that they had been beaten. Blood pooled down his leg as he fell onto the floor.

He looked at me again, this time with the expression of someone who knew that their story was about to end.

I was going to shoot him, but there was so much blood, and no one had told me to hold back. I let my desire to get close win. I leaped on him like a hungry dog biting and sucking for a moment as he screamed. Used the sudden excess energy, I tore his head from his body. I threw it out of the doorway and followed shortly after it.

I felt amazing.

Raf threw a body out of the cockpit of the ship and jumped down behind it to meet me in the middle of the dock.

This was not going to be a story for Temple.

STEP FOUR: WHY WE FIGHT.

We sat at the briefing table. Raf had blood splatters all over him and he looked like he had been stabbed a few times in the arm. I had spent blood to heal myself, so I was relatively unscathed. My back still hurt a little, but that wasn't the thing that worried me. I was very aware of the blood around my mouth, chin, and down my front. I was glad I was wearing black because they couldn't see quite how much was on me. My hands were caked in it too. I put them under the table in front of me, ashamed.

Jazz entered. Ola'an was just behind him. She sat opposite me at the table. There was no-one else there, save for the ever watchful gaze of Týr, I assumed.

"Welcome back," Jazz said, almost friendly.

I saw Ola'an look at me. She was afraid of me. I could smell it.

"You two did exceptional work. You saved almost fifty people from slavery this evening. That's good news," Jazz said.

Ola'an was studying me.

"We got carried away. When the portal opened in the middle of all the guns. I think we just went with it. I'm sorry," Raf said.

"Sorry?" Jazz asked with confusion. "You did amazing. You saved the people you were supposed to and took a gang of literal slavers out of play. Once the media sees the blood bath, slavers are going to think twice before using Central as a place to do business. They will probably think it's a rival gang. Good work."

I felt a drop of blood drip from my chin. It didn't feel like we had done good work.

Jazz must have seen the shame on our faces. “You did well. I was sent to be in charge of this operation for a reason. Holding you two back has resulted in werewolves and dragons running around the planet. You killed bad people. That’s good. Now, go home.”

He left, just as theatrically as last time.

“Why did the portal open in the middle of the dock?” Raf asked.

“Because Jazz wanted to see how you would react to unexpected combat. He watched the sensor data every step of the way,” Ola’an replied sheepishly.

“How did you feel about that?” I asked, wiping my face with my sleeve, hoping she hadn’t noticed how I looked.

“I became a follower because I believe in Her plan. This is part of it,” she said. I could tell she was freaked out. She stood, to leave. “There’s a new medical team on site. Jazz wants you checked out before you go home,” she said. She almost sprinted out of the operation room.

“I like our new boss!” Raf said.

I gave him the ‘please be quiet’ glance.

“You got a bit of blood on you,” he said with a grin.

I woke up and looked at the ceiling of my apartment, a knot in my stomach made itself known when I thought about what I had done. I thought about how I once told Summer that violence was part of what we did and he should toughen up. I had meant it; but now I had seen what happened if Raf and I were unleashed. How Summer had felt then, he was right. It had just taken me a lot longer to see what he saw at a glance.

Ashamedly, I had enjoyed my evening of violence; enjoyed my feral excitement bordering on the cusp of uncontrolled. I enjoyed it for myself, not for the success of my mission.

I sat up and reached for my Circlet. A flick later I was calling Raf.

"Don't you ever just sleep? Because you know who sleeps? Me, Ta'ra, I sleep. Why are you not letting me sleep?" He said in an alert way which told me that he wasn't asleep, no matter what he was claiming. He didn't even look sleepy.

"Followers don't like it when we kill people. Why didn't Jazz hold us back?" I asked.

"Don't go getting all paranoid, Ta'ra. He's been checked out by Týr, he's fine. He just isn't uptight like all the other commanders." Raf's video rocked about as he walked to his kitchen, presumably to get coffee. His kitchen was a mess.

"Bollocks Raf! David wasn't squeamish either, but he didn't encourage us to fucking murder a gang. And not *just* murder, that was messy and you know it!"

Raf brought his camera closer to his face. "No, Ta'ra. There was a gang of slavers operating less than three miles from the Temple. We sent a message. Just because we had a good time, it doesn't make it wrong."

I was a little stunned. "What do you mean, three miles?"

"Ta'ra, last night, we were in the south Canto dock. It was literally at the far end of the park. I mean, it's a big park but I could see the sign on the big coffee shop glowing when I was in that starship's cockpit. You know, when I threw that nutter with the knife out of the window." I heard his food hatch open as he took his coffee.

"But that dock is reserved for the Vampire arts commission. It's used for bringing in museum artefacts and dropping stock in for the local businesses. Not gangsters and slaves."

Raf sipped his coffee. "And crime can't happen in the same place as the cake deliveries, why?"

"No, why did we take a portal in, if it was just there, that place isn't even guarded most the time."

Raf sighed. "Because that way there would be no sensor data linking us to it. Honestly Ta'ra, are you new here?" He

snarked. "Relax. It's okay to enjoy your job."

He closed the Screen and I was left looking at his profile photo. I flicked Circllet closed.

After some annoyed rambling to myself, I finally left my apartment.

I walked through the park. It was only nine in the morning. The sun was too bright for my tastes. I was hyper focused on the memories of my violence. It wasn't sitting right still. I was so focused in fact that I almost pulled a knife when the small floating buggy stopped right next to me.

"Hi," came a familiar voice.

"What?" I replied, trying to sound friendly, as I took my hand off the blade in my pocket.

Peter, who was driving the small buggy grinned at me eagerly. He was a nice man and, he obviously liked me. I realised at that moment that I had been neglectful to him. I had totally lost track of how many days it had been since our date. Honestly, with my sleep pattern and the crazy events I had recently lived through... Wait, I literally didn't know what day it was.

"Wow, and there was me thinking maybe you would be pleased to see me, Ta'ra." He said my name properly.

"Oh no, I'm so sorry. I really am pleased to see you, Peter. It's just been a hell of a few days," my voice went up in pitch at the end, like it was a question. Why was I so bad at talking to people when it wasn't about murder?

"Going to your mysterious Temple are you?" He asked.

I nodded.

"Jump in. I'll give you ride."

I hesitated.

He noticed.

"Can we get coffee first?" I recovered from that nicely, I thought.

"Sure."

* * *

I had enjoyed unexpectedly spending my morning with Peter. That is until he stopped the buggy outside of the Temple, where it was supposed to be ending. We really did go for coffee, and then for a walk around the park, and we kissed under a nice tree.

"You had me worried, you know?" He said, with an adorable lack of confidence.

"Yeah, I should have Screened you, or messaged. It's just been really busy at work," I replied.

He looked at the Temple. The holographic flame was lashing at the sky, throwing out no heat at all, but looking very interesting, which was its point.

"So, what do you do? In there I mean." Oh no, this was a question which I did not have a good answer for.

"I'm a Follower. We do Follower things," I replied. That was a terrible answer.

"I was saying that I was a little worried when your friend outed you as... one of them." I felt myself look annoyed instantly. "Until, after our date, when I looked them up." I felt my annoyance fade. "Seems like you tick all the boxes for awesome people. According to the news archives, a few months ago, just after the war, every Elder government signed off on Followers. It was even the first things the Brick home world did when they got their power back. You must have impressed them. You all did a lot of good in the war, right?" He wasn't looking at me with accusation or suspicion. He was impressed.

I held his hand. "We really did. Did you read anything else?"

"Yeah. I asked my AI to summarise it all. Seems that there are rumours that your group went above and beyond with humanitarian work. Even talks of some mysterious red ship that did over eight hundred trips to Brick Prime and back.

You know anything about that?" He grinned. He really was impressed.

"You have your own AI?" I asked, playfully.

He laughed. "Okay, when I say 'my AI,' I may mean the Canto district AI. Abuse of work property and all that. I can't afford my own AI. I certainly can't afford to do humanitarian work in a mysterious red ship. I have an antique buggy. Can I use it to haul supplies?" He said, brushing dust from his dashboard.

I leaned out of it. I looked at the wire hanging from the repulsion generator. It was practical transport, way smaller than a surface shuttle. It looked like it was made of two float-bike engines and leftover parts.

"You think this thing is space worthy, Peter?" I asked with a grin.

"I wouldn't know. I've never been anywhere."

"You've never left the Central system?" I asked, surprised.

"It's worse than that, actually. I've never left Central Prime," he said, a little embarrassed.

"Wait, you've never been off world? Like, not even to one of the moons?" I asked.

I instantly regretted my tone.

He looked a little hurt. "No. Central has everything. And, I don't know if you know this but a groundskeeper salary is not a thing of legend. That, and the cost of rent at the park perimeter, trust me, there is not a lot left over for holidays," he said.

I felt like he thought he had told me a secret. Truth was, I hadn't given his income much thought. He was nice to the people in the park and he brought coffee to his gardening staff. He was a good man.

"I wanted you to know. I'm broke, and it's always been a problem for women, when I date. Honestly, I thought it was why you didn't get in touch. And it's why I didn't message

you either. I'm sorry."

Wow.

I didn't want to go to work now. I wanted to stay with him and his shitty buggy.

Before I could reply, he spoke again. "Anyway, I read about Followers, and what you all do. I figured it probably won't be a problem. I also know it means that you are probably busy organising food deliveries and blankets and whatever else, to people who can't get that stuff. So if you can't keep in touch all the time, I understand. But I... I like you."

Wow. Again.

"I'm going to skip work. Can we hang out?" I asked.

"That would be awesome."

I kissed him and stepped away from his buggy. I opened my Circler, but I wasn't using it. It was just a prop, so it didn't look like I was talking to myself when I asked Týr to put me in touch with commander Jazz.

"What?" He asked, not bothering with any pleasantries.

"Jazz, I know we don't know each other very well, but I assume you have read my record. I need the day off. Last night was shit, and I hated how much I liked it. That's something I need to process and there's this guy who I really like. Talking to him made me feel better. I hope that's okay. Pretend I called in sick if you want." I talked fast so he wouldn't interrupt me. He didn't even try to.

There was a silence for a few seconds.

"Good. That's what we fight for. Let Týr know where you want to eat this evening and he'll make reservations for you, my treat. I closed my Circler and sat down in the buggy.

"You like steak, Peter?" I asked.

"We talking Elven woodland steaks or actual meat?" He smiled.

"Despite what you have read about Followers, we're not all pacifist dreamers. My job is getting things done. I like my

meat rare. I like a lot of it. I don't care how much money you have, and my rent is free. Also, I was thinking Earth food."

He grinned.

"Your rent is free?" He asked, with an impressed whistle.

We drove away from the Temple.

STEP FIVE: BOYFRIENDS ARE NOT DISPOSABLE.

“Ta’ra,” said the stern voice of Týr, in my head, as I walked.

“Not now,” I replied, barely moving my lips.

“Ta’ra there is someone following you,” Týr said.

“Go on,” I replied.

I held Peter’s hand a little tighter and stopped to kiss him. The truth was, the kiss gave me time to look behind me as I turned to him.

“It’s a human male, just under five feet tall. He is dressed in a brown jumper, wool. He has long black hair and a short box-beard. At first I thought he was just going in the same direction as you, but he appears to have stopped repeatedly to maintain his distance. He is currently pretending to look in the window of the bookshop you just passed. Should I send someone?” Týr informed, and asked.

I could see the man. It was dark, but the neon glow of the buildings made him perfectly visible. Peter and I had enjoyed our day together, which had now turned to evening. We were strolling back to his apartment. We were hoping to turn our evening into breakfast.

Usually I wouldn’t dream of asking for backup, but I was in the middle of a crowd. I had no idea why I was being followed or indeed if Peter would be safe if I left him.

I pressed my nose against his and smiled. He was taller than me, I had to stand on tiptoes.

“Yes. Let’s go through the park,” I said, both to him, and Týr.

“Understood.”

“I see too much of the park. You know we both work there, right?” Peter argued.

"I have a room inside the Temple," I said, as way of temptation. "It's closer than either of our apartments."

"Oh!" He said, taking my hand and setting off immediately. "Bit strange, but I did want to see inside," he joked.

"Ta'ra, something has come up at the dock. Raf has been sent to check it out. We don't have more details. I am opening a portal for Ola'an. She will arrive at the closest clear-point in the park. Two hundred meters dead ahead," Týr informed me.

"Shit," I said absentmindedly.

"Sorry, was that disrespectful?" Peter asked.

"Oh, no. Of course not. The Temple is always open to everyone. Peter, there's a lot you don't know about me and I think things are going to get weird for a bit. Please don't hold any of this against me," I said, as we crossed the road into the park.

Ola'an stepped out from behind a tree as we did. Peter almost jumped out of his skin.

"Peter, this is Ola'an, she's a colleague."

"*Colleague?*" Ola'an repeated back, with a raised eyebrow. I wasn't ready to introduce her as my sister, not yet.

I ignored her comment. She handed me a sidearm and a knife. I noticed the gun was the energy blaster which I usually used, not one of Jazz's super cannons.

There was no way Peter hadn't seen the exchange, but he didn't say a word as I slipped the knife down the back of my skirt, which was not at all appropriate for combat. I zipped up my jacket and took a moment to lament the heeled boots I was wearing.

Peter looked at Ola'an and I. He let go of my hand but still didn't say a word. I wasn't sure if he was confused or scared, probably both. Ola'an was wearing combat leathers, and I noticed her wings twitch with excitement. She was new to

this. The leathers looked unnatural on her.

"It's a Wolf!" Týr said with urgency.

I turned to see it transform from a man to a beast, in just a few seconds. It looked honestly terrifying as its silhouette morphed, clothes ripping from it as it transformed. The backdrop of the city outlining it, and me, knowing that this was *my* problem to deal with.

I was getting to know these things now. I was learning their movements and tactics. They were pack fighters and alone, they only had their recovery time as an advantage. They were no faster than a lot of other things I had fought. While I still wasn't quite sure how smart they were, they were not going to pull out shields or guns; I was pretty sure about that.

It was coming closer.

I had only a few seconds now. I had to plan.

Ola'an was trained, I knew that, from her leathers, but she was not enhanced, not like Raf and I. I also had Peter who, I had no doubt would chivalrously defend me in a bar, was just going to get in the way here. Also, as much as I wanted to hold back, these things were dangerous. I needed to resolve this quickly.

"Human, stay with me. Let her fight," I heard Ola'an say. Good, she knew her skills were limited, she would stay clear.

The Wolf, true to what I knew about them, leaped into the air as its opening attack, giving it the advantage that its aggression offered it. It was also coming straight for me. Also good.

"What is that?" Peter asked as Ola'an pulled him towards a nearby tree.

I turned to smoke as the wolf landed where I was a moment ago. I reformed behind it. I attacked with my knife, hopefully a knife of the correct metal to hurt it. I assumed that Týr had made sure it was.

It had expected the attack and turned the moment it realised I wasn't there. My blade impacted claws, claws which were strong enough to block the attack.

I didn't know they could do that.

It used the force and surprise of its block to get time to stand more human-like, on two legs. It lunged at me immediately. I parried with my knife. This time, as it blocked, I pushed the knife down its menacing claw towards the hand. It recoiled as I hit skin.

Good.

The blade hurt it. It would recover in a moment though. I took a step back to assess the attacker better. There was enough ambient light from the city streaming into the park, for me to get a really good look at it.

It was taller than it had been as a man and its hair was a redder hue than I had seen one of these creatures sport before. It looked more dangerous somehow. More eager to kill.

It slashed again. I dodged, in a role to the side. I was fighting defensively. I looked to see Peter, trying to get to me. Ola'an held him back. A Vampire would always be stronger than a human; she held him back well. He argued with her. I had thought she had been sent to fight with me, but I saw now that Týr knew better.

I dodged again, but now I was sure no civilians were at risk, I changed my style. I spent blood to fuel my muscles and the next time it slashed, I stepped closer, blocked with my knife across my arm and shot it in the stomach from my hip. I knew it wouldn't do any real damage, but the gun had been set to a shotgun burst, my usual setting. It shocked the Wolf enough that it stepped back and I fired again, this one to piss it off. It made a sound, a groan. I shot it in the face from no more than a couple of feet away. It looked shook. Not healing as fast as before. Had my knife's metal interfered with its

abilities? I holstered my gun and followed with a fist. I gave it the kind of punch in the head that would burst a human skull. It shook it off. I didn't give it time to attack again. I split my body into bats. I spun around him and reformed behind it after a moment of confusing it. I stabbed it in its neck, deep, and was rewarded with the cacophony of a howling scream. It was healing but it had substantially slowed. I turned to bats again. It swiped at the air trying to process what was around it. I reformed and stabbed it in the stomach. It swiped at me and tore up my upper thigh before putting a little distance between us.

It jumped at me, pissing blood from its gut. I let it grab me and push me to the floor. Then, I turned to smoke.

Unexpected but convenient.

I reformed on its back and slit its throat. It didn't slow down. This thing wanted me dead, and it was too dumb to realise that its wounds weren't healing. My blade's cuts were slowing its metabolism; it wouldn't last long enough for its healing to counter the damage. After a second or two it tried to scream, blood pumped from its neck and it stabbed at me with its claws, faster than I had seen one of these move before. I didn't have enough in me to dodge so just took the attack. Claws slid into my upper shoulder. I pushed blood into my muscles one more time and cut its fucking hand from its arm. I pulled it out of me and stabbed the bastard in the face with its own hand. It was a reflex, one which instantly made me realise I was trending towards ultra violence again.

The wolf fell to the ground.

A moment later I followed it.

"No it's not fucking fine!" Peter yelled at the top of his voice. Ola'an waiting for him to calm down.

I was kneeling over a dead man. He was naked, missing an arm. His own hand was sticking out of his skull and his

throat was slit.

"Fucking shape shifters," I sighed. I had been standing ready to kill it again, should it get up. It looked like the metal of the knife did a good job at neutralising its only real advantage.

"Týr, can you please arrange a corpse collection, before someone gets the wrong idea?" I asked.

"Cleaning crew is on the way. Do you need a medic?" came the cold reply. I burned the last of my reserve blood energy and felt the gashes across my skin being to knit. The hole in my leg was an issue that would definitely need a doctor at some point.

"No rush. I have a civilian to deal with first."

Týr didn't bother answering me.

Peter was standing under a tree arguing with Ola'an, and pointing at me. From the shouting, I had a pretty good idea that he wasn't very impressed.

I put my gun away and slid the knife down the back of my skirt, with was, I now realised, ripped in some quite unladylike ways.

"Peter, I'm sorry that you had to see that," I said, as calmly as I could manage. My head was spinning from the fight and I was still jacked up on the adrenaline. Also, I had burned enough energy that he was half looking like food to me. I focused and controlled myself.

"Stay away from me! Killer!" he yelled. It was fear. I could, quite literally, smell it on him. It was like a battle cologne to me. Something I enjoyed smelling in a fight, but this was not how I intended for the evening with him to go.

"Killer? She saved your life! Do you really think that Wolf was going to scamper away once you had seen it?" Ola'an argued on my behalf.

"Fuck you both!" he yelled, flicking out his Circlet.

"What are you doing, Peter?" I asked, exhaustion kicking

in as the adrenaline left.

"He is attempting to contact the police. I have scrambled his Circlet signal," Týr said in my head.

"Peter, we can't let you do that."

He pointed at me, not sure if he wanted to scream *at* me or scream *because* of me. After a moment, he went back to his Circlet.

"Ta'ra, Jazz told me what to do if your date reacted like this," Ola'an said, ignoring him and maintaining her perfectly reasonable disposition.

"What? What was that? Who the fuck is Jazz? Are you going to kill me?" Peter asked. The smell got stronger.

We both looked at him. He turned and run.

"Are we?" I asked. Knowing that there would be a better plan in place.

"No! I was told to sedate him."

"Oh, yeah, that sounds like a plan," I said, realising that not only was our date over, but so was any chance of him ever being left in a room alone with me again.

Ola'an pulled out a small gun and fired at him. He was some way off, but we saw him fall down face first as the stun bolt fizzed away.

"Raf?" I asked.

There was a clicking sound in my head as Týr patched me into him.

"Oh hi, Ta'ra," he said.

"You okay, partner?"

"Yeah, no Wolves. Just a few spare gang members thinking that it was worth investigating what happened last night. I resolved the situation."

He sounded gleeful.

"Shit, Raf, I knew the new boss doesn't want us holding back, but we can't keep killing people like this! It's not good for us," I said with a heavy heart.

“Killing people? No, I scared the shit out of them until the police arrived. Wait! Who did you kill?” He asked.

“Oh,” I said, looking at the corpse which I had almost forgotten about. “No one, I had a Wolf problem. It’s resolved.”

“Oh. You need backup?” He asked.

I looked at Ola’an, who was strolling over to the unconscious Peter.

“No, I’m good. See you at the temple,” I said, closing my Circlet.

“You liked him, huh?” Ola’an asked.

“Yeah. He was great.”

“Any chance he’s going to be okay with this?” Her voice was compassionate.

“Nope. He’s a nice guy. He deserves a nice woman. Not a killer.”

Ola’an looked concerned but unsure how best to react to my self pity. After a few moments deliberation she hugged me.

“Ta’ra, you’re not a killer. You work keep this planet safe!”

I appreciated her words, and her hug, but some little rattling seed in the back of my head was half wondering what Peter’s blood tasted like, and that scared the shit out of me.

MISSION 4

STEP ONE: PLANS IN MOTION.

"Oh, a doctor? So, you're working on this project, are you? That's good news. I'm Doctor Atkinson, David Atkinson."

She smiled back, politely. "Elizabeth Michaels, Libby."

Doctor Atkinson pushed some buttons to pop open the lid of his crate and peered in. Libby glanced at me and back at David. I think she was relieved that he didn't raise an eyebrow at her being a non-organic. - Denouement.

I found myself on edge as I walked through the park. It was seven in the evening. I had spent my day in bed, feeling sorry for myself. I could have asked for a portal directly to the temple; I chose to walk. I think, on some level, I was reliving the night before.

Týr had transferred a sizeable amount of money into Peter's bank account, and delivered an anonymous, and untraceable message to him, explaining that he should not discuss what he had seen. Peter had replied, and agreed. The payment was large enough that he had instantly quit his job and arranged passage off of Central, and all before I had dragged myself out of bed.

Týr was also going to be watching his communications from now on. If he tried to tell anyone what he had seen, well, I was told that there were methods for dealing with that scenario. I was, truth be told, grateful that I wouldn't be bumping into him anymore.

My life was becoming less solitary, but I felt more alone than I had in a while. The followers at the Temple all knew what I did now. It had been agreed that the open secret would stay within the Temple. Followers were trustworthy, no one would breach the order. My own hero, the Champion,

Jon Michaels, had no idea we existed and I could literally see his house from my apartment. I imagined knocking on his door. Asking if he remembered the little Vampire woman who he met one Monday afternoon when his memory was fractured and the Keeper was still just Doctor Atkinson.

"Have you started brooding now? I always thought you would be a brooder, eventually."

I almost jumped out of my skin. Raf had appeared next to me without me noticing. That was quite a skill. He was in Follower robes again. He was wearing them a lot recently.

"Shit, Raf. How do you do that?" I replied. "You know one day you'll do that and I'll murder you before I realise who you are!"

Raf laughed. "Na, I could take you in a fight."

I laughed back. "I didn't know delusion was one of your enhancements, Raf."

He put his arm around me and squeezed me in tight. "I know. You liked him. I'm sorry it went down the way it did."

He wasn't very good at being thoughtful, not really. I knew if I just stayed quiet, he would blow it. He was a terrible friend, really, which I actually liked. His honesty was a time bomb.

"I *didn't* like him. He was fucking awful." There it was. Good job Raf, that was at least five seconds.

I glared at him.

"You never like anyone I date!" I teased.

"Well, you keep dating pricks! That one a few months ago, a literal accountant. Who the fuck is an accountant? We have AI for that! No one should be an accountant!" Raf ranted.

"He was an investment banker, Raf. He made investments for people! And Richard was lovely!"

"Ugh, Humans. Why do you keep dating humans? They're all idiots."

"Oh, and I suppose I should find myself a dashing Elf with

an excellent vision and the power to tweak gravity?" I teased him again.

"Ta'ra, the day I date a Vampire is the day I have officially lost my mind. Your species is composed entirely of people who think far too much," he said. "As exemplified, exquisitely by your current brooding."

I smiled. Raf had a type, and it was not me. He liked Bricks. His type was gorgeous, adventurous, and flakey. He liked a relationship to end, after about a week, on excellent terms. Emotional depth wasn't something he craved, on any level.

"I like humans. Anyway, you know what this is about tonight?" I asked.

We had been summoned by the commander. We were still sizing him up, but he seemed competent, at the very least, which was a delightful change from when Summer was in charge. Though, I think we both secretly wanted the Keeper to come back. We knew we could trust him, no matter what.

"Mission, I assume. You are up to a mission, aren't you?"

Angela brought us coffee, and biscuits. Angela was a strange addition to our little troupe. While I had some obvious tension with Ola'an, she, at least, fitted well. She was a skilled strategist and something of a zealot, in a way that we needed. Jazz made sense too. he was hard-boiled and single-minded. I was fairly sure he would send us to our deaths in a heartbeat if it was the right thing to do. Angela, however, was just a nice teddy-bear woman. Well, literally a bear, I wasn't sure what the qualification of 'teddy' would actually be. I was curious to know what she was doing, working alongside a group like us. She would have fitted far better on the other levels of the Temple, the ones that did charity work and looked after children. She noticed me observing her and smiled back at me, somehow content with her role.

Jazz entered the operations room like an emperor entering a castle. His dark grey crop-duster coat billowing behind him and one of his six shooters hanging from the belt of his worn blue jeans. His hair was as shaggy as ever and his five o'clock shadow was now well on the way to a day two beard.

He sat down, subtly adjusting his coat as he did, making sure it sat just right, draped over the arm of his chair. I wondered how long it took him to learn to make it look like he *didn't* do it on purpose. I glanced at Raf. I assumed he already spotted the little habit.

Jazz said nothing for a moment, people entered through the door behind him. People wearing Follower robes. There were at least a dozen of them.

Raf and I looked around. Ola'an came in behind them and began pointing them to stations.

"Black edging?" Raf asked.

"What?" I asked, looking back over my shoulder at the group.

Raf flicked his eyes to the group and back to me. "Their robes, have black edging."

I looked at them again. He was right. The brown and grey assortments of robes looked like normal Follower attire, but each robe was stitched at the collar and sleeved with black thread. I would likely not have noticed that, even if I was standing right next to them.

"Yes," Jazz began. The Temple has recently had a large influx of Followers who are not suited to the usual lifestyle of the order. They will make up our team here. As much as our nice little family has got things done until this point, this facility was designed to house over twenty operational team members. We will fill that capacity going forward. No more reliance on Týr's intel. We are now going to be doing good old fashioned investigating."

"And Týr is okay with this?" Raf asked.

"I am," Týr responded. This time though, not in our head but via the tabletop interface on the desk in front of us.

Ola'an joined us at the table. "It has been decided by Commander Jazz that we cannot solely rely on Týr. We will also send investigators to follow up on any leads we gather via the Follower intelligence network."

"There's a Follower intelligence network?" I asked.

Jazz smiled, something which I felt unnerving. He put his elbows on the table and clasped his hands together. "Your Goddess created the Follower order to be a toolbox for enacting her damned plan. You think she didn't have some less well-known tools in that box?"

"Well, I thought that was us," Raf said, pointing at himself and then me.

"You two maybe the best hammers and knives in the box, but you're hardly the best screwdrivers, are you?"

"I *literally* don't know what that means," I said, baffled by his analogy. "Why aren't we relying on Týr any more?" I asked.

"Tell her," Jazz barked, tapping the table as he did.

Our consoles lit up green as Týr spoke through them. "Because I have identified data points which indicate that I am not as digitally omniscient as I once believed. There appears to be a structuring of technology to which I am blind."

"Oh, shit," Raf added eloquently.

Jazz nodded at Ola'an and she took over the conversation. "Týr is familiar with the technology of nine hundred of the iterations our Goddess used in creating this final version of reality. In all these iterations, there is no record of the dragon you fought recently. That creature is not from any of the logged iterations. He has consulted directly with the Goddess and she has informed him that this creature was well documented in three of the first five iterations. She removed it

from reality when she saw how powerful they could become as they matured."

Ola'an was confident and well informed. I was impressed.

"And the Wolves?" I asked.

"Known in eight realities, all older ones."

"And when the fuck were you planning on telling us all of this?" Raf asked, annoyed.

"Now. I was planning on telling you now. This right now; this is me telling you," Jazz grunted in what appeared to be something on the way to a laugh.

I saw Raf recoil. "Okay. That's not a bad point. How do you know all this?"

"A lot of this information has come through Týr and has been verified by the Keeper. Our source is your Goddess. That legitimate enough for you?"

I saw Raf, filling with questions. I jumped in before he could ask them. He needed a moment to sort through them. "Týr has run almost our entire operation since we started. How does this change now?"

Jazz nodded, almost agreeably. "Excellent question. He will still be our overwatch. He will still be available to you both as he always has been. The only thing that changes is that we will be doing more for our selves, and not relying on his data as our sole source. Týr is blind to their technology. As far as he can see, it's all rocks and etchings."

"You okay with this Týr?" Raf asked.

"I am. Jazz and my other allies will do all they can to find ways for me to interface with the things I can't see. I am hopeful that it will eventually lift this veil for me," Týr replied.

The briefing had been over for a little while. Raf had gone to meet the new engineers and was trying to find out why specific metals hurt the wolves more than others. He had

been rambling about energy composition and bio-waves when he left. He seemed happy.

Angela had vanished to make food and drinks for all the new people. She planned on befriending all of them. Jazz had left, presumably to bark at as many people as possible.

That left me alone, at the table with Ola'an. She was still oddly reserved around me. Her demeanour now, did not match the hyper-confident strategist who had just debriefed us.

We hadn't spoken in a little too long already, and it was getting more awkward by the moment. She wasn't even working or pretending to work. She just sat there. Looking at the desk.

"Thank you for your help, with Peter. I couldn't have kept him safe without you," I said, realising that I was being a little awkward myself.

She snapped her gaze to me. "You're welcome. Týr has informed me of his departure from your life. I'm sorry it had to end that way."

"At least he's alive," I replied. Despite our very short relationship, I really was pleased that Peter was safe, and given the payoff that he was sent, it was likely his life was going to be far better, for knowing me. Though, I wouldn't be in it. Not ever.

There was that silence again.

"How did you know all of that?" I asked.

"What?"

"The briefing. You knew so much about Týr and the operation and iterations. You haven't been a Follower for that long. How did you know all of that stuff?" I asked.

She smiled, talking about her profession was comfortable to her, it was nice to see. "I studied hard. It's what I have been doing whenever you don't see me around. Also, before I came here, I was responsible for my mother's private security.

The skills are oddly transferrable. Which is a little unsettling to me."

"Organised crime protection squad to covert operation coordinator. I can actually see how that was an easy transition." I replied.

"Ta'ra, in the field. Part of what Jazz wants me to be doing is verifying and relaying data, with Týr, obviously. But I'll be barking information, and instructions at you a lot. Is it okay?" She asked. I could see that this was troubling her.

"Ola'an, you don't owe me a damned thing. It's not like I have had a bad life without dad, and it's not like you asked for any of this. If you need me to say it, fine. We're fine. I forgive you, or whatever you need to hear. My life is the mission. The mission is what makes me happy. If you are the one giving me orders in the field, I accept."

She leaned forward and suddenly stopped being so terrified. "I would like to know you better, Ta'ra. You are literally the only family I have who isn't a drunk or a criminal. If it's possible, I want to really *be* your sister, or at least have the hope of one day being your sister."

I knew I had a lot of anger in me about this topic. I also knew that it wasn't her fault. She was skilled, earnest and vulnerable. I felt bad for not feeling worse for her.

"I promise to try. How about that?"

She smiled. A wide grin. "Good. And we have a mission."

STEP TWO: WOLF PACK.

"I don't think this is very smart," I said as we arrived on the rooftop.

"What's not smart about it? It's very smart," Raf replied.

"We have no way of knowing if this is going to work, Raf."

"It'll work. I promise!" He assured me.

The mission was simple. We knew there were Wolves in the office complex. We had no idea how many and we had no way of knowing if it was a major base of operations or a tiny outpost.

We knew however, that they had made no attempt to leave once we had found them, Jazz had people watching them since we had first discovered it. They seemed to know that we didn't have a force that could take them down and even though we had killed a few of them, we hardly showed ourselves as a threat. We had the resources to raze the office block to the ground but they would just regenerate. And, we would hardly be able to remain a covert organisation once we had showed our hand. Whomever was in charge likely knew that.

Jazz had been watching Raf's overexcited research and passed it to his engineers. They built something. Ola'an formulated a plan to use what they had built.

"At least we're closer this time!" Raf observed, realising we were on the building next to our target.

"Yeah that's great Raf, we can die more efficiently now."

Raf grinned at me. He adjusted his combat leathers and tightened his pack.

I was in my own leathers and also had a personal shield attached to my arm. It was something that had been designed by another team, it flared red *and* blue, depending on the

attack and I was told that it would keep me safe for longer than the usual blue ones; it was something, right?

I checked my six shooter, it was heavier than my usual energy blaster, but I had seen what it could do and I had a pocket full of spare bullets. I also checked my knife, I had brought the big one with me this evening.

"Before we take another step, I need you to explain it to me, as simply as possible. I'm not a biologist," I said, leaning over the ledge of the rooftop to assess the immediate area.

Raf sighed. "I figured out what the components were which made the metals unique, the ones that hurt them. I then broke them down into a compound of just those minerals. Jazz had the smart people compress it into a very, and I do mean, very, compressed canister with a small amount of temporal explosives around the outer shell."

"And what will this magic device do?" I asked, already knowing but wanting to know again, on the off chance I had misunderstood something.

"It's not a device, it's a bomb, with a very short timer, a mechanical timer. When the timer hits zero the outer shell, which is angled outwards will remove the air and some of the walls, and floors and whatever else from the interior of the building. Then, because of how physics works, something you do understand, the compressed compound will zip out to fill the void. The compound will get in the skin, and lungs and eyes and hair of the bad wolves and they will all stop having super powered healing... we think," Raf explained, complete with hand gestures and whistles for sound effects. He actually sounded very confident, until the end.

Our job was to get the crap into the building. That was it. Drop off the *boom* and get out.

"Though," Raf said, "I still don't get why we didn't open a portal inside the building and just toss a grenade in."

A click in my ear told me that the operations room was

now paying attention.

"Well, Raf, that would be because we have no idea what's inside the building, or what defences they have against that kind of attack. We are not the only people who can open portals," Ola'an said. She had her work attitude on.

"We're not?" I asked.

"No. And it's none of your business," Jazz added. "Now, don't screw this up. Get in, get some intel, kill some Wolves and get out. The second team will be coming down the moment you say the word."

Once we were inside, we had to assess the situation and scan the structure. We knew we were not very good at detecting Wolves, or their technology but we could map the building. Once we had, we would blow the bomb and Jazz's mysterious soldiers would arrive by shuttle and, hopefully not get killed taking out the wolves. If they lost contact with us at any point, the soldiers would storm the building anyway. If all went well we would drop off the bomb and leave. Our part was easy.

No matter how enhanced we were, and no matter how ready we were, the two of us could not take on an entire pack of Wolves. The soldiers, with numbers and silver bullets, of a sort, they were most certainly the correct tool for this job.

"Okay, fuck it. Let's go," I said, reluctantly.

Raf grinned. We took a run up together and leaped from one rooftop to the other. He glided, pushing against gravity enough to allow him to sail through the air *like* he had wings, for a moment at least. I burst into bats, *actually* having wings.

The rooftop was empty. I was shocked that we weren't instantly surrounded by Wolves.

"Okay. Not expected," Raf noted. Also surprised we weren't fighting.

"You think they know we're coming?" I asked.

Raf shrugged and pointed at the roof door, which was obfuscated a little by the usual rooftop pipes, sensors and... something else. He tilted his head quizzically.

"What is that?" I asked, pointing at a circular grey rock which was about three meters across its middle.

He squinted and raised an eyebrow. "I don't know but it's got etchings on it." He squatted down next to the rock and studied it. Such attention was somewhat out of the ordinary for him.

I opened my Circler screen and set it to deep scan, and transmit. I flicked it away again. To me, it just looked like a plain, circular stone; from Raf's eager attention, I knew I was not seeing everything.

I gave him another few seconds before prompting him. "Come on. Fight time."

"Yeah, let's go," He replied, shaking off his study.

I used my knife, pushing it into the frame, around the height of the handle in the old metal door, with a wiggle, it popped open for me. These old office buildings rarely had any real security. Though, we expected this one to have, well, *something*, at least.

"We have the scan of the rock," Ola'an said, into our ears. "Tyr is analysing it now, as well as our local systems."

The stairwell looked like any other building. We stood each side of the first door, just one flight of stairs below where we entered.

"We're entering the door now," Raf said. To keep Ola'an informed.

The inside of the stairwell was worn. Well worn. There was dirt, dried blood and hair settled all over the steps, the walls had a few stains mostly of human hands.

"You see that?" Raf asked, pointing to the bottom step of this flight.

There was a large paw print in the dirt of the step. It was

big. Way bigger than we had seen before. The tips of each pad had clear claw gouges in it. *Now, there was something I hoped we wouldn't have to fight...* I realised I had jinxed it with the very thought.

We turned opening the door, six shooters drawn. Relying on our experience we stepped in strong and were ready on our triggers.

The entire floor of the building was on show to us, and empty. There wasn't even any unused furniture. It was a large, entirely empty office.

"Well that was a letdown," Raf said, holstering his gun.

I glanced at my Cirlet. It was still transmitting. "You seeing this?" I asked.

"Yes," Ola'an replied. She sounded cold. She was different when she was working. Gone was the timid young woman who was vying for my approval. I wondered if Jazz had observed the change too. *Of course he had.*

"We're going to check the next level down," Raf said.

The lack of an objection in our ears was our approval.

The next two levels were the same, just empty, though the stairwell was worn.

"Well this is getting annoying!" Raf announced as we opened door number four.

I scanned, as I had the last few.

"Týr, you are certain that none of the wolves have left this building right?" I asked.

"I have observed normative building traffic, nothing to imply an exodus of any sort," he replied.

Raf gave me a concerned look.

"We keep checking then," I decreed.

The building was sixty floors. By the time we got to the ground we were mostly just bored. Something could have been waiting to kill us behind any one of the doors, but we were fatigued with the lack of threats.

We opened the door from inside the stairwell to the ground floor. Empty. Again.

I holstered my gun and looked through the windows to the outside. I felt like our long downward trek was nothing but wasted energy. Until Raf noticed something.

"Huh."

"Huh? What does huh mean?" I asked, excited.

He walked through the large empty room to the front door and picked up a mat from the ground. He held it up and turned it, giving it a close inspection.

"You can keep it, if you like it so much," I said, scratching my head with the handle of my knife.

"It's black, rubber," he said as if it was important.

"Yeah. It is. It's very nice, well worth the trip," I snarked, realising that I had taken over his sarcastic role, for the moment. I really was bored.

"Ta'ra, open your circler. Týr, show us footage, scans, whatever you have of the front door, from the outside."

I did as I was asked and without me doing anything else, a series of photos and short loops of video filled my screen. I motioned a finger, flicking through them.

I was going to ask what it was about. Raf just jerked his eyes back to the screen, waiting for me to notice what he had seen.

"No way. I'm impressed," I said, the moment I saw it.

The mat which Raf was holding was black rubber. The mat on the screen was a deep red, a furry carpet square.

"Týr, can I get a live feed of the door please?" I asked. As I waited I stood in front of it and waved at the street.

The image that appeared on my screen showed the little red mat, and we were both missing from the frame.

"That is interesting," Týr said, interested.

"How are they doing it?" Ola'an asked.

There was no comment from Jazz.

“Should we open the door?” Raf asked, hand ready.

“No. I have a feeling that they would know. Whatever trick they are using to make this illusion is likely being monitored by them too. Whoever is controller the Wolves,” I said, thoughtfully. Now losing my sarcastic boredom.

Raf and I looked around the very empty floor of the building again. Checking we hadn’t missed anything. It was, as we had already knew, devoid of anything other than walls and windows... and a few mats.

“Something moved.” Týr’s voice was stern and serious, even by his standards.

I pulled my weapons before I realised they were in my hand. I readied my blood energy. Raf pulled a throwing knife and readied it over his shoulder. We met back to back. I covered the stairs and Raf the door.

“Where?” Raf asked.

“Just getting a the video feed calibrated now. Six Wolves just appeared at the end of the road. They’re heading your way on all fours. They’re moving fast,” Ola’an said. Her delivery was almost as concise as Týr’s.

“Orders?” I asked.

“Given how little we know right now, I’m going to extract you,” she said, pensively.

“Overruled,” Jazz said in a gravelly voice.

Ola’an had hit the mute button a second or so too late and we heard enough to know she was objecting.

Raf and I chuckled at the exchange. We had gone through similar things when Summer was our commander, he had tried to pull us out too early too, though with him, there was no one to argue with except us. We used to turn off our Circlets.

“They’ll be heading to the roof. Want to camp out and find out how this magic building trick works?” I asked.

Raf nodded, in agreement. “Absolutely! We don’t have

long. Express route?" He asked in reply.

I nodded.

We raced to the bottom of the stairwell and looked up from the floor. We knew there was nothing to jump us, at least not inside the building and we had Wolves incoming. We crouched and leaped. With a little push from Raf's enhancements, we shot up about four floors, he grabbed a rail and pushed himself again. I turned to bats and flew up, keeping his pace, and not costing him any energy, assuming he even used energy. His field of altered gravity made my own flight an easy one too, and fast. Very fast.

There was a click in my ear and Ola'an addressed us again. "Cancel that, get to the roof and observe the wolves as well as you can."

I reformed on the roof, bursting through the door as I did. There wasn't a lot of options for hiding. Raf and I had the same idea and in opposite directions we met behind the doors outcropping.

"They just entered the building." Ola'an said. We peaked out from each side of the structure. Our Circlets both transmitting all the data back to the Temple.

"I can hear them." Raf said.

I was always so impressed with his eyes, I forgot about his ears. While they were nowhere as enhanced as his vision. They were far more impressive than most peoples, even other Elves.

After a few seconds, I heard the sounds of feet on stairs, it sounded like galloping. It got louder, absurdly fast.

I clutched the handle of the still unfamiliar six shooter a little tighter as the wall I was leaning against rocked with the force of the wolves slamming into the attached door to open it.

We recoiled behind the wall and watched the circlet scan, which Týr had been thoughtful enough to overlay across our

vision.

We could see the wolves circling the stone which we had seen when we arrived. One of them was stationary. According to the scan, he had morphed into something closer to man. His hands moved like he was operating something but there was nothing on the scan.

I looked at Raf, he nodded and we both leaned around my side of the wall, the side which the scan implied was slightly safer. The Wolves had sat down around the stone, the humanoid one was shaking a netted bag of gems over it and growling words.

The stone lit up with a purple glow coming from its underside. The glow zipped across its surface like veins. It met in the middle and the wolf threw the bag of stones at it.

The Circlet scans in my vision, showed nothing, just the stone and the Wolves. I was starting to understand why Týr couldn't track them.

"I can smell something!" said the humanoid one. He turned, looking directly at us.

"Go time!" Raf said leaping vertically.

The wolves began morphing into humanoids. The attack started before their transformation was even complete.

There were six Wolves who needed killing. There were also time constraints due to whatever the now glowing stone was doing. Any backup we would call for would take too long to arrive before we were dead.

We knew our enemy liked close combat and relied far too heavily on their healing ability. They were selfish fighters and there would be very little group strategy. They would pile in and start slashing, and biting, whenever they saw opportunity.

I went for the one who seemed to be the leader, the one who 'smelled' us. Usually in a fight I would go for the

support before going for the leader, because, the leader was usually in charge for a reason. I had no idea how Wolves picked their alpha but I doubted it was for his deep combat strategy skills.

Conveniently my body turned to smoke as he lunged for me. I was quite prepared for his attack but, regardless, I was smoke. I used the second I had to cloud past him and reformed as I swiped with my knife.

It wasn't a deep cut. Smoke wasn't very good for combat placement. Despite that, he *was* cut and a cut with this metal, we were confident would fuzz their healing long enough for the next step.

Taking my queue, Raf shot his six-shooter the moment he landed. I knew well enough to get out of the way as the Wolf's head exploded. It was messy but he wasn't likely reforming after that.

Raf twitched as he saw one of the wolves lunge for me. He shot it. It's chest exploded and the force knocked it onto its back.

"You owe me another one," Raf said over our communication link.

Rather than reacting to his words I casually stabbed a Wolf who was about to grab me from behind. That left three, but now our opening volley had lost its surprise. It really was a good opening though.

The remaining Wolves had fallen back enough to assess us. They were a little smarter than I gave them credit for. They actually took stock of us, rather than relentlessly attacking. There was something to that hesitation they had. Were they concerned that we were scarier predators than they were?

The middle one ran towards me. He dropped down as he did, his features turning more wolf-like as he did. It threw me a little and I missed my swipe as he passed me. Raf spun around as another tried it on him. At first I thought Raf was

just enjoying himself but the spin left him at the right angle to chase the Wolf with a throwing knife. It was hit in the rear. It responded by turning back into a humanoid. It pulled the knife out of its arse and threw it at Raf. Raf caught it by the handle with one hand, because of course he did. He returned it, the wolf batted it away. Impressive.

The third Wolf came directly towards me, no tricks just a fast lunge. I punched him in the face and used his nose to push myself out of the way of his claws, just in time.

I remembered there was one behind me and burst into bats as it leaped through me and with its claws in front of it, did more damage to the other one than I had.

Raf was going knife-to-claws with his. He was too close and the Wolf was too fast, he didn't have the time or the space to shoot the fucker. Our weapons were too powerful, he would likely take too much damage himself to make it worth it, even if he did have the gun in his hand.

It was time to stop conserving energy. I burned blood.

"The Wolves are fast. Do you need the backup team deployed?" Ola'an asked in my ear.

The Wolves really were fast, I assumed that they were moving their claws faster than the Circler scans could process, it was likely that the team at the Temple were just seeing clouds of arms and knives.

"No. We got this," I replied.

I used the blood energy to make myself stronger. It wasn't trying to dodge me, it was trying to control the fight. Usually I would spend a little on strength and the rest on speed but in this case I just needed to hit the fucker really hard, which even without speed, would win me a moment to pull a gun. I had grazed him enough that his healing was already on the way out. He wouldn't likely have noticed.

It took a moment or two more of blocking before I saw my chance. I had intended to give him the two handed chest

smack which would have knocked him to the other side of the roof but he was too focused on my arms. *Good instincts.*

I dropped and swiped his legs from under him with the extra power in my already enhanced Vampire muscles I felt his legs snap and he almost flopped in two.

I wasn't far enough away to use the explosive gun, so I took the remaining energy I had in my veins and punched him in the chest as originally planned. Though he was on his back at this point. My fist stopped when it churned through its body and hit the floor, I was pretty sure I had cracked it.

He was expecting his healing to keep him alive. Maybe he was right and it was still working. Rather than pulling my hand out of his chest, I used it as an anchor, pulling his body up, while I slammed my knife down into his neck, which had the desired, instant effect of freeing it from its mortal coil.

The Wolf went limp and my knife shattered against the stone floor, which it had hit at an awkward angle. I left the broken knife in his neck.

I realised there there was another Wolf. In a controlled panic I looked around for him.

Raf had two dead wolves at his feet. He was standing in a crater and the wolves looked closer to mashed than stabbed. He had likely used his ability to increase gravity to take them off their feet and just started stabbing. He had obviously gone a bit too far and actually *popped* them with his power. His emotions seemed to effect his potency, but also, his control.

"Now you owe me two!" He said, panting to get his breath.

There was movement behind him.

The wolf he had shot in the chest, we hadn't stabbed it. It had began healing.

It stood up like it had just realised it was alive and with a now, gooey, healing, hole in its chest it grabbed Raf by the back of his neck. I pulled my gun and burned blood to give

myself speed, the time, to aim. I shot it in the head. The right side of its head, it wasn't a perfect shot but I didn't want to hit Raf. The bullet did what it was supposed to and exploded as it impacted. The blast should have been enough to send Raf flying. He stood solidly in the plume of the explosion and turned, slashing with his knife. The last thing we needed was this fucker getting up again.

A moment later the Wolves were all, finally, dead.

Raf's leathers were smouldering and his face had blisters across it from the heat. The gravity he had used to stay sturdy had also affected the explosion, he could have been far more burned but he was still lightly toasted and had large cuts in the back of his neck where the Wolf had grabbed him.

He fell to his knees.

"Raf, what is your status?" Ola'an barked. We ignored her.

"Raf?" I asked as I helped him to his feet.

"I'll live," he said as he pulled a vial of Cure-all from his pouch. He swallowed the sparkling green mix of drugs and nanites. His own enhanced healing and the Cure-all would likely have him back to his old self in an hour or two. We were both built to last.

"We're good," I said to my link.

"Thank the Goddess, I thought you were in trouble," Ola'an replied.

Raf laughed. "I know you're new to this Ola'an but honestly, this is a pretty standard day out for us."

I raised an eyebrow at him.

There was a popping sound. We both turned to the stone. A portal had opened. It looked stable.

"We going in boss?" Raf asked.

"I think maybe it's time for the team to take over," Ola'an replied from the Temple.

Raf laughed again. "I was talking to Ta'ra."

"We need to drop the grenade before the team will be any

real use. Track our signal, this thing could take us anywhere on Central."

There was no objection to my statement. Though I had a feeling Ola'an and Jazz were arguing about it. Jazz would have had similar instincts to me, I was sure.

"I need to top up first," I said as I picked up the closest Wolf corpse and bit down.

"Yeah, Temple; mission's not over yet," I heard Raf say as he activated the locator on his Circlet. All they had to do was follow his signal.

"Let's go!" I said, dropping the corpse and wiping my mouth.

STEP THREE: PREDATORS ON PATROL.

As was the case with portals, it began to close the moment we stepped through. Our guns were drawn, and we were both channeling our relevant energies. The air bit me with cold as the swirling light behind us finally snapped shut. There wasn't time to process much of what was happening. We had come in with no knowledge what we would face.

Our number one priority was staying alive.

The hanger we had arrived in was well lit with ancient white neon lights and the walls were painted white to make sure the lighting was stark and clean. The room was massive, and oddly familiar to me. There were wolves but looking somehow more civilized than they had been before, three of them. One was so human, that he was wearing a Circlet around his wrist. I knew that they could disguise themselves as people but nothing I had seen indicated that they knew how to function as anything but killers. I considered for a moment if their form was related to their intelligence.

We had been in situations like this before. The first task was always stopping anyone from calling for help. Sure there would be an alarm going off in a few minutes when the computer or security system realised we were not supposed to be there, but that was the next problem. First things first. I shot the Circlet-wielding wolf in his chest. The sound echoed around the chamber, instantly alerting the other two. The Circlet wolf splattered most of his insides on the wall behind him, which was quite distance. I knew he would get up again, but right now we needed to take him out of the equation.

The other two morphed into more bulky forms. This was what we were used to, their combat shape. Raf threw two knives. Each impacted a different Wolf, they didn't even

flinch. I let them get almost on top of me giving the metal time to neuter their healing powers, then I fired at the first. A headshot with the six shooter left nothing to regenerate. I had expected Raf to take the other one. He didn't. I fired again, just in time, before I got pinned. I hadn't expected to need to pull the trigger. I wasn't ready.

"What the fuck was that?" I asked, turning to Raf, annoyed and wanting to know where my support was.

He was kneeling down, right where we had arrived, shivering. He had a look of dread in his eyes.

Shit.

It was too cold for him. I knew it was cold but I hadn't realised how cold, my adrenaline was running too hot for me to register it.

"Týr, we need a portal!" I yelled, aloud, so that Raf knew I was doing something.

"I can't locate you," Came the clinical reply.

I looked at my Circler screen as I informed him that we had turned on trackers to realise that I was showing the astonishing 'No Signal' warning.

"I can interface with your Circler but without any local link access I cannot locate it," Týr said.

"The live scan has stopped, Ta'ra, I need you to tell me what's happening," Ola'an asked, sternly.

"One sec, busy," I said, as I noticed the Circler-wolf beginning to pull himself back together. I pulled a throwing knife from Raf's bandoleer.

"I'll fix this. Give me a second," I said.

He nodded. Too cold to speak.

I wasn't good at throwing things, not compared to Raf, so I didn't try. I burst into bats and reformed directly in front of him. I stuck the knife in his neck. He swiped at me and I turned to smoke, it half felt like I did it on purpose. I reformed behind him and took a few steps back. I fired my

gun and his head left.

I then pulled the Circllet from his arm and flicked it open. The screen informed me that it was DNA locked to its owner.

“Temple. We have arrived in an old hanger. Looks like an old pre-Event leftover. It’s cold. Too cold for Raf he won’t last long here. Týr I have in my hand a Circllet which is locked to its user, can you piggy back off mine to see if it’s useful?” I asked.

“Týr has used his own connection to reconnect your Circllet transmission. We can see your scans, but without local signal, we can’t get a location on you,” Ola’an replied. There was a concern in her voice.

“This Circllet’s last known position was logged fifteen minutes ago and there has been no energy spikes that make me think its been through a portal. If the location is right, you are at the south pole of the planet. The team will be there in a few minutes. Get signal so we can have your exact location and extract you,” Týr said, efficient as ever.

I had never been more grateful for him than I was right then. There was no force which could block a signal that Aygah had encoded into reality. Týr was a rock, which I clung to.

I turned to Raf, we had only been there a few minutes and he was already looking like he had been in a freezer over night. I knew it was chilly, but it must have been freezing to him.

I pulled his shield generator from his shoulder. Neither of us liked using shields, they interfered with our abilities, I couldn’t turn to bats or smoke when I was using one, it acted like a cage. Raf couldn’t use his kinetic acrobatics properly either. But, shields had heaters. I adjusted the settings and put it back on his arm. His shivering didn’t stop but his eyes told me that he was at the very least not slipping away now.

“That a little better?” I asked.

"Yeah, a little, but I don't think I can stand, not in this cold," he said, shivering and trying not to pass out.

I took my own shield and turned its heater on too, I slapped it onto his other arm.

"It's something," I said.

Truth was, doubling up on shields offered little extra protection, or heating. The fields mostly merged. At least it would last a little longer if some more Wolves arrived.

I considered the room, this was a hanger. Like a shuttle landing bay, but the technology was old. We were standing on a round stone on a slightly raised platform at the back, it was the same as the stone we had used to get here and still had a faint blue glow across it. There was a small garage door at the far end, maybe big enough for a shuttle, but only just. I looked up, the roof was metal, thin and corrugated. There was strong metal framework and hydraulic pumps of some sort attached to the walls. This place was, at some point, a hanger for a low low-tech ship, I assumed. The rest of the room was empty aside from a stone floor, the recently dead wolves and a single console at the side.

I ran to the console at the edge of the room, I had no idea how long Raf had before permanent damage was caused. The console was old technology. The screen was cathode-ray and had a neon amber glow to it. It had chunky plastic buttons on each side and a large ancient keyboard below it. I pressed some buttons on the side of the screen. It was asking for a password.

I had seen this technology before. A long time ago, back on Earth, there was a hidden facility which was left over from when Aygah, the Goddess, had re-written reality for us. The only person that really understood any of it was Jon, the now legendary Champion. I knew there was little point trying to interface my Circler with the computer, it was closer to clockwork than digital. Even if I had an expert or an AI with

me, it would take them a while to interface and get any sense out of such an old machine. They didn't even register as computers to modern scanners.

"Týr," I said as I looked under the desk. "I think I know how they are circumventing your gaze. They are using Pre-Event technology. Like the Facility; the one where..." I realised how the sentence ended. "Like the one where I died."

Technically it wasn't 'death,' because Ayygah took me out of the timeline the moment before I actually died and regenerated me on her healing world. At some point she edited my DNA too but I didn't know when or how that had happened.

"How is that possible?" Týr asked.

"I have no idea, but, I'm looking at a silicone based computer right now," I assured him.

"Ta'ra, I am quite able to interface with those sorts of machines, that is not a blind spot for me."

"Great can you open the door with it?"

There was a moments silence. "No. The computer is not attached to a network. I can scan it but it's not attached to anything. I am afraid there is not time to explain the process of interfacing your Cirplet in the time Raf has."

"Okay, Plan 'B' then," I said, marching back to Raf. I took a throwing knife from his supply and put it in my pocket and then took his gun. I reloaded it, and mine. Holding both out in front of me, I shot the hanger door.

I wasn't sure how thick it was, or what was on the other side, but I didn't have a lot of options. I fired both guns at the same time, to make sure the door didn't hold.

The plume of smoke cleared and a cold wind came through the opening. I lifted Raf up and put him on my shoulder. I was small, but strong. I had no problem lifting him but he was bulky, compared to me. I realised that I would have to put him down if something attacked me. I also realised I was

about to be walking towards an even colder place, wherever it may be.

I stepped through the opening. The sky was dark, but it was well lit by lights beaming down onto me. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust. This was a military base. The lights were on poles, shining down to the large open area, there were buildings all around me and snow coming down hard. A vehicle of some kind, on wheels was heading towards me, and from the sounds of things, someone had just pushed an alarm.

I fired my guns, both of them, at the vehicle coming towards me. In a bursting of light and heat, the explosion flipped it backwards. I burned all the blood I had in me and increased my speed and strength, both at once. I used the speed to take a look around. I turned my head, feeling like I suddenly had seconds, rather than moments. There was a large tank, an old gas container, I wondered? I fired at it with one hand, I had to keep my arm straight while I waited for the bullet to leave the chamber. I saw something else, a ship. It was big and looked like an old planetary cargo vessel. It was fuelling up. I shot at the fuel pipe. The moment both bullets left the chamber, I ran towards the closest patch of darkness, assuming it to be the fastest way away from their aim.

Burning as much blood as I was, I felt light as a feather, even with Raf over my shoulder. The euphoria didn't last long, though; I felt a snap as my speed ran out, but only a fraction of a second before the explosion of the gas tank and a moment later, a larger explosion. That would have been the fuel tank on the ship going up. My strength would last a few more seconds yet, and I was almost in the darkness. I could make out a wire fence. I would usually turn to bats and pass through it, but while carrying Raf, that wasn't an option.

“Raf, if you’re still awake, we really need gravity to piss off for a second, old friend,” I said, almost praying he wasn’t unconscious yet. I leaped, my muscles firing like hydraulics, I left the floor. I felt lighter the moment I reached my apex. Raf was still with me.

We landed hard, but not on snow padded concrete. We had fallen into deep, soft, layered snow.

I looked back as the floodlights went off, leaving only the glow of the fire I had left in my wake.

“Týr, we really need that pickup, right fucking now!” I said sternly to the sky.

I glanced at Raf lying next to me as his eyes closed. Succumbing to the cold, finally.

There was no answer. I picked up Raf and marched a little further into the darkness and snow. I knew he didn’t have long.

“Týr! Now! They’ll be following any time now! We need a portal!” I yelled.

There was still silence.

“Temple? Ola’an? Jazz?” I asked, getting concerned.

Nothing.

I popped open my Cirlet, there was still no signal. I used the location menu and scanned the sky.

The location really was the South Pole of Central Prime. Exactly where Týr said we likely were.

“Týr! I may not have any signal, but I know you can hear me! Seriously! I doubt you have more pressing matters right now!”

I walked a few more steps before I stopped, laying Raf on the snow and checking his heated shield was still operating. It was, but he didn’t look okay.

“How do you know my name?” Týr asked in my ear.

“Oh! Thank the Goddess! You’re there. I need that extraction right now, Týr,” I replied frantically.

"Who are you?" He asked.

"What? Who am I? Did you get a bang on your head? I'm Ta'ra, and if you don't get me a portal, Raf is going to die. Now, get us out of here!"

"This is concerning. A friend is coming to meet you," He replied.

I had no idea why Týr was pretending not to know us, but he had confirmed that help was on the way. Perhaps our enemy had learned how to monitor his communications. I lifted Raf and sat with him in my arms. Hoping to keep him a degree or so warmer.

"Someone's coming. I promise, we're going to be okay. Don't die on me!"

STEP FOUR: THE OLDEST OF FRIENDS.

A few minutes passed and I could see flashlight beams glistening in the night. The base was searching for us, or at least was about to.

There was a sound behind me. I turned, expecting a portal to be opening, but I saw someone moving in the snow.

I pointed my gun at the figure.

"Týr, is that our pickup?" I asked.

There was no answer.

The figure came into focus. It was a woman with dark skin; it was almost obsidian. She was wearing charcoal grey shorts and a form fitting cropped shirt of similar material. She sported a long cloak and was wearing it like a cape, despite the cold. As she got closer, I saw her eyes. They were glowing white with smoke rising out of them.

"A Blade!" I said, shocked. They were all supposed to be dead. They had been dead since before reality began, save for one, and he was gone now, too.

"How are you a Blade? How do you exist?" I called to the woman.

She looked at me quizzically. Veins across her skin glowed purple as she studied me. She spoke a language I didn't understand. "*Qui êtes-vous et comment avez-vous connu le nom de Týr? Dis-le-moi, ou je te détruirai.*"

"I'm sorry, I don't understand you. Do you speak Elder?" I asked as I lowered my gun. I didn't know much about Blades but I did know that there was little point in trying to shoot one.

She stepped closer to me, cautiously as if she thought I was trying to trick her.

"How do you know that language?" She asked.

She crouched down to see me better. I also was able to see her face now. I almost screamed.

"Aygah!" I yelled without thinking.

She looked back again, confused by me.

"I'm sorry, Goddess. I am grateful to see you."

A light beam flashed our way, she glanced up at the base. "I think we should talk about this somewhere more convenient," she said, and, with a blink, we were sitting on the floor of a wooden structure. The heat hit me. Going from snow to heat in an instant made me short of breath.

It was a tropical climate, wherever we were. The wooden floor was made of loose planks and the structure was only closed on three sides. The open face of the building let me see out to a jungle. There were boxes all around, some metal and some wood. A few of them were stacked as a makeshift desk. Covered in papers.

Aygah squatted down and looked at Raf.

"Your friend is almost dead. Someone has altered him. You too. Did you know? Who are you?" She asked.

"What do you mean?" I asked in reply. "You altered us, when you saved us from our deaths."

It was hard to read her expression with the smoke slowly rising from her eyes.

"Did I?" she asked.

"I don't know what's going on, Goddess, but Raf is a good man. Please don't let him die."

She stood up from her crouch and took off her cape. She hung it on a bamboo stick which protruded from the wall.

"Your friend may live," she said.

Raf took in a breath, like he had just realised he could. He sat up and began panting.

"Where are we?" He asked, looking around. He saw a stranger and pulled a knife from his sleeve, glaring at her.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Aygah said, veins

glowing again.

"Goddess!" he exclaimed, dropping the knife, stunned.

"I need you to tell me how you know my name. And, I need you to tell me right now, or I'm going to leave you on this very distant planet," She said, with a tone that sat at the edge of angry.

I was starting to develop something of a concern. This woman looked like our Goddess and had powers, but the only other time we had met her, she was fighting against constant distraction, and had told us she couldn't stay in our timeline without discomfort. Now though, as solid and corporeal as me; and how did the Goddess *not know* things?

"Týr, is this woman really Aygah?" I asked, softly. Usually I would have been reaching for a weapon, but regardless of who this was, she was definitely a Blade and you did not win fights with Blades.

"How do you know this name?" She asked, sitting on a large wooden chair which wasn't there a moment ago.

I waited for Týr to answer me.

"Týr, answer her, please," She said, vaguely looking into the air as she did. That was something Raf and I did, too. Something which told me she was familiar with Týr.

"Miss. I would also like to know more about you, and your friend. For now though, let me assure you that you are speaking with Aygah Michaels. She is the only ascended Blade, and is quite able to destroy you, should you be attempting trickery."

Raf stood up, he was looking well, now.

"This is no trick, Goddess. Raf and I met you a few years ago. You picked us up just before we died in a shuttle which was being attacked by some people who had crossed an iteration. You enhanced us. We work as Follower Heroes now," I said.

Aygah waved a hand and two wooden armchairs appeared

for us. We sat down.

"Why you?" She asked. "Why did I save you two specifically?"

Raf answered this one. "If I recall, Goddess, you said that one day Jon would hold you accountable for our deaths, and you didn't want to tell him you let us die for no reason."

Her smokey eyes widened. "You know Jon?"

"Well, yes. He doesn't know we are still alive. We're a covert group. We enforce your will on Central," I said.

"Those wrist devices you're wearing. Hand them to me, please," she ordered, sticking out her hand.

Neither of us had any hesitation in handing over our Circlets.

She took them, vanished and returned, without them. "Týr is scanning them now. It may take him a little while to interface with them."

"Goddess, I don't mean to be disrespectful," Raf said. "But, honestly. I don't understand what's happening right now."

"They're being honest. We need to talk," Týr said in our ears.

"They safe?" Aygah asked.

"I am certain."

"Týr isn't certain very often. We're taking a trip," She said.

Raf and I both nodded enthusiastically. We may have been baffled as to what was happening, but we knew that if Aygah said something, we were onboard.

Aygah didn't give us any warning or any choice. She just turned, with purpose, and we were somewhere else.

The new room was far less tropical than the last. We were, suddenly, in a modern setting. The room was laid out like a lab, about twenty feet square, with old wooden furniture. The table in the middle had glass test tubes and vials bubbling away. The floor was carpeted with a thick-pile shaggy white-

thread. The room sported a smell which was close to musty, but with a hint of ginger. No sooner had we arrived than Aygah marched out of the door, we followed with reverence.

The corridor outside was long with a slight curve which stopped us seeing the end. There were doors along the right side and a single window running across the left, the outside of the curve. The window showed streaking stars and occasional flashes of colour as nebulas passed. We were travelling at T.D Speeds, faster than light.

Raf and I paused for a moment. "We're on a ship!" He realised.

There were no vibrations or sounds to imply that we were in motion, or that there was even an engine running. The vague smell of ginger was still in the air. As soon as I realised that we were on ship. I assumed it was a quirk of the life support system.

The window was impressive in subtle ways. There was no physical barrier in it. It was generated using an energy field. This wasn't something which was possible while travelling at these speeds. Also, if the energy failed, the ship would likely lose structure entirely. Physics be damned. We were literally walking with a God, neither of us were surprised that whatever this place was, it wasn't bound by our understanding of physics.

We realised she was leaving and rushed to catch up with her.

"Welcome to the cave," she said as we walked past unmarked doors. "This is where I live. If what I do is actually living. We're not technically inside time, but you probably figured that out already, as you seem to know so much about me."

"We do not know much about you, Goddess," Raf said, apologetically.

She stopped. "You two are quite a surprise to me," she said

and started walking again.

"I *am* sorry," Raf said.

"Don't be. I don't get many surprises anymore."

Raf put a hand on my shoulder. "Is this really happening? It's really her?" He asked quietly.

"I can hear you," she said as she opened one of the unmarked doors and vanished into it.

I took another look at the impossible window before following.

The distance between the doorways implied to us that we were entering a small room. The moment I stepped in, my breath was taken by the odd smells and sudden, but slight, increase in gravity. We were in a street. An alien street of some sort. There were cobble stones beneath my feet and buildings of old brick and wood all around us. It was nighttime. There were occasional lights flickering from windows. There was something approaching. It was a horse, pulling a carriage of some kind. It had wheels, large ones which rattled. Raf was almost frozen with awe. He turned and gestured to the street.

"Where are we?" He asked.

"I think this is Earth. I once saw a picture of a place like this, it's a pre-event human settlement, I think."

"Very good, Ta'ra," Aygah said, with a smirk.

The horse and carriage stopped. A man leaned down from the top of the carriage.

"New friends miss?" He said in a thuggish and backward way, which sounded like he never learned to speak Elder properly.

"Good evening, Thomas. Yes, I wanted to bring them somewhere interesting for a conversation. We have a wolf problem to discuss," she said casually, matching his broken speech pattern.

She stepped into the carriage and waved for us to join.

I looked behind us. The door we had stepped through wasn't there. We were standing in front of a shop which was signposted as a 'butchers,' which I found oddly unnerving in the dark street.

Raf waved for my hand and pulled me into the carriage.

"I have fixed the oversight. You both will be able to hear and speak the local language now. I tweaked you. You wouldn't understand. The point is, I fixed it, and a few other things," Aygah informed us. Raf and I exchanged concerned glances. Neither of us felt any different. As far as we knew, nothing had happened.

Aygah sat opposite us, in the middle of the plush padded bench. Even the walls inside the carriage were covered in ornate fabric designs. There were thick curtains covering the windows.

"If this is pre-Event Earth, won't they find a Vampire and an Elf a little unsettling?" Raf asked.

She smiled. "No. I fixed that a long time ago. They never notice how me, or my guests look. It all seems quite natural to them. I made them blind to all the out-of-place technology too. It's actually rather convenient. I blinded a lot of people to my activity. There was a time when I valued solitude more than I do now."

We endured the next few minutes in silence, she eyed the both of us intently as the carriage rolled on. *It was unsettling.*

The horse eventually stopped, and she left the carriage with purpose. We followed.

Once outside, we were agog. We had arrived in some industrial looking area filled with chimneys and large brick warehouses. One building, the one we had stopped next to, was not brick and wood like the others, it wasn't even brick. The building we were next to wouldn't have looked out of place in the middle of Central Prime. Granted. it would have been a small building there, but against these three-story

buildings its thirty floors of modern metals and glass looked other worldly.

"Come on," she barked.

"Seriously, what's happening?" Raf asked. I shrugged and followed Aygah.

The reception desk was empty, however at the back of the sizeable reception area was an energy cannon, it was the sort of cannon which you would expect to be mounted to a ship, it was almost ten feet long and pointed directly at the door. I had a feeling that, should it have fired, it would have taken out half the of the street out front.

Unlike us, Aygah did not stop to take stock of the cannon. Instead she disappeared into a glowing doorway on the left. It looked like it should contain an elevator but the glow told us that it was a Fold platform.

We arrived in a large living room. It was decorated with neon and leather and sported a deep purple carpet. I glanced out from the window. I could see the whole town from here. It was so small and disorganised. Aygah sat down on the leather sofa and gestured for us to sit down, as matching armchairs faded into view as if they were being revealed by a stage magician.

"According to Týr, you're from *my* future. Honestly, I have no idea what to do with you," she said as we sat down.

There were two things which were impossible. Everything I knew, everything that every Follower knew, reinforced these impossibilities.

The first was that no matter where you went or what you did, you could never free yourself of Aygah's plan. We didn't know the details or the endgame but every Follower had learned that no matter what you did, no matter what decision you made, you were always within Her plan and Her watchful eye would always be upon you, should She need to

use you.

The second thing was that time travel was not possible. Her own champion, Jon, had said so himself. He could remember over nine hundred iterations of reality and he had never once seen time travel emerge as a viable option, not in any of them. David, the Keeper, had also told us that it was impossible, and knowing things was his job. Science had never even had a sniff of a practical implementation of it, so much so that many Followers, our scientist, believed that Aygah had removed the ability from reality, if it had ever even existed in the first place.

But here we were. This woman, in front of us, who we were certain beyond reasonable doubt was, in fact, Aygah, was telling us that the two fundamental truths of reality were bollocks.

"I think I need to sit down now," Raf said.

"You are sitting down," Aygah noted.

"You *are* the Goddess though? You *are* Aygah?" I asked, also sat down.

"I've never thought of myself as a goddess, but yes. I am the ascended Blade known as Aygah. I am totally unique in the universe, so I doubt there's been any confusion," she said with a half smile. "You know more about me than I know about you, which is also a unique circumstance, but between doorways I have read everything on your Circler devices. I know who and what you think I am. Which is why we're here, in this building."

"Yeah, what is this place?" Raf asked. "Is this your citadel or something?" He added, as if he wasn't content with her assuming he was a jackass and wanted to prove it.

"No, The citadel," she smirked at describing her ship in that way, "That place, the ship we were on a little while ago, that's my home. I call it the 'Cave' but 'Citadel' is probably a fair bit more theatrical, now you mention it. This, is a side-

project, something which no other person has seen, save for my good friend Týr."

"May we know what it is, Goddess?" I asked.

"Yes, but I am not your Goddess, not yet, I don't *think*. Though, reading through your Cirplet's library, at some point I am going to be. Given how much time I spend out of the time stream, I probably already am, and forgot. But this place? Well, this place is a machine, a machine I am going to use to create a wild storm which will re-write everything for me. A catalyst for my already wide influence, which will let me act across time and space as more of a surgeon than a grenade."

Raf and I gasped. She was talking about the Event. Every Follower learned the truth of the Event. It was where she took hold of power, the moment she crafted our reality, and possibly a million before it.

"I thought you would like that," She said with a clap, entertained by our shocked expressions.

STEP FIVE: ITS HER UNIVERSE.

Aygah proceeded to tell us about her machine. The Follower order always assumed it was her ascension coffin and her own power which allowed her to make changes to reality. She just informed us that while she could, and did, or had changed things without the machine, she had built it in order to make refined tweaks. It was designed to let her see the wider impact of her changes. It took a lot of effort for her to change large-scale things. A lot of compute was required, which was way more than even her gargantuan biology could calculate. Blades, from what we understood, manipulated the flow of reality around them. Her ascension allowed her to harness all the energy which comprised reality. She was smart, ascension had made her smarter, but she needed more, she was, after all, having to 'think' through every event in reality at once.

"I never thought you had limits! I have literally spent every moment since I met you the first time, assuming you were omnipotent, and omniscient!" Raf said, still reeling in excited babbling.

Aygah laughed at his shock. She was laughing so hard that she was almost crying. This woman was vibrant and entertaining and, well, normal. Sure, she had shown us that she had power, she was an ascended Blade, so, by any measure you cared to apply, a god. But the first, and only time we had met her before this, she was distracted and aloof. She had told us that it was hard to keep herself in one place because she naturally wanted to be in all the places at once. The Keeper had told us that when Jon and Libby had met Her, She kept fading in and out of our time stream. She didn't even know how long she had been there.

Now though, she was a person, a real actual woman, not a force of the universe. I considered what had gone wrong or, at least sideways, for this to be Her.

She stopped laughing at Raf's babbles and wiped her eyes. "Look, as simply as I can explain this, the building, the machine, is like the coffin device you already know about, but with computers and sensors and AI cores, which by the way, didn't exist until six iterations ago. Until this point I have been altering reality in ways that are best described as thuggish. Once I have the machine running I can channel my power, and my alternations will have a lot more intentionality. No more prodding blindly. I'll start making fundamental changes, rewriting physics, altering the state of the universe. I have even devised a communication method which operates outside of the limitations of physics. I have been trialling it with Týr. Well, you know about that already."

"Thuggish!" Raf blurted out in response. I ignored him.

"But, if you've read the data in our Circlets, you know the future, your future. There is no machine where we're from," I said in a pleading tone which was a surprise even to me.

She grinned again. "I know this is confusing but, I'm not stuck in time, not the way you are. I am fluid and free and untouchable in ways which I can't actually explain. Trust me, Zal, the cults, the Followers, The Thinker war, it's all planned out, *I think*."

"You think?" Raf asked, suddenly picking up on the *right* question to ask.

"Yes. I *think*, because honestly I hadn't even come up with the idea of Followers until about ninety years ago. Oh, and the Champion, this 'Great Family' and even the Keeper lineage it's all still in flux in the back of my mind. But the thing you don't understand is that because I'm fluid in time, and my power *is* functionally infinite, the machine, once turned on, even for a moment, will be a part of me forever. It

will be attached to me, operating inside me and from here and the past and the future and, for as long as I exist, which I *believe* will be, until the universe dies, at which point I'll probably make a new one."

"Part of you?" I asked.

"I think I understand that," Raf replied.

"You do?" Aygah asked, a little dubious.

"Yes. If you have a computer which isn't stuck inside time, you can constantly move back and fourth, between where you are and where it is, in time. Time becomes a location, you don't need it to exist for longer than it takes to answer one question."

Aygah suddenly wasn't laughing. "Clumsy, but I think you may actually get it. However it's not exactly like that, Raf. I'm going to turn it on, forever, powered by myself, and I'm going to fold its existence up into one tiny, but infinite moment and then I'm going to put it inside myself. Which, again, is a very clumsy way of explaining something so complex that I have had to build an entire school of science to even make it possible."

"Why were you so different when we met and when Jon met you after the Event. You weren't like you are now." I figured I had been dancing around the point, but I may as well just ask.

She leaned back in her chair, which I swore was slowly getting larger. Her expression grew more intense, she put her hands together in her lap. "I am experiencing my reordering, piecemeal, from the ground floor. To do that, I have to dampen my ascended self. I can't be here, and everywhere at once. So I focus down to this moment."

"We're not staying with you, are we?" Raf asked.

"No," she replied.

"Why are we here, then?" I asked.

"Because I have been debating with myself. This portal you

have come through, it's only time travel in the sense that it allows sideways movement within the deck of interactions I have created, or rather, will, create. I have been trying to decide if the sort of, *let's say magic*, should be allowed to exist."

The telltale click in my ear, came shortly before Týr spoke. "I have advised her that such things shouldn't be allowed. I am blind to the technology of rocks and crystals, it may cause issues in the next realities. Or, more precisely, according to your wrist devices, already has."

"Iterations," Aygah corrected.

"But why are we here now? Why did Týr, our Týr talk to us until we left the wolves base?" I asked.

"My Týr thinks that proximity to the stones they use for moving around allows for grav-locking transmissions to pass between iterations. Something which is very useful to me, but very dangerous for others as portal's can be opened between realities, as you are now aware."

"Like the Warps?" Raf asked

"Týr?" Aygah barked.

She looked absent for a moment, while he told her things, about the Warps. The holes which existed between sectors of space in our *iteration*.

"Now there's a new idea," she said with a grin.

"Really?" Raf asked.

"You two are going home now. But once I have finished in this place, I will remove magic from the iterations, all of them. I won't change your past, but the people you fight will lose their *magic computers*, going forward."

Raf and I were stunned. We didn't know what to think about this interaction, never mind the implication of her decision. I briefly, for a moment at least, wondered if Raf and I were the reason that Warps existed.

"Oh, and please, don't feel bad about killing the Wolves,

they're literally savage's and without the organisation which is controlling them, they would kill anything that moves." She pointed behind us as she said the last words.

I turned to see what she was pointing at, instantly finding myself standing in the snow.

I turned to Raf, who was looking around suddenly concerned. After a moment, he started laughing. "I'm not cold!"

The searchlight stopped upon us. We were in the location where we first met her, just to the side of their base. I realised that the fires we had started were still burning, the sirens were still sounding.

"She put us back, exactly where we left. No time has passed!" I said.

Raf smiled, realising that he had a full bandoleer of knives and a fully loaded sixshooter. I looked down, I had my knife and gun back too.

As the fight had progressed, I had become more and more aware that my use of my powers wasn't draining me as it usually did. I had just turned to bats and fluttered around a small group of Wolves with a level of precision which I had rarely reached before. I had then burned blood for strength and I reformed to punch them hard enough to break them. I still felt like I was running on a full tank.

Raf was doing just as well as I was. He was launching Wolves into the air in ways which were closer to juggling than it was fighting.

And best of all, these were Wolves, evil, soulless. Wolves who the Goddess herself had endorsed the eradication of. Our fighting frenzy was not only useful in this battle, but it was divinely sponsored.

We ran out of Wolves.

"What I don't get is who the fuck has the resources, and

the knowledge to organise these idiots?" Raf eventually said as he calmed down from the fight.

"Yeah, that's worried me too," I replied, dripping in blood. I had bit and drained the last few Wolves I had faced, I didn't need to. I Just wanted to and for once, I didn't feel the least bit bad about it. The snow was bloodstained but the fresh falling flakes were covering it fast. Raf looked around with a still wide smile. He was enjoying being out in the snow, and not scared for his life.

We strolled into the metal and stone shed where we first arrived. The round stone platform still glowing slightly.

"Raf, Ta'ra, respond!" Týr said in our ears.

"We're here. Had a Wolf problem was all," Raf said.

I looked at him quizzically. He shrugged.

"I can't track your Circlets, were are you?" Týr asked.

I flicked my wrist, realising that Aygah hadn't returned them to us, as she had with our guns and knives. "Yeah, they were confiscated by the Goddess, both of them."

"What? Tell me later. I can't track you, the team has scanned the whole area and can't find you. Where are you?" He asked.

"We'll be back on that rooftop in a second. Get a team there, I think we're going to need them."

I looked at the stone disk. "How do we make it work?" I asked.

Raf scratched his chin for a moment and then looked, "Ready when you are, Goddess," he said loudly, to the air.

The portal opened.

"Smart arse," I said.

"What can I say? I was definitely her favourite!"

We stepped through the portal and the evening air of the city hit us. We were atop of the building again. The portal behind us closed in a vicious snap.

We stepped off the stone and its glow was snuffed out. It

cracked as if it had been hit in the middle with an invisible hammer.

"I have your location," Týr informed us. "The team is on its way."

Raf opened the door atop of the roof and it was instantly obvious from the sound, that there was a ruckus happening.

"Shall we?" Raf asked, waving a hand towards the open doorway for me.

"You have the bomb?" I asked.

"Obviously!" He replied with a grin.

"Well, I suppose it would be rude not to kill them."

I walked down the stairs and kicked open the door. This time, instead of empty office space, there were tens of Wolves, all in various states of forms. The humanoid ones were first to react to us, they barked and pointed.

The floor of the office building was stone, with dried grass bedding all around. They had some sort of totem at the back of the room. It looked like they were inspecting it when we entered. I assumed that this meant that it had recently stopped working; not that I knew what it was supposed to do.

Raf, having confirmation that wolves were indeed in the building, and wouldn't be leaving soon, pulled the pin on the bomb, tossing it like a grenade, down the stairwell behind us. He closed the door and turned as the wolves leaped towards us.

I batted the first few away before the explosion. Raf opened the door. There was a thick black smoke which wafted in and the fight began, this time, them without their healing abilities.

"Send in the troops, Týr, it's done," Raf said a moment before he started launching knives like he was an Elven machine gun.

MISSION 5

STEP ONE: REASONS FOR DOING.

Her visage made her look like she was of the stars themselves. She moved with a mobility that I didn't know a person could wield. She looked at me and time slowed to a crawl as an approving grin spread across her face.

She disappeared into the shadows again.

Something had changed.

I was holding a rifle. - Denouement

The soldiers had been quite effective at murdering wolves, once their healing ability was disabled. With a little help from Raf and I, not a single wolf had survived.

I liked that our commander knew when murdering things was the correct course of action. Though it was hard to like him when I was in the same room.

He dropped himself in to what had become his 'usual' chair at the briefing table. The operation felt like it had evolved again. Instead of being a large empty briefing room, it was now teeming with busy Followers, checking data and following leads. Once Ola'an and Angela joined us, he activated a privacy mask around us, which used a simulation to make it appear to outsiders that we were quietly talking, no matter what happened on the inside of the mask.

Jazz slammed his six-shooter on the desk, which I had realised was his indication that the meeting had began.

"That was a shit-show. From start to finish!" Was his opening volley. "You were off mission for over twenty minutes. We had no idea where you were, and, when you finally did get back on mission your explanation for missing time, is a pointless trip to another dimension, where you failed to bring back a single scan, or other useful crumb of

information!"

"I hardly think that spending time with the architect of our reality was wasted time," Raf said.

"You're right, we also know that Týr is a lying prick who knew about the Wolf technology before reality began! Literally forever, and didn't say a damned thing!" He ranted, waving his hand as if offering Týr the chance to respond.

"That was not me," he said, after slightly longer than was normal. "Just because Aygah is not bound by the limits of this reality, it doesn't mean I am not. I assure you, commander, I had no idea about any of this."

"Honestly, if it weren't for the fact that he would know everything about our operation, with or without our consent, I would throw him off this team right now. I don't believe for a moment that he didn't know everything about this before any of us even existed." He paused for a moment, "And it scares the shit out of me!" He added, looking at the empty air where he had imagined Týr to reside. "If I could turn that bastard off, I would!"

Ola'an made an uncomfortable face. Threatening to turn off a non-organic was about the most offensive thing you could say to them. It was similar to threatening to murder an organic.

Raf and I were less shocked by his words.

Angela looked at Jazz, and then us, with a vaguely entertained expression. Though, I still wasn't good at reading bear-person expressions, yet.

"Raf and I spent time *with* Aygah. And, we spent time with her in a way that I don't think anyone else has. It was an honour. She took our Circlets *because* she didn't want us returning scans to you; *I think*. Týr *was* there, or at least a version of him. We know now, as a fact, that his actions are endorsed by her. Whether he remembers, or not! Honestly, I don't care what you think." I said, still in an elated state from

the time I had spent with Her.

Jazz spun his gun on the table. "Ola'an, you agree with this sentiment, I assume?" He said, the barrel of the gun stopping, pointed squarely at her. It wasn't a threat, it was just his innate bond with the damned thing.

Ola'an, sheepishly nodded. "I know you're not a Follower, sir. But, sir, whatever the Goddess wants, well, that is the will of Followers."

He glared at her.

Angela made a bear noise, which I took as one of agreement.

"Ange, Something to add?" Jazz barked.

"I make snacks and deliver tea, it doesn't matter what I think. But I *am* a Follower, first and foremost. As a Follower, I agree with them, yes. Not that it matters. You are simply, well... wrong, honey."

I gave her a thankful nod, her support was welcome. Though, calling Jazz 'honey' would likely send him over the edge.

"The idiots upstairs want a report about your meeting the bloody woman, so make sure you write nice things about me," he finally said before standing and snatching his gun off the table. The sign that the meeting was over.

"The idiots upstairs being the Follower leadership?" Raf called as our commander marched way, quite disgruntled.

He ignored him. There was a shimmer as he left the privacy mask.

"Yes, *those* idiots," Ola'an confirmed. "Now, forget Jazz. Angela and I want to hear about the Goddess!"

Recounting our story to Ola'an and Angela had somehow turned into recounting our story to the entire room. Angela had turned off the Privacy mask and before we knew it, we were telling everyone about the adventure. Týr had even

offered to transcribe and edit our tale so that there was no need for us to file a report, that is, so long as we were thorough in our telling, which we were quite happy to be.

The Followers of the operations room had, up until that point struck me as aloof. As we talked with them, it became clear that they were actually intimidated by us.

A woman sitting cross legged on the floor raised her hand as my story ended. There were a little less than fifteen of them gathered.

"Err, you have a question?" I asked.

"Yes Hero Ta'ra, I do," She said. She was an Elven woman who I vaguely knew as a second generation Follower. Her parents were followers and had raised her in the order.

"Well, ask it then," I said, confused at her formality.

"Why do you think that she showed you all that, when she could have just put you back right away?"

To be honest, I had been wondering the same thing. She showed us ancient Earth, her building, or machine, a tropical planet and her ship. But she didn't need to do any of it. It was just showboating.

"I think she was lonely," Raf said, with a reflective tone. "She seems to be trapped in her own isolation. I think we tripped over an encounter with her at an early point in her timeline and she used it to experience the fruits of her work. She just wanted to hang out with us... I think."

Another hand went up. This time a human man, he was physically a little older than the others.

"Go on," I prompted.

"Space is big, time is big. How did she even find you?"

"I was calling out to Týr, got his attention. The Goddess came to investigate," I said, glad that these were people who dealt with Týr all day and didn't need his power explaining.

"But, Hero. The only reason you knew Týr's name was because the Goddess saved you and put you in this job. If she

hadn't done that, you wouldn't have known who he was. She caused a paradox, of sorts."

That was quite a thought. "Yes. I suppose she did. I'm not sure 'paradox' is quite the right term... Was there a question there?" I asked.

"The Goddess said that you pointed out the Wolves crystal-magic technology. And you think she turned it off. But she already knew about it when you first met her, originally. It was in *her* future. So, she let all that happen for no reason?" He finally finished asking.

Raf and I considered the point.

"Yes," Raf finally said. I couldn't add anything to such a complete answer so I just nodded and echoed his words... word.

"What do you think the commander is going to do?" Ola'an asked me as we walked through the park towards the city.

"Jazz? I have no idea. I never do. He's an arsehole," I replied.

"Yes. But he's a very competent arsehole. He really is trying to make our organisation better. He's not holding back and, he's doing all the missions which come down to us."

I slowed my pace a little. "Where do the missions come from?"

"The Keeper, he sends us bits of intel and occasionally more. It's usually obvious what he wants us to do," she replied.

"How does he even know things? He's in space right now, on Basilica," I asked.

"Jazz recently said that the Keeper has a book, with *Her* plan in it. He opens a new page every few days and reads what's in there, it gives him guidance," Ola'an said, with the poise of a dedicated Follower.

"Why doesn't he just skip to the end then?" I asked, giving

myself away as jaded.

"The pages don't make sense unless you read them as things happen. The book is tied to time."

"Old and mysterious magic, no doubt," I said in my best 'spooky,' voice.

"You are an odd Follower, Ta'ra. You have the blessing of knowing the Goddess and most of the Great Family, personally, yet you don't take Her plan seriously at all. Raf is the same. Neither of you have the reverence that I would expect," Ola'an pointed out, in her delicately spoken, yet cutting way.

"Well, I met John and Libby when he was missing most of his memories and Libby was hardly the unleashed badass who she finally became. The Goddess gave me a new life. I can never repay her for that, but sooner or later, this new life *will* be the thing that kills me, little sister."

She grinned at me, finally calling her sister. I knew she would notice that. Us Vampires were an artistic bunch and the poetry of the moment would stick with her. I wasn't very typical for my kind, but I knew how to play the part.

We stood at the line between the magenta grass of Canto park, and the stone and steel paths and streets of Central City. Behind us was tranquillity and purpose. In front was the electric lure of the largest city in known space.

Ola'an sighed. I glanced at her.

"So, *big sister*, you want to go to the party district and dance until morning?" She asked.

I laughed out loud. I did not expect that offer from someone as buttoned down as her. "There is no way you actually party!"

She laughed. "I grew up the daughter of a crime matriarch. Believe me, I know how to party. Maybe you're too good to hang out with me now that you're best friends with the Goddess."

We laughed and stepped across the threshold. I didn't have the heart to tell her that I was immune to alcohol; *she'd figure it out.*

STEP TWO: THE THREAD.

The door chime went off again. My *sister* and I had fallen asleep my couch, watching terrible Brick movies. We really had partied hard, for a few hours. Truth was, neither of us was very good at letting loose. She had gotten drunk within an hour and was throwing up within two. By hour three we were sitting on my couch under a blanket, with marshmallow flavoured popcorn.

“What’s that noise?” Ola’an asked.

“The door, don’t worry, I got it,” I said, as I flicked the safety catch off on the gun I had behind my back.

I pressed to open the door and readied my blood, on the off chance it was danger, rather than annoyance.

It took me a moment to realise who I was looking at.

“Hi,” he said.

“Ola’an, you’re going to want to wake up up for this,” I said, backing away from the doorway.

“What?” she asked, sticking her head up over the back of the couch.

“Hi,” He said again.

“Are you...?” Ola’an managed.

“Yes, I’m Ba’an Ty. Former president of the Sol alliance.”

I stumbled, not quite knowing what to say. I just backed away from the door as he walked in.

President Ty was a legend. Not only because his actual family was one of the most powerful in our entire sector, but because he, himself, was the most well known Vampire who had ever lived. He gave up the most successful presidency ever and a week later a war broke out. Seeing him in person, he was stunning. He stood over six feet tall, his pale skin was flawless. His lips and eyes were marbling red and, most of all,

his wings were so big they looked like a cape on his back. He wore a black hoodie and jeans, but despite that, a regal presence radiated from him.

“President Ty, what are you doing here?” Ola’an asked, seemingly less intimidated than me.

“I’ve come to talk to you about your father.”

Ba’an, as he had instructed us to call him, sat down in my armchair and looked over at Ola’an and me. His demeanour was commanding, despite him looking like a giant in the tiny designer chair.

“I rarely get involved in things like this,” he began. “But because you are a Follower, Ola’an, it would be remiss of me not to talk to you at least.”

“Ta’ra,” came Týr’s voice gently in my ear, so not to startle me.

Ba’an continued. “Some things have happened recently, which will be making the news feeds in about an hour, and I think you may find difficult.”

“Former president Ty does not know about our operation, or that you are Ola’an sister,” Týr said, coldly. “I edited the records to show your apartment as her residence, when I realised he was looking for her.”

“I’m sorry to break this to you, but your father has been killed.”

There was a silence in the air which came like a knife. My father had never been a part of my life which I connected with, not really. But he was still the only one I had ever had. The news cut me inside. Ola’an exploded in tears and I held her tight while I stoically held my own at bay. Ba’an had no way of knowing that it was my news too.

He gave Ola’an a few seconds, looking at me like the excellent friend I was, comforting her in this time of need. I shattered inside.

"The news feeds will report this differently, but you should know that he was assassinated while on the way to a government facility, where he was going to brief the authorities on your mothers activities... I assume you know which activities I am talking about." Ba'an finished delivering his news and relaxed in his seat. This had been the hard part for him, and it was over.

"What do you need from Ola'an?" I asked, knowing that there would be another layer to why he was here, personally. Ola'an carried on crying. I wanted to share in her soul's screaming, but this was work. I had to maintain our cover. Of all the people who could have delivered this news, he was the one person who simply could not know who I was; that I wasn't dead and it was my dad too. The one person who would definitely tell Jonathan Michaels, who would tell Libby Michaels, and our entire operation would be exposed to the very people we were supposed to be supporting by doing the violence which they couldn't.

"The government has suggested that Ola'an be taken into protective custody. It would appear that her mother is securing potential breaches. According to government intel, Ola'an turning her back on her family business and becoming a Follower has put her at risk."

Ola'an's face left my chest, tears still streaming. She turned to look at him. Her strategic mind was now at work, though she suppressed the tone which usually accompanied it. "No, I'm a Follower. I'll be safe at the Temple. The Temple is safe."

The Temple may not actually have been the safest place she could be, but the basement was. It wasn't like she could tell Ba'an that she had access to a NOLF surveillance expert who could generate portals to any location on the planet, and her friends were two hyper-violent biologically-enhanced agents of the Goddess, and we all worked for a mysterious badass cowboy man.

“I had a feeling that you would feel that way, which is why the government has asked me to come and speak with you. I think you likely know that I’m not just an old politician. I work closely with... well, I work on Basilica. And, I think you know what that means. I may not officially be a Follower but I have lot of sway with the Keeper. I think he will agree with me when I say that this is not a problem for a peaceful religious order. It’s a serious problem and your life is at risk.”

Had he been talking to almost any other Follower they would have swooned with his very presence and done whatever he asked. We were not peaceful Followers, we were not helpless, and we were not safer under his custody.

“I appreciate that you have come a long way, but my mother knows I want nothing to do with her. It’s why I became a Follower. She is not likely to send her goons to attack a religious temple, even if she did think I was going to be a problem.” Ola’an had taken the *I’m-not-important* angle. A solid gambit.

“I had a feeling you would say that, which is why I have arranged for you to return to Basilica with me. You can hardly argue that there is anywhere safe than that!”

Damn, Ba’an was pulling out all the stops. The fact that he had arranged that meant that the Keeper hadn’t been informed. He would have known full well she was absolutely not at risk. Ba’an would also know that no Follower would refuse a position on Basilica. It was essentially the most prestigious posting that there was for a Follower. She would *have* to say yes, simply to maintain our cover.

Damn.

Jazz had been inside the privacy mask at the briefing table for about an hour. I don’t think he knew that it didn’t work on Raf, who was sitting on a desk by the door, legs folded under him, listening to every word.

I had been busy answering questions about Aygah with the operations room staff, most of whom I was getting to know quite well, without learning what any of them did; *because I was pretty sure it was going to be very boring.*

Angela arrived with a large tray of drinks which was honestly too large for someone of her size to carry, which gave me a clue as to the traits of her species. She began dishing out coffee and snacks like it was her personal calling.

Perhaps it was.

"Anything to report, Raf?" I asked.

"A little," he said without changing his posture, or even glancing at me. "After exhausting all of his contacts, Jazz is finally calling the Keeper. Oh, and he had found out that Basilica is scheduled to leave at midnight, local time."

Angela sat next to me on the desk, Raf on my other side. The three of us probably looked quite odd to the people who usually worked there, I'm sure. She handed me a cup of warm blood, which, for reasons that only Angela could explain, smelled vaguely of pumpkin spice.

"How are you feeling?" She asked, gently.

"I'm fine, but I'm going to be pissed if I lose the best combat coordinator we've ever had."

She looked at me with that hard-to-read face. "I meant about the news. You just found out your father is dead." From anyone else that may have sounded blunt but from Angela, it sounded simply concise.

Truth was, I didn't know.

"I'm not sure it makes a difference. I can't visit my family, can I? I'm legally dead. And, that was specifically arranged by Aygah, so there is likely a reason for it."

Angela made a bear noise and put her arm around me.

"Which is why, I imagine, the idea of losing your new sister is so hard for you."

I didn't like bears anymore, they were too smart.

STEP THREE: DEAD DADS AND ABSENT MOTHERS.

Basilica was so low in the sky that I could make out windows. The beautiful red ship looked like a shard of stained glass as the city lights reflected across it. Usually dusk wasn't a time of day which I thought much about, but seeing Basilica in this light, so close, made it seem almost magical. The five pointed ring at the back hardly looked attached as it rotated around it, generating the stabilisation field.

Raf stood next to me, looking up at it. I envied him. I could make out windows, he would be able to see people, probably even faces.

"Has it ever been so low before?" I asked.

"Not as far as I recall. The pilot is showboating for the benefit of the Temple," Raf replied.

Followers were gathering out the front of the Temple to see the flagship of our religion so close. The ship was legendary to us all, even Raf and I. It was one of two ships which Aygah had provided to us. Basilica was a war ship posing as a humanitarian cargo vessel. Though, I doubt anyone who had actually seen it would think of it as anything other than a gun with an engine on the back. The engine was another thing; there were no others like it. It used a type of energy that our version of reality never invented. It was one of a kind. A ship chosen by the Goddess herself because of its power and legacy. Now that I knew my Goddess a little better, I was pretty sure it was also because it looked cool.

The other ship she had given us was owned by a woman I had met once, before my new life. It was a small, but powerful starship with some interesting little quirks. It was less obvious why Aygah had chosen that one. It was called

Thirteen. The Keeper once told me that it had been the only ship that could fly when the Brick homeworld was attacked during the Thinker war.

I realised I was lost in thought when Raf put a hand on my shoulder.

"Hood," He said sternly.

I pulled my cloak closed and made sure I blended in with the other Followers who were gathering.

"Týr, are you ready?" I asked.

"Of course he's ready. Keep out of this," Jazz snapped in my ear.

Raf glanced at me through his hooded opening, smirking. We were beginning to like Jazz. Despite his grumpy demeanour, he was working very hard to make sure Ola'an stayed with us, rather than being whisked away into permanent hiding on Basilica.

There was a click in my ear as Týr patched us through to Ola'an. Jazz told us to stay quiet.

"Týr, was that clicking you?" She asked.

"Yes, Ola'an. Has the Keeper spoken with you yet?"

"Yes. He maintained our cover. He has convinced Ba'an and Jon that taking me would make Basilica a target for my mother. He's arranged for a public accident to occur. They plan on faking my death." She sounded totally calm, she was likely torn. The chance to travel on Basilica was probably quite appealing to her.

"Ola'an, it's Jazz. Did they tell you the *official* plan?" He asked.

"Yeah, something about a shuttle explosion. The Keeper told Jon and Ba'an that he had ways of getting me clear, which they argued about for an hour. He said a team of Follower's would take me away and no one, not even him, himself would know where I was."

Jazz laughed. "Bet they were pissed off that David

wouldn't part with his secrets. They probably think Aygah is getting involved for him."

"That's what they were arguing about," Ola'an snickered back.

Týr chimed in next. "The deal they came to was that if Libby can track you, you return to Basilica with them. If she can't, you stay with us. She has no idea that I exist, or that I can generate portals. I am confident in the cover. Should it be required, I believe I can alter her perception of data relating to you, but I would rather not have to try."

It only then occurred to me that Týr could read all digitally stored data, all of it. He could likely read Libby's mind. I decided to ask about that, the next time I got the chance.

"Aygah was true to her word and killed the rock computers. We began to get data on our enemy movements. Seems that there is an attack being organised on Basilica. I'm not sure when but we are certain they are up to something," Jazz said with his usual grizzle.

"What!" Ola'an replied.

"Don't worry, Týr is going to futz with their systems. Besides, they can hardly attack while it's doing a fly over Central Prime, can they?"

Basilica flared its shield and a glittering red sheen covered it for a moment as a small blue dot left its belly. This was the shuttle which Ola'an was on.

"Tracking motion and connecting with Circlet," Týr said. There was a moment of silence which felt like it had gone on too long.

"Portal opening."

"Why does this feel so tense?" Raf asked me.

"Don't worry, the shuttle is well within Týr's range and it's slow. It's fine," I reassured him.

"We have her," Týr said calmly.

A few seconds later, the shuttle exploded, with just enough

force that there was no debris to fall onto the planetary shield. All the Followers around me pointed at the sky and made shocked sounds, though most of them would have assumed that it was staged. As planned though, there was a camera recording which would prove that every Follower was outside looking up at Basilica when the 'accident' happened, meaning that even if the authorities decided to investigate a private shuttle accident, we were all accounted for, luckily.

"Get back in here, now," Jazz ordered in our ear, while the explosion was still in the air.

"Problems?" Raf asked.

"Yes. Get your arses in here."

We exchanged loaded looks and backed out of the small crowd toward the Temple. As soon as we were behind the fire pit, we turned and ran for the entrance.

The small Fold in the basement placed us in the entry room of our facility. We waved politely to the nice gentlemen on 'the door,' before realising that no one was there. We sprinted towards the operations room.

I entered the room in a cloud of bats, which was slightly faster than feet. Raf bounced off a wall behind me and we came into the operations room full of adrenaline.

Ola'an, Jazz and Angela were there. I hugged Ola'an.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Ola'an has been tracked here," Jazz said gravely.

"What? By who?" Raf asked.

"I don't know. I went straight from the Temple to Basilica with Ba'an. I met with the Keeper and The Family. I didn't see anyone until I got on the rigged shuttle," Ola'an explained.

"How do we know she was tracked?" I asked.

Jazz threw a metal disk across the table. It was no larger than a Circlet power-cell. I picked it up, it was a solid piece of a silver metal. I passed it to Raf, who I hoped would be able

to see something I couldn't.

"Is it still active?" I asked.

"Týr blocked it about three seconds after it entered the facility," Jazz said.

"Is this a big problem? If someone wants to attack us, it doesn't take a tracker to figure out that we're in the basement of the Temple does it?" Ola'an asked.

I saw the concern on Jazz's face instantly, but it was Raf who spoke first.

"We're not in the basement of the Temple."

"What?" I asked.

"We never were," he added. "Never been able to figure out where we are, exactly, but I have some theories."

"And you never told me?"

"Didn't seem worth it. Everyone wanted us to think, or assume, we were under the Temple and I have a feeling that if I had told you, Týr would know I had figured it out and informed our commander. Though, other than the Keeper, and I would guess Jazz here, I doubt any of them have known themselves."

I was left speechless. Ola'an let out a sigh as she unpacked the information.

"So, where *are* we?" I asked.

Jazz put his gun on the table, I think more out of habit than a formal sign that we had started.

He scratched his bristly chin thoughtfully and his lips pursed for a moment while he considered his options.

Finally, he spoke. "We're on a small space station in a geostationary orbit of the second planet in the Central system."

"That's not possible, Týr can't generate portals that far off world, and, we use a Fold to get here, they don't work at that range!" I replied, not really sure why I thought Jazz would lie to me about this.

He checked something on the panel in the desk and stood up, picking up his gun. "Why do you think the Wolves were trying to blow up the transmission needles? We use them to leapfrog the materialisation signal. That private organisation that owns and maintains all communication non Central, well... That's Týr."

"What do we do?" Ola'an asked.

The holographic planning map which we often used to look at the city popped into existence across the briefing table. Though now it showed the solar system. Týr's voice filled our ears as the map tightened in on the second planet of the solar system. The one that was usually thought of as a warehouse planet.

"There are currently three ships heading to our location, while they may appear unrelated, they all started heading right for us a few seconds after Ola'an returned. Presumably when they got some rough location information from the tracker. I blocked it before it would have gained an exact fix."

"Are they armed?" Ola'an asked.

"Not officially, no. However, their designation doesn't necessarily match reality and they are too far away to scan right now. Our enemy is clever enough to have changed all the build records."

"Týr, you can just interface with their systems and give them false data, right?" Ola'an asked.

"At this time, I have not been able to make a connection. Which, I do not quite understand."

I suddenly felt vulnerable. "I assume we are capable of defending ourselves?" I asked.

"Sort of," Jazz said, nervously tapping his gun, which now hung from his hip. I hadn't even noticed him pick it up.

"What the fuck does 'sort of' mean?" Raf snapped.

"We're very hard to spot, visually and with sensors. The station is small, I mean, bigger than the parts you have

explored, but small by station standards. We have a red shield generator and we got more armour than most battle ships. But, no guns."

"No guns seems like a bit of an oversight," Ola'an said.

"Weapons can be located, they show up on deep scans. Also, it's entirely possible that they won't locate us, even with the data that they have," Jazz replied.

The map zoomed in a little more. I realised that Týr was clarifying something for us. We really were going to be hard to find. We knew that the planet we were orbiting had rings, anyone who had ever looked at a star chart knew that. What I hadn't realised was that the station, appeared to be one of the rocks, *in* the ring.

"We're an asteroid?" I asked, sharply.

"Yeah, which means if our guests start sniffing around the belt, the planetary security force will shoo them away for us, I hope," Jazz replied.

"How did you put a base inside an asteroid without anyone noticing? It's hardly the middle of nowhere. That planet is used as a way-station. It has more traffic than most city worlds and there are constant patrols," Raf asked.

"The station was here *before* your Goddess created this reality."

"Oh, that's smart. We use portals, so we're untraceable and no one has ever come in or out of it, ever. It's a good hiding place," Raf mused.

"Unless someone brings in a location tracker," Ola'an said regretfully.

Týr clicked in our ear before updating us. "The ships appear to be using conventional system engines to get to us without raising suspicion. They will be in deep scanning range in four minutes."

"Plan?" I asked.

Jazz took a deep breath. "All our facility staff are outside

making sure they are on camera, so that they can have alibis for any investigation regarding the fake shuttle explosion. Notify them they should stay at the Temple for a few hours. Realistically. It's not like a single one of them can hold a gun anyway. Bloody pacifists. Let the Keeper know of our situation, please, Týr. Turn off all nonessential systems and cut life support outside of this room. We'll try to be a rock."

It was a good plan. We weren't cut off, because Týr's ability to communicate was outside of our facility and untraceable. Presumably the station itself was deep enough inside the asteroid that with everything turned-off, we would look like every other rock, even on a deep scan. Now all we could do was wait.

"Týr, any idea why you can't interface with their computers?" Raf asked.

"I'm sorry Raf, I have been continually trying. The three ships appear to be using the same types of dampening fields as the rest of their operations. Their systems are not visible to me."

"Didn't we sort that? I thought Aygah turned off all their magic rocks and stuff?" Raf followed.

"Yes, as a lot of Wolves have become visible, but it appears they have more complex ways of hiding from me."

Back to waiting.

STEP FOUR: WAITING FOR IT.

The operations sensors were now off-line. The heating was also set to minimum. Raf was thankful that he was less sensitive since our meeting with Aygah. It was chilly, but not frozen, Jazz had wrapped his old crop duster around himself like a blanket and put his feet on the desk. Angela didn't seem bothered by the temperature drop either. She was entirely covered in fur, so it shouldn't have come as a shock. Ola'an was okay too, Vampires were less sensitive than Humans when it came to temperature.

"Okay, Jazz, I have to ask. Now I know that this place is a super secret space station inside a rock. How did you get aboard without Týr tracking you?" Raf asked.

Jazz laughed. "Yeah, the Keeper wanted to know that too. Really freaked him out. Which was bollocks, because doing things like that, well, it's the reason I was hired in the first place."

"That didn't answer the question," Ola'an said, speaking to him a little less formally than she usually did. I suppose the cold may have been getting to her, a little.

He grinned. "I clicked my heels together three times and said something about there being no place like home."

We glared at him.

"Fine! I asked Aygah nicely, and she let me use *Her* entrance. You don't think she would make the longest range teleportation platform ever constructed and not have her own way of using it, did you?"

"You told us you weren't a Follower," I asked.

Angela was smiling. She looked content watching us bicker.

"Týr, you got any updates for us yet?" Jazz asked, in a

thinly veiled attempt to change the topic.

"No, they are still scanning. Though it's hard to track because I have to use remote planetary sensors, not our own. The Keeper had promised us support should we be discovered. He is arranging for Basilica to stay orbiting Central Prime until we are in the clear. Obviously, though, if he has to aid us, our status as a *covert* organisation will be gone." Týr, unlike the rest of us sounded as professional as ever.

We ignored him and stared expectantly at Jazz for the rest of his story.

"Fine. If you must know, the entire time I was supposed to be trying to get here, I was actually using my Sol alliance contacts to get a meeting with the President. The Keeper once told me she was Her daughter. Once I got her to meet with me, I asked her to get me a meeting with her mom. In a manner of speaking. If I was going to work for a bunch of religious nutters, I needed to know for sure if their God was real, and you all weren't just delusional."

"You asked President Joanne Michaels to call the Goddess for you? I didn't even know she could do that," Ola'an said, a little shocked.

"She can't, or at least didn't admit to it. But, when I pulled my gun at point blank range against her head. I suddenly found myself in *Her* company. Took some explaining to convince her not to turn me into, well, who knows what, but I can tell you, she was angry! We're all good now. I think we got along pretty well, actually."

"You tried to kill the President?" I asked, more than a little stunned.

"Context is important. I had a mission and I don't fail missions," he grinned. I wondered if the story was even true.

There was a rocking motion suddenly.

"Týr?" Jazz asked.

“One of the three ships I have been tracking has vanished from scans and the other two have broken off. I can’t be sure without powering up the station, but I believe from the motion, that someone maybe using contact blasts to identify our location,” Týr replied.

Angela looked at me for an explanation. Sometimes even I forgot I used to be a physicist, of sorts.

“They have gone stealth to avoid planetary patrols. They are using low-powered blasters, shunting rocks about hoping to light up a shield.”

“Týr, can we turn our shield off, stop it from automatically firing up if we’re hit?” Jazz asked.

“We can turn anything off. But without the shield system, we would be totally open to attack should they locate us.”

Jazz rubbed his chin. “The entire point of this base is that it can’t be located. Turn off the shields.”

“As you wish.”

We all sat in silence. It felt like we should whisper, though we all knew that there was no point, space didn’t work like sonar. I was still angry with myself for never figuring out that we weren’t under the Temple.

“What’s that sound?” Raf asked.

Everyone looked at him with concern.

“Raf and I can take care of this, whatever it is,” I said, standing up with purpose.

We threw off our Follower robes and checked our weapons.

“To hell you will,” Jazz said. “Týr bring minimal systems online across the facility. Give me some information.”

Raf crouched down and tilted his head from side to side. “There is something cutting into the hull.”

“Yes. Raf is correct. There appears to be a pod attached to the underside of the facility.”

"Týr, power everything up and activate internal defences. Open the garage door. Ta'ra, Raf, get down there. Ola'an, coordinate from here. Angela, keep her safe," Jazz barked as he slapped a personal shield on his arm and spun his gun like an old cowboy.

The door opened as the corridor lights blinked on. We left the operations room in a sprint. Neither of us were using our abilities to expedite the journey. We knew well enough to save our energy for a fight.

Ola'an began speaking in our ears. "Okay scanning the facility, sorry, station, now." Týr has unlocked the *actual* layout map for me. All the space stuff is accessible via the emergency door in the garage. That's where they are coming in."

We approached the garage level, and both drew our guns. "These maybe a little overpowered for space combat," I said, suddenly realising that while we were in a large asteroid, hull integrity was likely something we had to think about.

"Only if we miss," Raf said.

I nodded and flipped my gun over. Holding it by the barrel, I offered it to him. "Seems smarter if you shoot," I said.

He took it.

Ola'an took a deep breath. We heard it through our audio link. Not a good sign. There was about to be quite the offload, I worried.

"They weren't contact bombarding us to get a location. They already had a location. They knew we would turn off our shields and they could lock on their pod. It's big. Looks like it may hold twenty or thirty people, well, Wolves. Also, Týr wants you to get a deep scan while you're close, he thinks he can interface if he knows what he's looking for."

Raf laughed.

I couldn't help but smirk. "So, with no backup, and no

preparation, you want us to fight off thirty Wolves, get into their attack pod, and do a scan. And do this *before* another pod arrives?"

"No," Jazz said sternly. "I want you to do that before their battle cruiser realises they are losing and just starts shooting at us."

I pulled my knife. Raf spun the barrels on his guns. I burst into smoke and he used his gravity bending acrobatics. We entered the garage to something of an anticlimax. The second door wasn't open yet, but we could hear tools working behind it, and whoever was there was not trying to be stealthy.

"Is there any chance that we're getting backup?" I asked.

"As soon as you have that scan, Týr is going use the data to open a portal into their lead ship and I'm going to order a whole pile of marines through," Jazz assured me.

"And you can't bring them here?" Raf asked.

"The defence shield is up, Týr can't portal through a shield, even our own," Ola'an said. "Now please kill things."

Raf glared at the closed doorway. We knew that it wasn't an emergency exit to a road now. It was the access to the external docking port. We also knew that Týr had internal defences armed and ready to shoot. But the Wolves were borderline unkillable with anything other than our knives or a head shot with enough power to atomise. The explosive revolvers could do it but even then, anything other than a shot in the brain and they stood a chance of reforming.

"Any chance we have another one of those magic grenades?" I asked, knowing full well that the engineer team was waiting for a shipment of metals from the Vampire homeworld.

"No, but at least were going to have some fun. We have about a minute before that door gives way. Maybe we could finally drive one of those surface shuttles."

* * *

The door in question was an external blast door. It was thick, starship hull thick. As with all doors like this, there were only a few ways to break it. The Wolves had, as expected gone with the simplest one. A high powered laser pointing right at the centre and then, once hot enough, a bloody great battering ram, in this case, a mechanical arm, we assumed. The pod they had attached was a combat insertion pod. Something that most militaries used, not a random bunch of alien Wolves.

I climbed into the surface shuttle, which was closer to a small tank than a transport and pressed the buttons to bring it online. The docking clamps released. I had always wondered why they had docking clamps, at least now I knew. Raf stood behind it, readying his own support.

The ram burst through the door and then retracted as coolant gas was released to make the big hole safe for ingress.

It was at that moment, as the smoke filled the room that I put my foot on the accelerator. The shuttle blazed forward at a speed that I hadn't been aware it could manage. This was, in no small part, due to Raf's tinkering with the gravity it was operating under. As planned, a moment before it hit the newly open door, I turned to bats and left via the shuttle's door, which I had intentionally left open.

Raf, as soon as I was clear, increased the gravity of the vehicle. This mixed with the speed, turned it into a very dangerous object. The resulting impact made their battering ram look like a polite wave in comparison.

"That almost ruptured the pod's seal," Ola'an informed me, curtly.

"That's our plan. Wolves probably can't live in space," I replied. "Týr seal off this room and fry the controls. If they make it past us, there's no reason to make it easy for them."

Raf and I met up in front of the door as the shuttle came to

a halt.

The impact had been almost explosive. We heard screaming as it made contact in the darkness which lay beyond.

There was movement next to us, I didn't look away, Raf took a glance. "It would appear that Jazz joined us before the door closed."

"Stand back," Ola'an informed us over the link as Týr fired two large ceiling mounted lasers into the hole.

I took the the few seconds of coverage to dash to our commander. He was wearing a large armoured shield generator over his shirt, rather than his usual coat.

"What are you doing here? You realise we're trying to blow the seal?" I asked, annoyed.

"Space shield," He said, tapping his chest as a red glow shimmered around him. "Keeper left one here with me last time he visited. It's for emergencies."

The firing stopped after a few seconds. Raf and I stood, weapons at the ready, waiting for something to move. Jazz was at the back of the room, gun drawn and pointed in the right direction.

There was a creaking all around us. Two sets of red eyes glimmered from the inside of the pod and Raf fired a shot from each of his over powered revolvers. There was a sudden and intense Wolf scream, at least, I assumed it was scream, it was more of a bark, or yelp. Raf squinted for a moment and fired again, this time at the top of the pod.

"Hold on," he said sternly as he offloaded yet again at the sealed edge, shrapnel flying.

I stepped back and took hold of the other vehicle left in the garage, a large land cruiser.

A Wolf leaped from the darkness between explosions as the seal finally gave way. The air burst from the opening and pushed the pod into space. The Wolf didn't make it. It howled

and whomped for a moment as he bounced against the pod, which was floating away at high speeds, and then, into a small asteroid which made up the planetary ring we were in.

Raf and I both smacked the shields in our arms as the pressure finally equalised. We didn't really need the air and Raf wasn't cold sensitive any more, but the vastness of space left even the most hardy of us feeling naked.

I turned to look at Jazz, I realised there was no air to carry my voice so, using the Cirplet interface which Týr left in my head, I asked, "Was that all of them? That was hardly an insertion force!"

Jazz's shield was flickering and sparkling red, the chest plate he was wearing like some kind of tabard was venting oxygen into his little energy cocoon.

"I know they're stupid, but that was a terrible plan," he said before being cut off by Ola'an through the communication link.

"We have a new problem. The stone wall art thing, by where the Fold brings us in, it just started cracking!"

"What does that mean?" Raf asked.

"Chunks are falling out of it and Wolf arms and coming through it!" Ola'an clarified.

The three of us started for the door, then stopped, realising that we were open to space.

"What do we do?" Raf asked, looking at me, rather than Jazz for guidance.

"Fuck! It was a decoy!" Jazz said, smacking the wall as he looked at the closed door. "We sealed the door! Even if we could get it open, we would just be emptying the air out of the rest of the station. None of the other doors are air sealed."

Ola'an's voice clicked as her mic cut in again. "They must have known that. They used a dummy attack to get the really dangerous people trapped. Now they are coming to take the station. The stone plate covers a secondary emergency

docking clamp.”

“No problem, we’ll come around the outside and get the pod off from the back,” Raf said.

“We can’t, if we do, we break their seal. Ta’ra and Angela will be dead in seconds,” Jazz informed us. He was right, of course he was.

“Týr, can you open a portal from here into the operations room?” He asked.

“No. The ship out there is deep scanning us. If I open a portal under a scan that intense, I would be giving them the frequency of the control beam, they could jam us in the future. Also, and this is more concerning, even if I were to risk it, they would know exactly where in this asteroid field the portal generator is. At this time, they may think it is on this station. It isn’t,” Týr said.

“The portal generator isn’t even on the station?” I asked, shocked at yet another layer of misinformation.

“It’s only powered for six or so seconds when it activates. It’s a distributed system, built with the kind of attention to detail that bordered on paranoid. Someone knows what they’re doing here! They know *us!*” Jazz ranted.

“Yes. And better than your own team does!” Ola’an snarked.

“What are our options?” Jazz asked.

Raf and I both drew a blank. We couldn’t get in from the outside. We had no idea what the station layout actually was, even if we could, and we couldn’t use portals without giving our enemy what they likely came for.

“They’re coming in,” Týr said.

“I think it may be time to call Basilica now, boss,” Raf mused.

“Honestly, by the the time they get here, it’ll all be over. Even that ship can’t make it here in time,” Jazz said.

There was a loaded silence for a moment before Ola’an

finally snapped it like a twig in a forest.

"The large ship scanning us is going to be coming within a few hundred feet of the station in the next few minutes. Raf and Ta'ra, float over there and destroy their power systems. Týr as soon as it's safe, open a portal and get them in here to deal with the Wolves. That's the plan, make it happen."

"Ola'an they can't be more than a few minutes from the operations room," I said, frantically.

Jazz looked at me with a knowing expression.

"I'll buy her some time. Don't worry. The plan is good," Angela said, now not at all sounding like her usual demure self.

"Ange?" Raf asked, shocked.

"She's *trying* to be a pacifist, but she will defend Ola'an. She's very capable," Jazz confirmed.

"How capable?" Raf asked.

"You ever wondered why you've not seen a bear before?" Jazz asked.

Raf shook his head.

"They are classed as a hostile hyper-violent species by all four Elder races."

Raf's eyes grew wide in an approving expression. "Go Ange!"

"Would you please get on with it!" Ola'an barked over the link.

STEP FIVE: DIE FOR THE CAUSE, AGAIN.

Raf and I leaped from the opening, Jazz holding onto Raf's belt, and somehow looking far cooler than he had any right to.

I had intuited that this would not be a normal stint in space. For a start, I had a crappy shield, not a space suit, or even a whatever odd thing that Jazz had. I also knew that we were in an asteroid belt, which was also a little concerning. The final issue was that there was a moving ship coming, and we had to get on it, with no pre-planning, no briefing and no tools, save for knives and guns.

Despite my intellectual preparation, the reality was terrifying.

Raf had been the one to tell us the moment to jump. He had an understanding of motion, and vectors which would even make a non-organic raise an eyebrow. He also had the edge of being able to direct gravitational forces, even, I hoped, in a vacuum.

Our rotation and perspective was the same as the rocks which made up the ring, while we were probably moving very fast to a stationary observer, from our point of view they were almost stationary, the odd one drifting by a little faster than the others. After a moment in free fall, I realised how close the planet below appeared. It was just close enough to make me feel like it was 'down' relative to us. My stomach flipped, I felt myself almost turn to smoke. It took a level of control which usually eluded me to stop it happening. I wasn't quite sure how my smoke form worked, but being smoke in space was probably a very bad idea.

There was a flash in front of my vision, a ship was streaking past, relative to our motion. It was pushing rocks

out of the way with its sparkling blue shield.

I felt the pull of gravity and suddenly it was the rocks which were streaking past. The ship, now slow, was getting closer by the second. I was being pulled along by the wake of a leviathan in the darkness. I suppose there was some truth to that, after all Raf couldn't generate gravity, only alter its grip on us. "Hold on, this is the hard part," Raf said cheerfully, a moment before we hit the sparkling shield at high speed.

I rolled along it like I had fallen from a shuttle and was bouncing down a road.

Jazz however, rather than bouncing, passed right through the shield. It took me a moment to realise it. Raf slapped his arm and was pulled down towards the hull, Jazz still holding on to his belt like it was a lifeline.

I didn't have the same grip on him as Jazz and my hand slipped. I looked down to see the shield, bright and blue beneath me. Raf had lost his grip, I was about to be thrown from the surface like a barnacle in a storm.

I knew smoke would distribute in space, but bats had a little more agency. Burning blood for speed, I slapped my arm to disable my shield and burst from it as it vanished from me.

I flew, blood enhanced bats, using the moment of perceived stillness to fly through the vacuum and into the shield, through the very grid which it was made from. Some of my bats singed their wings as they passed through. I was pretty sure I just defied the laws of physics, but given that the ability to turn into bats made no sense to begin with, I decided not to consider it too deeply.

I reformed next to Raf and Jazz. I screamed, though in a vacuum it was louder in my head than it was outside of me. I had burns appear across my arms and the back of my left leg. There seemed to be no logic between where the bats placed the damage when I pulled myself together. I had to burn more blood to numb the pain. Though, given that there were

no missing limbs or broken bones, I didn't burn enough to heal the wounds, just silence the symptoms and pain.

I slapped my arm for my shield to come back on, there wasn't really much point, but I wanted to feel a *little* less vulnerable.

"You okay?" Jazz asked, sincerely, for once.

I opened my mouth to answer, forgetting that my lungs were empty., I wasn't sure I could go on indefinitely without oxygen, and that fear had taken until then to surface.

I switched to the internal Circlet interface. "I've had worse. Bats were small enough to get through the shield. I didn't have much choice."

"I thought we had lost you, for a second."

Raf, and I had been on enough missions and had enough close calls that he didn't waste time congratulating me on not being dead. He glanced at me, instantly assessing that I was still combat able. He shrugged and went back to looking for an entrance to the ship.

"How did you pass through the ship shield?" I asked Jazz.

"Red energy beats blue in direct contact," he said.

Raf spotted a window set deeply in the bulkhead. He gestured for me to throw him a blade. I did. It wasn't a very good throw but Raf reached out and it arched towards him. He pried at the rather large seal around the edge.

The compartment decompressed in a matter of seconds. Due more to luck than any skill or wisdom on our part, we had breached into a small living area. There were some furniture items, now tossed about in the decompression. The desk and couch were bolted down. It likely looked like a cheap hotel room before the furniture was juggled around. Once the pressure had equalised, we wiggled in through the opening. Once we were inside, I picked up a metal table and slammed it against the opening. I held it there for a few seconds and

the room began filling with air, enough air for me to get a well desired lung full. It wasn't sealed though, not really. It wouldn't last more than a few seconds, but it was the few seconds we needed to get to the other side of the door.

The door was solid and mechanical, a real space door. Not the sort of useless set-pieces that were on our badly thought out fake basement of a station. I spared a moment to lament that I had never figured it out.

The door closed behind us almost the exact moment that we heard the table snap under the pressure. It was likely that the ship's sensors were aware of the breach.

Raf knelt down to get his breath. We had stamina and apparently we didn't need that much air, but we still needed some. I was now finding out that Raf needed more than me. I was barley feeling the strain when we breached in. Jazz turned a dial on his shield armour and it shimmered as it lost its oxygen seal. There was a vague popping sound and the air inside escaped.

"Plan?" Raf asked, looking at me.

I looked at Jazz.

"This isn't where I shine, Ta'ra. You two are the experts here. I'll be useful where I can, but don't hold back on my account."

"I can hear something that way," Raf said as he stood up, finally getting his breath and pointed down the corridor.

I tapped my communication controls. "Ola'an?"

The sound of gunfire, and growling filled my ears. "We're holding the operations room. Too busy to be your strategist, sorry!" Came her reply. She closed the link as I heard some screaming.

"We need to move," Jazz said sternly.

"We find something to shut down this ship and then we leave. Engine room should be on the lower decks," I said, striding towards the noise which even I could now hear was

heading our way.

“Works for me!” Raf said, spinning the barrels of his guns as he checked their ammunition.

The noises, a group of people, came around the corner. One of their heads exploded in front of me. The others froze, I looked back to see Jazz’s gun outstretched.

“That could rupture the hull, you know,” I said, not hiding my impressed eyebrow.

“Only if I miss,” he replied.

There were four rapid explosions as Raf fired, popping the head of each person in succession.

“Show off,” Jazz said. It may have been the first time I had seen him smile.

The last time Raf and I were infiltrating a ship, we were reserved and working under cover. This time we were stabbing, shooting, cutting and beating our way through a hall with a violent gleefulness. We had cut through about ten people. None of them moved fast enough to retaliate, and certainly not fast enough to raise the alarm; and on a ship this size, it was unlikely anyone would be looking at the cameras without a reason and the computer probably wasn’t AI capable, because it would already have seen us and sounded the alarm. Keeping things as analogue as possible was likely a part of how they kept Týr out.

We made it to a service hatch, I looked back. Jazz wasn’t right behind us, as he had been. He was looking down at one of the corpses we had made.

“Problems?” I shouted. I realised I was still fired up, and I pushed my feelings down. Taking control of them. “Is everything okay?” I asked again, now with less killer in my voice.

He crouched down and scratched at his stubby chin.

“This one, you cut him up pretty good but he’s wearing expensive shoes,” Jazz said, poking at the mashed human

with the tip of his gun.

Raf called for us to follow from the bottom of the service tunnel below us.

"You can have them if you want them, I won't judge," I said, half joking, but, well, Raf and I had done stranger things over the years.

"It likely means that they're mercenaries, not soldiers."

He stood up, his own shoe squelching in part of the corpse as he did. Jazz was a man, just a regular Human. His lack of disgust with the death he was surrounded by bothered me. Was it because he wasn't a Follower? I wondered if Humans were all like this before the Goddess touched them. Jazz was not a bad man, he was one of the good guys, but he was colder than ice and twice as ruthless.

He glanced at me and I think he saw the concern I had for his species. He jumped into the access tunnel.

I dropped down behind him.

"This way," Raf said, heading down to the next level.

"If it helps, I grew up on a planet that's far less civilised than you did. I learned to kill when I was very young. I don't enjoy it, I just understand why we do it," Jazz said, apparently reading my thoughts I had leaked across my face.

"I..." I didn't really have anything to say. I think I just pretended I did, so that I didn't seem stunned at his words. I had a feeling he would interrupt me anyway.

"You want me to bring Summer back? Not sure he would have the stomach for this sort of mission."

I grinned. There really was no more fitting response.

"I don't think I really understand Humans. A lot of you seem to be sociopaths," I said.

"The universe needs sociopaths, sometimes."

An alarm sounded through the walls. Someone had pulled an alarm. It was only ever a matter of time before someone

did. Raf assured us he could feel the vibrations of their engine just a deck below.

"Týr, you *can* open a portal if we screw their power, right?" I asked, in that odd tone I used when I spoke to the air.

"Yes, and please hurry," came the reply.

Raf nodded to me and with a swift kick at the access panel, we entered the engine room.

The engine room was far cleaner than I expected. Engine rooms were usually filled with pump, heat and oils. That was the nature of ships. This one looked quite new though. This ship couldn't have done more than a handful of voyages.

I turned to smoke as internal defences fired. Jazz knew well enough to stay in the access tube. Raf shot the laser node almost instantly. I reformed and slipped a blade from Raf's arm, throwing it at a woman who was looking over a ledge above to see what the noise was.

I wasn't Raf but it was a good shot. The knife went straight into her neck and she fell back off the gangway she was standing on. People instantly appeared to try and help her, she was already dead, on the floor of the level below.

Raf shot them in the head one by one, and then casually reloaded his guns while I turned to bats and closed the gap. These were not soldiers, they were engineers and grease monkeys. I cut them down with so much ease that I didn't even feel my pulse raise.

The generator core, as expected, was a tall interconnected tower with conduits, pipes and sensors sticking out of it. It was a likely filled with a mix of exotic matter, coolant gasses and just enough voltage to keep the reaction churning as the other pipes would syphon off the generated energy and direct it to the capacitors and large scale batteries which then drove the ships, pretty vanilla TD-Drive. There was a sound as the elevator moved and a rattle of stairs and soldiers, or at least

security, were heading our way, fast.

"How best do we fuck it up, fastest?" Raf asked.

The problem was that, even if we killed the generator, the general power grid would keep everything running for a while at least. We needed to truly mess things up, and fast.

Raf pointed both his guns at the base of the reactor.

"Wait!" I said sternly. He looked at me, waiting for my idea.

"This ship it too clean, they aren't pushing this system hard enough for it to be driving the engine. There's another propulsion system."

Raf rolled his eyes and turned. He shot at the elevator cavity to prevent visitors arriving.

"Go let it out then," he said.

"What's he talking about?" Jazz asked, finally leaving the safety of his wall cavity.

"We need to open that door," I said, pointing at a large blast door.

"The engine head?" he asked, "That won't take out their jammer. Ta'ra."

"It will when we let the dragon out!"

MISSION 6

STEP ONE: DRAGONS ARE FUN.

“Adults don’t keep chicken in their pockets, Jon,” Libby chastised as we slogged down the stairs.

*I didn’t care. I liked chicken. As it happens, it’s very portable. -
Denouement*

I burned an inordinate amount of blood and charged my muscles more than I think I ever had pushed into them before. Since our recent encounter with Aygah my abilities had been amped-up, somewhat. Since then, I had felt like a one-woman army; I still hoped that it was enough to do what was needed. I pressed my blade between the two-foot thick metal planks which ran the thirteen feet of the door’s width. I ran to the side, holding my weapon tight. I felt the supports sandwiched between the front and back planks snap. That was the easy part, and not likely to open the door.

I spent all the strength that the blood had bought me with a single, well placed punch in the centre of it. The door gave way and, with my blood fuelled senses, I saw the wall ripple with the impact as the feeling faded. A wall which was supposed to guard from the radiation and heat of a starship’s TD-Drive had given way to a single attack. I was suddenly very aware of my power.

The ripple met the edge of the door and a few of the front pieces fell from it, revealing the white hot glowing metal structs that made up the other side. Something was trying to get out, even before I tried to get in.

As my perception crept back to normal and the wave of fatigue hit me, I realised that even though it took me less than a minute to open the blast door, it was enough time for things to go very wrong. Raf and Jazz were shooting and there was a

hum of an internal security system spinning up to fire on us. Also, my hand *really* hurt.

The internal defences didn't get a chance to fire though, at least not at us. I had no sooner rolled out of the way than the blast door blew outwards from the centre.

A dragon strode out as best as it could through the relatively small doorway; it was a lot larger than the last one we had encountered. The heat from the blast it had used to get free had put a thick, soup-like fog into the air. It was getting hard to see but what I did see, wasn't a serpent who swam in the air as naturally as Raf, not at all like the last one. This one was a six-legged beast. It had no wings, but it still had the distinctly lizard-like features we had observed last time. The security laser fired almost the moment it emerged. I realised that it was probably never meant for us at all. It was a last line of defence, should the dragon get loose.

It ignored the ensuing barrage of lasers and eyeing the black insignia-free uniforms of the people piling into engineering, it looked enraged. The blast of energy which left its mouth was formidable. Formidable enough that it didn't need my help get free. It just needed to be mad enough.

"Jazz, space-shield!" Raf said loudly as the dragon's laser-like onslaught burst the hull at the far back of the ship. I wasn't sure what was back there but enough damage had been done to the power grid that the lights began to fade. The cracking sound which followed was something I had only heard a few times before. It was the sound of a starship ripping apart. The guns were all pointed uselessly at the big green and grey monster and no one cared what *we* were doing. The people shooting had no idea how close to death they were. They couldn't fight that thing and even if they could, the ship was about to burst down the centre. It was only the radiation shielding inside its cage that had stopped it cutting the ship in two on its first attempt.

Raf, Jazz and I crouched hoping that Týr would take his chance.

The portal opened directly underneath us. Good plan, would stop anyone following us. As we fell into it, I heard an explosion, the ship had given way.

We were almost sucked back through it before it blinked out, I realised that it was another reason Týr had opened it under us, speed was more important than I had realised.

"Count off," Jazz said, giving away his military background.

"You realise, *we* are far more likely to have survived than you were?" Raf replied.

"Here," I said, playing my part.

It was only a moment before we saw that there was something happening above the portal basin.

Laser fire streaked across the top of it, presumably from what remained of the internal defences. A Wolf leaped across in return. Without a moments hesitation I was a flock of bats and heading up.

I reformed on the top of the basin and intercepted a Wolf mid leap. I cut its legs from under it with a swipe of my two knives and turned as he fell, two bloody sumps, onto the floor. It looked at me with confusion, waiting for its legs to grow back. I wasn't sure if it was the Goddess' blessing me or the upgraded metals in my knives, but he wasn't going be healing. I drove a blade through his eye socket as Raf landed gently behind me, instantly firing off a few shots. While he was covering behind, I looked in front.

The control room had been trashed. There were even ceiling panels hanging down. It looked like they had literally torn the room apart. One of the sections of flooring was on fire and there were probably a dozen Wolves, in parts, across the room, some of which were still twitching. It was a mess.

"Angela?" Jazz called, as he emerged from the steps of the

portal basin.

“Týr, locate Angela!” He yelled, frantically.

Raf fired again at the doorway as another Wolf tried to get in.

“Welcome home. Angela and Ola’an have disabled all the controls here and headed for the garage, via the armoury. They are currently holding their ground.” Týr sounded distracted as he spoke, which worried me far more than the state of the operations room.

Jazz left the room, presumably heading down a level. We followed behind, though we knew where they had come in, so we watched the rear closely. The corridor we had ran down was in total darkness.

“Everything okay Týr? You don’t sound yourself,” Raf asked.

“I am currently having to remap and falsify three thousand independent sensors, planet side and on ships, to prevent anyone recording the presence of a massive explosion and a space dragon. Please excuse me if I am a little curt.”

Raf shrugged. “Waste of time. No way that people won’t just see the damned thing out of the bloody windows.”

I couldn’t help but smirk at the idea of Týr forgetting about windows. A sound in front of us caught my attention. I spun my blades out of habit and looked to Raf. Even Jazz had stopped his stride to look at him.

Raf flicked out an arm and fired a gun, he tilted his head and fired again into the darkness. There was a ‘thud’ sound as whatever he had shot fell, presumably dead. Raf looked again, squinting. A moment later he fired wildly at the darkness. It wasn’t more than a second or two before Jazz and I were aware of the sound, the rhythmic beat of feet on metal.

Jazz turned up his shield and backed away. Raf flipped over and stuck to the top of the corridor, while he reloaded and I turned to smoke. There were probably twenty Wolves

stampeding towards us, or well, through us. That wasn't what had us worried. We had been aware that there were larger Wolves, we had seen their footprints in the office building they were using as a nest, but we hadn't seen one. Not until now.

STEP TWO: OUTWARD.

A corridor fight is not an easy thing. As someone who kills things for a living, I can assure you, no one, on either side, likes a corridor fight. The fact that both factions in the conflict are limited in both scope of attack and options for defence make is less than ideal. When you find yourself in a corridor, your best option is to end the conflict as fast as possible.

As I reformed from smoke to woman, I saw the back of the Wolf-wall. The horde of regular sized Wolves would have been enough of an issue, but the addition of a Wolf which was so big that it had to crouch on all fours in the corridor, well, that made it a very concerning interaction.

I cut at it, getting its attention and fled up the corridor, hoping to kite it back towards me.

"They've stopped trying to get to us," Ola'an said in my ear.

"Don't worry, sister. We are neutralising them now," I said with faux confidence.

Like a good little assassin, I began assessing the situation coldly and methodically as though I was playing high stakes chess.

The big one was actually big enough that it took him a few moments to turn around and face me, which meant only a few of the horde could make it past him. I readied my knives.

As I slashed through the Wolves, occasionally turning to smoke, or bats, I watched the big one moving towards me. It was about five times the mass of the normal ones, its fur was almost white and it was far slower due to its bulk. I sliced a head off a small one and wished I had time to top-up my blood. This was a fight which would benefit from some extra juice, even with my newly enhanced reserves. I had burned

too much when I let the dragon out, I was suddenly concerned that I hadn't held enough back for any real healing. A worry for after the battle.

I sliced upwards, to add a randomness to my fighting style, rather than returning in the same direction I slashed across with the other blade and flipped back a little, to get a beat and choose my next target. I had no idea what was happening on the other side of the horde, but there was gunfire.

The big one had stopped and was turning again to face Raf and Jazz. I leaped on the head of the closest Wolf. I bounded a little way forward and burst into bats. I reformed, stabbing the huge back-leg. With almost intentional timing I smoked my-self back to my starting point and finished off another aggressor.

The big one turned to me again. I knew it wouldn't keep switching targets like this forever, but I had brought Raf and Jazz a few more seconds.

This was my fight. There was no way the revolvers the other two had would be enough to damage this bloody great monster.

"Raf," I said though my Circlet. "Wait until its on top of me."

There was little more than grunt in reply. They had more smaller Wolves to deal with than I did; I didn't take it personally.

I cut down the last one on my side of the meat-wall and stood waiting for it to charge at me. I didn't have to wait long.

The white wall of Wolven rage growled in a deep and intimidating tone as it came at me, mouth open enough to make sure I knew its intention.

Perfect.

I readied my blade and burst into bats the moment I felt its

breath. Raf and Jazz fired at its rear. I reformed under it, slicing up at its neck. It turned snapping in my direction. Its mouth was wide enough to bite me in half.

I was shocked when it didn't fall. I had cut its damned throat and it didn't even stumble.

This was new.

I swung myself around and scrambled to my feet.

It had changed direction and was running towards my friends. I wasn't in a position to support them. The corridor was clear, I ran into the garage.

The place was a mess. The hole we had originally escaped from had been sealed by a foam pack, which would have been deployed by Týr as soon as we were out.

The large ground shuttle, which we had used against the insertion-pad was still more than a little beaten up and just about everything that *had* survived the decompression was broken, smashed, scratched, or, literally gnawed.

I looked around suddenly realising that Angela and Ola'an weren't in there. It was where they should have been.

"Ola'an? Ange?" I called, trying to be loud enough for them to hear me, without attracting more attention than I had to from the corridor.

I heard fighting outside, I had to trust that Raf had it well in hand, for now.

I had a plan.

I called for my friends again, there was no answer, so I turned my attention to the shuttle, the plan. It was on its side, not its roof, like I had first thought. I shoved it hard and flipped it the right way up. Without its power turned on it made a crashing sound, metal hitting metal, I wasn't trying to be stealthy. My plan was quite simple, power it up, get its gun on-line and shoot at the big problem. *Assuming it was still functional.*

I pressed my hand against the smoked black glass of the

side door, where I knew there were sensors. The ships' lights came on, illuminating the inside and making it lift a little from the floor.

I actually leaped back when the lights came on. There, in the back seat, were two familiar faces looking at me. Ola'an and Angela looked as shocked to see me as I was them. Angela lowered her blaster and the door opened.

I climbed in and pulled closed the sliding door.

"Good hiding place!" I said excitedly. "Are you hurt?" I asked, seeing the blood matted into the brown fur across Angela's face and hands.

"Ange took a beating but I think we're both fine," Ola'an said. "We kept them busy as long as possible but eventually we hid here and turned off all the power. It was designed to be a life pod of sorts, with the power off it shields life signs."

That made sense, if you didn't want people knowing there was a secret base in the planet's rings you needed an escape pod which wouldn't give you away either.

"It is a real shuttle though? Right?" I asked, getting settled in the snug flight seat and powering up the systems.

"Yes, I think so," Angela said. I instantly noticed the grizzle in her voice. She was hurt worse than she was letting on. I knew that tone. I had used it myself more times than I cared to count. It would seem that Angela was a warrior after all.

I had the manners to ignore it.

"Well, let's hope the weapons system works," I said as I pressed for the ship to sound a loud alarm for a few seconds.

"There were over twenty coming for us, when we hid in here," Ola'an said, concerned.

"We took care of them, just the big one is left," I replied, realising that I was still in my combat focus, using as few words as possible.

"What big one?" Ange asked. I grinned her.

"I assume that means that you are ready, then?" Raf asked

though the Cirlet, in response to the noise the shuttle was making.

I sounded the alarm again. "Yes."

A moment later Raf and Jazz came running through the door. As they came into the garage, Raf grabbed the back of Jazz's shield vest and jumped away with him, and out of sight of the shuttles window. With a press of the controls the shuttle lifted a little more and rotated towards the door, I backed it up a little.

"Hold on," I said sternly. Ola'an having a rough idea what was about to happen, strapped herself in behind me. Angela braced herself against the back of the passenger seat.

The large Wolf came barrelling into the door, barley squeezing in through the double wide opening. Thanks to the higher ceiling height in the garage, it stood up on its hind legs. As it stood, its form became more like that of a man, and less animalistic. I wondered if this was perhaps a different species than our usual prey. I didn't consider it long though. The grey monster widened it claws to prepare for attack, I fired the shuttle's guns. Guns which were designed to be involved in a surface war, not a single meaty opponent. I didn't let up on the trigger. I kept the barrage up and intended to keep shooting for as long as the weapons system could sustain it. After a few seconds, it was the heat protection which stopped the firing, not the power-banks.

Angela leaned forward a little in her seat. "The shuttle has a missile. It was retrofitted, it's that button," she said, pointing at a grey button on the dash with a red 'x' across it, scrawled with a marker on electrical tape.

"Oh, thank you," I said, pressing it.

The missile flew out of the bottom of the shuttle and exploded into the doorway, the force shook the garage and a little dust floated down. The smoke and rubble from the other side of the doorway made it impossible for me to see what

was going on.

"What about the hull? Did we pierce the hull?" Ola'an asked, realising that she and Angela couldn't breathe in space, and the shuttle was likely too banged up to be any use as a life pod.

"The imminent hull breach risk is behind you, the direction which Ta'ra fired is deeper into the facility," Týr said in our ears.

I thought that I saw a flash of movement. I accelerated the shuttle, hitting the thrust as hard as I could. The hole, left by the missile had widened the opening enough that the shuttle barely nipped the side as it zipped out. To my surprise I had more acceleration room than I had expected as the missile seemed to have taken out the walls in the following three or four rooms. It was hard to be exact because of the debris, smoke, and plumes of fur.

We impacted the Wolf who was beginning to stand, about a room before the shuttle was finally stopped by a wall.

The force, and the fact that I was the only person who didn't strap in, made me fly towards the window. I burst into smoke with the forward motion and thanks to a large crack in the glass I reformed outside, standing on the frontage of the shuttle, a beaten and furry face in front of me. I pulled the one blade I had managed to keep a hold of and stabbed it directly in the eye, the one bit I knew would be soft enough to get me access to the brain. I fell back onto the window of the shuttle exhausted, banged up and all out of blood. A moment later, Raf appeared from above, still holding our commander by the shield vest. He pushed the barrel of his gun into the other eye, he pulled a trigger as Jazz covered me, his shield flaring to protect the both of us from the exploding projectile's heat, and thankfully the chunks which it carried outward from the head.

There was a moment of silence. Finally, a moment.

Jazz was first to break the spell of peace. He leaped from the nook between the wall and shuttle. The door opened to meet him, with Angela appearing out of it.

They embraced, and kissed. After a moment, they exchanged murmurings of worry and relief.

“Even I didn’t see that one coming,” Raf said, eyebrow raised.

The five of us were almost silent in the garage, taking a few minutes to decompress from what had just happened.

Raf and I had both lay on the floor. I was beaten to shit, exhausted and out of blood. I just needed a moment to let my body complain. Raf had used up a lot of, well, whatever it was that powered his abilities. He had come out of the fight as battered as me and looked somehow less graceful than usual, heavier perhaps.

Angela and Jazz sat on a storage crate holding hands.

The only one of us doing anything actively useful was Ola’an who, once done thanking us for saving her and Angela, opened her Circlet screen so that she could begin collating battle data and find out just how much trouble we were in. Overall, that was.

“How long have you two been, I don’t know, sweet on each other?” Raf asked, without opening his eyes.

“Sweet on each other? Raf, you sound like an old romantic!” Angela replied.

“If you must know, Raf, we were married forty-six years ago,” Jazz said.

Raf opened his eyes at this and sat up. “How old are you?” He asked.

Jazz sighed. “Not as old as either of you two!”

I sat up on my elbows and looked at the two of them. “Yes, but we’re Elder races, we get to live forever. You’re Human, and Angela is from a Younger race. They don’t usually age

much different to Humans."

Angela's cheeks rose, giving away a bear's grin. "True, but *my* race ages real slow. I'm eighty three."

I looked at Jazz. "So are you going to tell us?"

He grunted in reply and then added, "You two aren't the only people who don't match your species current state, you know?"

Now Raf sat up on his elbows to match my pose. "You're not even a Follower," he said.

"She is a damned lunatic with good intentions and way too much juice, not a god. I'm not one of Hers"

"So, She didn't enhance you?" I asked, pushing for more from him.

"No! She's not the only way for a human to pick up an edge, or a few extra years." There was moments hesitation as he made the decision to go against his instinct to keep secrets. I assumed it was in response to the little loving nudge that Angela gave him.

"I'm from an iteration early enough that your Goddess hadn't robbed humans of their natural immortality. Back when we had the same blessings as the other elder races and a lot more anger management issues."

There was a moment of awe. He may well have been older than Jon, the Champion.

"I thought version-one humans were supposed to all be hard-boiled nut jobs," Raf said.

There was a tense silence as they locked eyes across the room.

I wasn't sure which of them burst out laughing first but the tension evaporated instantly.

Angela rolled her eyes.

"So, how are you not, you know, gone with your iteration?" I asked.

"Moxie, hard work, and some gardening," he replied. That

was all I was going to get.

“Guys,” Ola’an said, intruding on our moment of stolen levity.

Raf and Jazz began exchanging insults with wide grins, both intentionally ignoring Ola’an and her grab for attention in hopes whatever problem she had discovered would go away on its own.

“What is it, dear sister?” I asked.

She spun her Circler screen in the air, so that I could see it, “I know who was behind the Wolves, the attack on the base, all of it. Týr and I just compared data.”

I gestured for her to tell me, as Jazz interrupted, “Spit it out then.”

I looked at her screen.

“Oh no.”

Raf came over, after seeing how unexpectedly shocked I was. He looked at the screen.

“Your bloody mother!” He exclaimed.

STEP THREE: GROWN UPS ARE HERE.

Her mother, my dad's wife. Possibly my dad's killer, I wasn't sure. She was behind this? How much of it? What were we supposed to do with this information?

I stood cold, letting the information sink in. I had known that she was involved in organised crime, but I had no idea that she was organised enough to even know about us, never mind coming after us directly.

"Explain," Jazz barked, pulling out his own Cirplet, no doubt getting the downloaded report from Týr. I assumed we all were. My own Cirplet had vibrated to tell me I had a file coming in.

Ola'an, looking far less stunned than I would have expected her to, sighed, blowing air out slowly, obviously trying to process the data, emotionally, more than intellectually.

"I don't know, but since the Goddess did something to the Wolf technology, to make it easier for Týr to read, he started getting trickles of data coming in. All of it points back to a shell company my mom owns. And, it looks like she knows we can read her files now, because according to the money movements, she was trying to attack us fast. She seems to have only begun organising this when Týr began tracking her. She must have realised her magic rocks had stopped working, or something."

Without having much more than a few seconds to process the news, Jazz began organising.

"I'll contact the Keeper and get an external repair crew for the outside of the facility, as soon as we're all patched up, and we can move to a new location in the planet's rings, I'll reopen the Fold to the Temple. As far as anyone there will

know, we got attacked via portal. Follower workers will fix the inside. Should take a day or so to get everything back up and running. Týr, get them a portal to a safe-house planet side, please."

"We're not going anywhere," I said. "The bunks on the top floor, sorry, deck, seem relatively intact. The Wolves headed straight down. We'll sleep here. This place is probably still safer than most, especially if the Keeper is on the way."

Jazz nodded. "Ange, can you look after them? I have to make some calls."

Angela, agreeing before he had even finished speaking.

Somehow with no staff, barely working power, emergency lighting and as far as I knew, no food hatch delivery system, Angela managed to feed us, supply me with fresh-*ish* blood, medical supplies, change of clothes and some rather nice ambient lighting. She had turned the stark, long, room of bunks into a makeshift home for us. I couldn't have appreciated it more if I had tried. She had even moved some mattresses around to make something close to sofas for us.

"It is wrong that I want to kill her?" Ola'an asked, as we settled for a well deserved rest.

"Angela? Yes, she's delightful, please don't kill her," Raf relied.

"No. My mother."

"No," both Raf and I replied without a moment of consideration.

"You both think it's okay that I want to kill my mother?" Ola'an said, to confirm that she wasn't misunderstanding us.

"Don't do anything too hasty. Think through what you're saying, my dear," Angela said as she came in with a tray of snacks for us. She turned to leave.

"Ange, please, stay," I said, gesturing for her to sit next to me.

She did, nodding appreciatively. Raf and Ola'an sat opposite us. The tray, atop of a table which was formally a gear-trunk from the bottom of the bed, which was now one of our sofas.

Raf leaned forward and took a handful of nuts; he liked nuts.

"I don't see a problem. Kill her. If you don't want to, Ta'ra and I are probably going to do it later anyway," Raf said, trying to sound jovial, though he was being completely honest.

We hadn't discussed it, but we both knew that the moment Ola'an was asleep we were going to go and kill her mother that very evening.

"I always knew she was a criminal, I mean, you know, like, *the* criminal. But when I found out how bad she was, I left, became a Follower. I figured it would be how I atone for her crimes."

I took a handful of nuts too. They were awful. I had no idea why anyone would eat the nasty little wood nuggets. I made a face as I looked at the handful I still had. Angela took them from me with a smirk.

"I never cared for the man, not really, but as we are just about certain that he killed my, our, dad. I was always going to go and get her eventually, when I had time. But Ola'an, if she's controlling the Wolves, then she has been using them as her agents for months. Think of all the people we know they have killed. She let that happen, to hide her true intentions. She's more of a monster than they are." I worried I had been too honest.

"You guys are really going to kill her? Like, this evening?" She asked.

"Yes," Raf and I said, in unison, again.

"I want to come. I don't care who does it, but you are right, we need to stop the Wolves. Killing her seems like a good

way to do that.”

Raf took the rest of the bowl of nuts, mostly out of fear that Angela was going to eat them first, I think. “We heal fast, my abilities will take an hour at least to be back to full power. Then, well, it’s as good a time as any. Let’s face it if we wait for Mr Jazzy Bear to give us the okay, it may be months.”

Angela laughed. “You need to call him that. He’ll hate it!”

Ola’an looked worried. She was talking a good game, but matricide wasn’t an easy thing to discuss with two seasoned killers.

“What do you think, Ange?” She asked.

“I like looking after people. It’s my calling. But, that woman has access to Wolves, space dragons and who knows what else. She attacked our home, murdered her own husband and tried to kill her daughter. All in the name of protecting her criminal interests,” she said, sternly. After a moment she added, “So let the Heroes kill her.” The implication being that Ola’an should stay out of it, herself.

It was good advice.

We entered the operations room, which was a buzz with automated repair drones. Týr had already confirmed that his ability to generate portals wasn’t affected by the work. Though, now I knew that the actual portal generating systems weren’t even stored onboard the station, facility, whatever, I did wonder just how advanced they were if even we weren’t allowed to see them. Nothing here could actually interfere with them.

I was aware that we didn’t look like we had made the decision to murder the queen of crime. We were still a little beaten from our recent fight, though I had a new black jumpsuit on. I was also sporting a new knife, and a more traditional energy based variable blaster at my side. The revolvers required more precision than I could give them to

be truly effective. Raf however, wore one at each hip and a double wide bandoleer of throwing knives. Rather than a black jumpsuit, he wore his loose fitting green jumper and cargo pants. He looked like a damned clown next to me. It felt like we were in control again. As he pointed out, though, I was the one who could kill them in the dark, he was the one they looked at while I did it.

Ola'an had opted to join us, against our better judgement, we agreed. She wore Follower style combat leathers. Not that she was particularly well trained, they suited her and fitted over her demure wings with little issue. She carried a revolver on one hip and an energy gun the other. Angela followed in her usual robes, no intention of joining our quest.

Despite spending the evening mainlining Cure-all bottles, Ola'an was by far the most banged up of us. She lacked the supernatural healing which Raf and I took for granted. I wondered if we should have prepared an entire strike team, rather than the three of us alone. But that would take time and, it was what our target was expecting.

I was surprised to see three familiar combat packs on the rim of the portal basin, as we got close to the edge.

It made more sense a moment later when we saw Jazz sitting on the steps, Cirlet open, reading something.

He looked up as we got closer. Flipping his screen away.

"Don't try and stop us. If we don't strike right away, she'll have more Wolves protecting her, she may even run. We could lose her," Ola'an said confidently.

Jazz stood up. "I have no intention of getting involved. I just want make sure Ange isn't mad enough to join you."

Angela pushed past us and stood next to him, clasping his hand.

"No! I'm not *that* mad," she said.

"Packs should have everything you need. Get out of here right away. It would appear that Basilica has noticed all the

action in the area and is coming to investigate. Jon was on the bridge. He'll be here any time now."

The implication was enough. Raf and I were legally dead and if Jon, the Champion, were to see us, then our cover would be well and truly blown. Maybe, if we weren't there, Jazz could tell him enough part truths that we could maintain our anonymity.

Jazz tossed Ola'an and I our packs along with a little gadget that I recognised as a shield ball. Something which came from his past, when Earth was even better at weapons than it was now.

"Týr, as close a possible please," I said, the portal opening in the basin almost instantly.

"Good luck," he said, sincerely, as we vanished.

STEP FOUR: WAS NEVER GOING TO GROW OLD.

We had no idea what we were going to find on the other side of the portal. Usually we had a rough idea at least. This time though, our enemy knew about our portals, knew about our powers and knew about Týr. With no secrets to be kept and no reason to hold back, Týr had opened a portal in the middle of the penthouse. Ironically the same building I was trying to bug when all this started a few months ago. Back when we thought we were dealing with thugs and mobsters.

Now though, it was the most secure place in the city. There were enough private security people out front to protect a visiting king. There were also the less legitimate mercenaries for hire on the inside and the illegal guns fitted on every floor. And, no doubt, Wolves.

I had clicked the button on the shield-ball and rolled it in as we stepped through the portal.

We weren't rushed, or overwhelmed when we appeared inside a barrage of laser fire. We were calm and collected. We were good at this.

We knew the shield would hold for at least another short time. But, when mercenaries fired guns at an unknown threat, one which they had a pretty good idea was very dangerous, they tended to not stop until they over heated or ran out of charge.

It went quiet and the shield blinked off, it wasn't out of power, it was set to be reactive not static. It had another thirty seconds or so of charge left, even under this assault.

Ola'an scooped it up and dashed to the side, I covered her, in a swarm of bats.

Before the smoke had cleared Raf flicked knives out,

guessing the locations of the shooters based on the trajectory of the attacks. He threw three with each volley, dropping most his targets before the next wave was ready. He gave Ola'an and I enough time to reach the edge of the room and then jumped up. He ran across the wall of the room, which we were only now realising was a massive space.

It was a double height ceiling with one wall made of actual glass, a large pool outside, and a flickering blue energy stopping the outdoor area from being ruined by the terrible weather. It was flashing with each raindrop and was likely quite beautiful if you were there for a party, rather than a blood-bath.

Ola'an skidded to a stop, almost running into the wall. She was wearing a personal shield. The red and blue kind, the new ones. She should be *mostly* safe with it turned on and out of the main fight. I turned on my own, for once.

I flipped back and with a controlled stance and started shooting. I shot well. They were men, not Wolves.

Three more mercenaries fell almost before the fight really got started. I heard a clicking as the ceiling mounted turret turned to me, as Raf was leaving the area it was in. I ignored it.

It exploded a moment later. *Nice*.

The direction I was looking in was clear of targets, but my shield was flaring behind me. I turned and fired at an Elf and a Brick by the door. Their shields absorbed by guns. I was annoyed. I had my gun set high enough to blow through most personal blue-shields.

Raf dropped down next to me and with a casual click of his revolvers, both men's heads exploded.

"Energy levels?" He asked.

"Still very full, you?"

He smirked in response as something caught his eye. The second wave was coming.

An insertion such as this usually had distinct phases. The first was already over. It was the initial defences, usually expecting attack to come from the outside, this one had been unusual because they didn't panic when we appeared. They knew there was a chance we would be using a portal.

The next phase would be the people from outside the room, and possibly a floor below heading to us, with the bigger guns. This wave would likely be more sustained and people would keep piling in. The third wave would likely be the Wolves and whatever else the damned queen of crime had in reserve for us. No sense over thinking it; work needed doing.

The second wave entered through the double doors. A large man, from a race I didn't recognise, stood legs apart as he wielded a cannon which looked like it should have been attached to a shuttle. He had no shirt on and a metal frame supported his arms and legs, presumably to assist with the lifting of the gun. I briefly wondered if his muscles were a natural trait of his species, or a result of hard work. I toggled my shield off and turned to smoke as the blade of bullets passed through me. I took a moment to check that Ola'an was out of the line of sight before I reformed a little closer to my target. Raf fired his revolver. The bullets exploded harmlessly in front of the man. His shield held even against those bullets! Time to get creative.

I ran towards him, swapping my gun for knives. He responded unexpectedly fast. That would have been the effect of the support frame, no doubt. I turned to smoke and as I hit his shield I went around it in all directions finding the tiny gaps in the generator. I reformed inside it, pressed against his body. The shield expanded to accommodate it but we were pressed together tightly. It would have been almost erotic, had I not also pressed a knife into his groin. He looked shocked, I pulled the blade up, with blood fuelled strength.

He fell in two. So much for cool metal rigging.

I looked beyond the doors.

Shit!

Wolves, earlier than I expected. Super gun-man was a stalling tactic. Nice, good planning. Ola'an would enjoy that. Though, given her mom lived here, it shouldn't have surprised me that her strategic planning was good, not really.

"Raf, back up," I yelled, bursting into bats and following my own advice.

The Wolves swarmed in. They were fast.

"Screaming," Raf noted as he landed next to me as I reformed.

"Screaming?" I asked.

"The Wolves were released while there were still mercenaries on the way. They're killing them as they pass."

I grinned. Raf nodded at me in agreement. If the people organising this defence released the Wolves too early, that meant they were scared of us. Which meant that they weren't sure of the defences.

The Wolves were coming in like a flood, the smaller ones getting stepped on by the larger. They were already in a frenzy.

Being pack animals they wanted to get into position before they attacked, they instantly tried to surround us, spreading out from the door. Ola'an had the tactical insight to run towards us as soon as she saw them.

"Got that shield grenade?" I asked.

"Balcony?" Raf queried.

I nodded and Ola'an handed me the grenade.

We ran back, out of the room. I flipped the toggle on the side, and dropped the shield behind us in the large doorway. It was set to static now.

The Wolves smashed themselves against it, the ones at the

front being almost mashed by the pressure of the ones behind, though, with their healing abilities, it likely didn't matter.

To most people it may have looked like we were cornered. Ola'an was a strategist and we were experienced warriors. We all knew the play here.

Ola'an set up the plan. "Týr, hack and disable the outer shield on the balcony, please?"

Týr didn't bother answering. The rain began hitting the floor around us. The three of us had active shields which flickered in reds and blues as the rain was boiled before it wet us. Usually this sort of thing would drain a shield quick, they had very linear batteries and as such a finite amount of time which they could flare. In the case of these new red layered ones, we could all but ignore that drain.

"How many do you think there are?" Raf asked, looking excited to fight.

I took a quick glance at the oncoming torrent but before I could make my assessment Ola'an had already done the work.

"Sixty-three."

"Raf, take her. I'll be bait," I ordered.

Raf stood behind Ola'an and readied himself for a jump.

The shield grenade blinked off and the doorway suddenly became open.

The Wolves came towards us at full speed. Raf, and Ola'an shot straight up. I slapped my arm, disabling my shield. I let them get close enough that I could almost smell them before back-flipping off the balcony.

They piled over after me. I was already bats, and returning to the platform.

Raf landed.

"Týr, bring the shield back on-line," Ola'an ordered, as I reformed.

The bulk of the wolves didn't take long to climb back up the sloped area below. It was too late, there was no chance they were going to punch and scratch their way back in. This was a building-level shield, not a personal one. They wouldn't give up, we knew that, but, we could ignore them for now.

There were still Wolves left on the balcony, of course. But now, there were a little over a dozen left, and they were only there by virtue of being slowest.

I slapped my shield and pulled my knives again. Dodging between a small group, I slashed, going for legs. I cut at them, repeatedly, with little regard for how deep the cuts were. I rolled for the next group. Raf was throwing knives at any I missed.

We had to tag them with blades first, so that their healing would be interfered with, then we could just shoot them, nice and rapid. While Raf's revolvers would do the trick in a pinch, he had twelve bullets ready to go, and likely no time to reload. That was if he didn't miss. In a melee like this, there was a good chance of missing, even for him.

I finished my dangerous dance at the doorway to the penthouse, on the other side of side of the balcony area. I looked back to see Raf, jumping around knifing, shooting and kicking things. He looked as much like a dancer as I felt, slicing my way to the door.

I caught sight of Ola'an shooting wildly with her blaster set to shotgun spread. They weren't even getting close enough to trigger her shield. Meanwhile the swathe of Wolves outside almost permanently lit the shield behind her as they did everything they could, uselessly, to get back in.

I fought the feeling of satisfaction when I watched how expert we had become at dispatching a foe we once thought invincible. Though, Aygah had somehow made them a *little* more fragile for us. Still, it felt good.

A Wolf swiped at me. I jumped back and kicked out, pushing it back. I could see its side was bleeding. It was tagged with my blade. I pulled my gun and with a click, a ball of white fire left a burning mark on its chest. It fell back, catching the attention of three more. One attacked me with a well placed slash. I got caught across my face. That would be cost of hubris, I considered. I fired my gun, it shook off the attack and came at me again.

Shit, not tagged.

I blocked its next swipe, burning blood in a very real way for the first time in this fight, reinforcing my arm so that it didn't snap when blocking. In a pirouette of red, I got a cut on two of them. I briefly considered turning my shield back on, but a brief stint as smoke made me realise it was likely not that useful. I stabbed a Wolf in the back of the neck and was knocked on my arse by another.

"You need me?" Raf asked in my ear.

"No!" I yelled, feeling a fury fill me.

I kicked out and burning blood for dexterity and moved with the level of precision that was usually reserved for Raf, taking revenge on the one who had hit me.

Using my blade, I pushed through another as I was hit in the side by a big one. I had dropped a blade. Not ideal, I considered, as I fired from my hip. Cutting one in half.

I glanced over to Ola'an, she was safe enough, couple of Wolves flaring her shield but Raf was on the way to her. I grabbed with my blade-less hand, fuelled with blood, pulling out entrails as I did. I kicked back. My leg was grabbed and I was thrown across the floor. The Wolf parts strewn and splattered the floor prevented me from sliding far and I leaped back, landing on the Wolfs shoulders. Lacking a better plan I squeezed its head and bit down on it's skull. It screamed as its head burst into my mouth. It felt good. I was losing control though. I needed to push back my urge to kill

and keep focused. Messy wasn't necessarily better, but it came more naturally.

Then came the thump.

The thump was the sound I made when I was thrown to the ground. Something big grabbed me around the waist with one damned hand and threw me down.

The quick succession of explosions told me that Raf was distracting it with his revolvers. It stepped back in pain, but only for a moment as its head reformed. This was another of the shuttle sized Wolves; maybe the biggest we had seen.

I burst to bats and felt myself scream as it grabbed two of them out of the air and crushed them. I reformed next to Raf and was bleeding from my leg and chest. I had to spend an awful lot of blood right there and then, just to stay in the fight. My wounds knitted shut but I wouldn't be at my best any time soon. Ola'an helped me to my feet as Raf stood, arms out, emptying his guns into the beast.

"You good?" He asked. "He ate one of your bats, it was pretty gross."

"Still kicking," I replied as I readied my blade in one hand and blaster in the other.

"We tag it?" I asked.

"Out of knives, should be some lying around here but it's hard to find them in all the meat," he said, glibly.

I looked around, taking stock of what was happening, for a moment. The Wolves were still screaming and scratching to get in through the shield behind us. The big Wolf stood like a mountain by the door, three small ones standing next to him, looking jumpy. The large balcony floor a literally a wash with butchery and bones.

"Plan?" Ola'an asked, sounding three quarters of the way to terrified.

"You're the strategist, I think you know the play," Raf chastised, nodding at my blade.

We needed to cut the monster before we could kill the monster. And I had the only blade of the correct metal.

"I'm taking a month off after this!" I said as I eyed the target.

"Ta'ra, if we survive this, I'm quitting. Going to be a real Follower. Do charity work and shit," Raf proclaimed.

I sniggered at the thought of him telling the stories outside the temple.

"Cover me."

I realised almost instantly that I couldn't turn into bats. It was always a trade of energy for mobility and I lacked the energy to make it happen. I was lower on blood energy than I had realised. The healing took a lot out of me. Smoke didn't take much blood though. I had no idea why but it didn't, it was a reflex, not a decision. So, I ran towards the wall of Wolf.

At the last second it reached out to me and as if it was on purpose I was smoke. I think it actually tried to grab me, which showed that just because its head was larger, it was not smarter than the others.

It turned, following the bulk of my black and grey cloud. I had very little control and no time, so I reformed, in the air, knife down. It was fast. It blocked me, but I wasn't trying to kill, or trying to escape. I let my knife go into its arm and holding on, I swung from it, driving it in as deeply as I was able to.

The massive Wolf flicked out, throwing me across the room and into the shield. Gravity took hold, which meant that Raf had made the right call and was attacking the Wolf rather than bothering to save me. That was always the right thing to do.

Ola'an slapped me, bringing me back to consciousness. She slapped me again, for good measure. I grabbed her arm before it hit.

"You're out of blood aren't you?" She demanded.

“Yes, help me up,” I replied.

She slapped her arm, turning off both shields.

“What are you doing?” I asked, trying my best to stay conscious.

“What the mission needs,” she said, picking up the severed hand of a Wolf. She made a fist and cut the back of her arm with its claw. Before I realised what she was doing, she had shoved it against my lips.

My eyes grew large as a few drops trickled into my mouth. I want to say there was some nobility in me, telling me that this wasn't right or some remorse for feeding on my own sister. But, the reality was, I needed blood to stay in the fight and she needed me to keep her alive.

I grabbed her arm and pressing it to my lips, with no hesitation, I sucked, pressing my teeth in and taking a bold draught. I spent it almost immediately. One swallow and the healing started. Another and the power returned to my muscles. One more and I was ready to fight. I let go. I knew enough to let go, despite it going against my natural urges. When my Goddess tweaked me, recently, she had also ensured that I would have enough control for this. I let go, thanking Aygah for her foresight. I slapped Ola'an's arm and her shield lit again.

“You okay?” I asked.

“I'll live,” she replied. Her red lips as pale as her face. She held the gash close while she searched her pack for medical supplies.

“Make it worth it!” She ordered, obviously woozy. I had taken a lot, but not enough to do any long term damage.

I turned facing the fight. I took the severed Wolf claw from Ola'an and threw it at an airborne Wolf which was about to land on Raf. It wouldn't hurt it, but I threw it with enough force to take it out of the air. Raf stepped back as he fired the last few rounds of his revolvers into the large Wolf.

"Thought you were out of red stuff," he asked, without looking around.

"Ola'an made a donation," I said as I pulled my blaster and shot a tagged Wolf in the head with a thin beam. A *good setting for saving power*.

The big one stumbled back at Raf's bullets. Raf was increasing gravity around it. Making it so that staying on his feet was hard. I ran towards it, this time with enough fuel in me that I turned to bats and flew up, as high as I could before the building's shield stopped me. I reformed and spent blood on strength. I made a fist and let Raf's gravity do the work. The added weight and acceleration that the height offered made it hard enough to crack a shuttle in half. It was made all the better because the Wolf chose that moment to look up, screaming its battle cry. The fist went down its throat and I'm pretty certain that it didn't stop until it hit the floor under him. I looked up, drenched in blood and standing knee deep in meat. Without losing my momentum, I kicked out at the one Wolf that was still alive, still fuelled by the blood I had spent, I took off it's head in one clean sweep.

The Wolves behind the shield, had stopped clawing to get it, they had stopped howling for blood. Their frenzy was done. They stood, quiet, watching us.

I could see Ola'an standing, pale and likely exhausted due to blood loss. She was drinking small bottles of Cure-all and tossing them away, empty. She would be fine until we were done.

There was the sound of footsteps. I turned to see soldiers coming in, not our soldiers.

They formed around the edges of the penthouse and two of them marched in with a large and very expensive looking chair. A white leather armchair with enough padding that it looks absurd.

Raf and Ola'an stood next to me as we watched, baffled by

what we were seeing.

A regal, well dressed woman appeared from the door at the back and sat down.

“Mom!” Ola’an said in confirmation.

STEP FIVE: MOTHERFUCKER.

“Well, come on in then,” the woman shouted. Her voice was a crisp dialect, powerful and classic. She was a very old Vampire. We knew what to expect. Followers had been keeping an eye on her since just after the first *Event*, when Aygah took control of our reality over a hundred years ago. This woman had been there since day one. People who were around before the Event were a special breed. Most of the ones who were still active in the universe were agents of justice, or inventors, or religious savants of some sort. A hundred *real* years gave people a lot of time to accomplish things. Humans didn’t live long enough to do things. Aygah had seen to that; they usually went bad. This woman in front of us had been bad forever, making us wonder why she was brought into this iteration of reality.

This entrance was contrived and theatrical. Designed to intimidate us. It didn’t work. We strolled forward into the room, leaving the balcony behind us. The three of us stood in front of her. She had the confidence of someone with the upper hand, like we had just lost this fight. We hadn’t, not at all.

Ola’an already had pale lips from the blood loss, but standing in front of her mother, she looked white. Which was impressive for a Vampire. The effect her mother had on her was striking. She was terrified.

“You know, almost always, people try and sneak up on us. They usually think it will end better for them that way,” Raf said, casually reloading his revolvers.

She glared at him, tips of her fingers held together like she was considering us deeply. She wasn’t an unattractive woman. She looked the same age as Ola’an and myself. Her

form was delicate, classical almost. Her long hair dyed blonde, giving her an even more pale look than she would have otherwise sported. I wondered if this was in fashion in Vampire high society. She was wearing a figure hugging red dress which looked like it would be better suited to the city's nightclubs than this odd meeting. Her jacket pink fur, which I assumed, had, up until recently, belonged to some poor creature. Her wings were controlled with a precision that up until that moment, I had only seen president Ty wield. They were tucked in tight and moved slightly as she breathed, they were actually beautiful, in an aristocratic way.

"Mom, we know you're behind the Wolves. We know you're using them as enforcement for your interests. We know everything. We even know about the dragons you have been using for starships engines," Ola'an said, as if it was an announcement.

"Yeah, I think she figured out that we knew when she tried to kill you and steal our portal generator. Also, yeah, the dragon engines, that's a bit fucked up, even by my standards," I added.

She continued to glare at us. Her intense study didn't waver.

Ola'an and I both turned to Raf, expecting him to say something snarky.

He just looked back at us and asked, "Why aren't we fighting?"

We all turned to look at Ola'an's mother, who was still sat in her chair.

After an eerie few seconds of silence, she lowered her hands, casually resting them on the arm of the chair.

"You have proven yourself. You have nullified my Stonecraft technology, which I honestly did not account for, and you have rebutted an expensive attack on your space station. You took out one of my stealth cruisers in the process. I am

suitably impressed," she said. Without a hint of emotion in her voice.

I felt myself glaring at her intently. We all were. We were waiting for more.

She gave it to us.

"Ola'an, you have obviously become a very capable young woman. That is evidenced by your continued breathing. Given what you have been through, you should know that you have earned my respect. I won't bother you anymore."

Ola'an looked shocked at the statement. "You know, that really may be the nicest thing you've ever said to me, mother."

Raf leaned into me and whispered. "That explains a lot."

She continued her speech. "You currently have the upper hand with technology. I can no longer conceal myself from your surveillance AI, not without the Stone-craft technology. And, since the Thinkers are gone, I do not expect to receive any new stones anytime soon. However I have a sizeable force at my disposal and your lives are in my hands. Go. Leave here. I will not escalate this conflict, you may even feel like you have won."

She waved us away and her guards all took a step closer as if they had rehearsed the move. They likely had.

"I think she understands she can't win. I think we can go now," Ola'an said, quietly.

"What?" Raf asked, confused why she was so willing to back down.

I suddenly realised what this setup reminded me of and I flashed back to standing in front of my Goddess Aygah, sitting in a chair and judging us. This woman had the audacity to position herself in the same way a god did! This wasn't okay. This wasn't hubris, this was megalomania, and given that we had totally dominated this fight, it was unearned. I stepped forward, suddenly sure of the correct

course of action.

“Or...” A strong opening, I was doing well already. “You dismiss these guards, turn yourself over to us and I promise, you will get a fair trial. Central doesn’t have a death penalty, sadly, and with your influence, a life spent in prison could be quite a reasonable way to spend your retirement.”

A thin smile appeared on her lips. “Don’t be childish. I can drop that shield and those Wolves will be back in here in a heartbeat. They know who is in charge here. You should too.”

Ola’an looked over at me like I was the bravest person she had ever know. I realised that it was possible she had never actually seen anyone say no to this woman before.

Raf pulled his guns out again, almost as casually as she had waved us away. He had decided it was time to escalate the matter, too.

“Týr, can you drop that shield, and lock all the doors in this building, please?” Ola’an said, boldly.

“I’m blocking all transmissions in and out of this tower, though given you are trying to commit suicide, you should thank me,” She said. Her coolness now thawing as she worried that her control was slipping.

It was my turn to grin when her Circlet chimed. She looked genuinely confused and flicked it open.

“Hello,” Týr said to her on an unexpectedly not jammed Circlet. “We haven’t spoken directly, but I am the surveillance AI, which you seem to think you can block. You are mistaken.”

For the first time, she was shocked. She flicked her Circlet closed and turned to the closest guard.

“Deal is off. Lower the damn shield, let them die if they are so eager!”

The guard looked terrified, but decided that obeying her was actually less risky than letting fifty angry Wolves in.

Interesting choice, there.

He fumbled with a controller he pulled from his pocket and we heard a 'zoop' sound. The blue tint washing in from the balcony vanished and slowly, cautiously, the Wolves creeped in.

Her guards began looking nervous, to say the least. One of them was visibly shaking and the two closest to the door began slowly edging towards it, they almost made it. The door's shield came online and the exit was sealed.

Ola'an looked at us, worried.

Raf and I kept our poker faces. I think we both knew how this was going to play out.

The wolves filled the room, no less than a dozen circling us slowly. Ola'an stepped closer to me and checked her shield levels.

"Still think you can win this?" the ice cold woman asked.

"Mom, this has gone far enough, stop it," Ola'an demanded.

Her mother had no intention of stopping.

"I'll tell people you died in that shuttle accident, should anyone ask," she said coldly.

She stood up, ready to leave before the bloodbath began.

"Go on then, killers, you have earned this," she said, loudly and with direction.

The Wolves didn't respond.

"Kill them!" She demanded, looking quite nervous.

One of the guards closest to the Wolves ran to the door. A wise man. He stopped when he realised the door was sealed. No matter what he did with the controls, it didn't respond to him. He began screaming at it.

Now it was my turn.

"Wolves, follow their alpha. I don't know what you did to become the alpha, but I doubt it was as impressive as murdering a bunch of them and forcing the rest to watch. *Was*

it?"

She glanced around at her guards. Another one tried to run.

"We're the alpha's now, my dear."

I surveyed the pack, who were all cowing to me, "They are all waiting for me to tell them what to do."

Raf put his guns away. "Týr, we're going to need an exit. And I think, if you have any of those marines around, they may be needed to cover this building. When its all over."

A portal opened next to him a moment later.

"I refuse to be arrested, and I absolutely won't be standing any trial," she blurted out, not used to the new power structure and not really sure what to do.

"No! Mother, you won't," Ola'an said. "Too many people have died at your hands. As Ta'ra said, there's no death penalty here, so we're not going to bother with a trial." She paused. "Can we go now?"

I nodded. The three of us took a step closer to the portal. I turned to the biggest, meanest Wolf I could see in the horde around us.

"Kill her, will you?" I instructed.

We stepped through the portal and Týr closed it just as the screaming started.

"Well done," he said. "The building's defences should keep the Wolves contained until we can create another anti-Wolf grenade, at which time commander Jazz's private forces will take care of them."

We stood in the portal basin. Raf lay down, suddenly deciding it was all too much for him.

"You okay?" I asked Ola'an.

"As fucked up as this is. I think that I did the right thing. She was just, fucking evil," she replied, thoughtfully. I knew that she *wasn't* okay. No one could be after that. I knew I wasn't. I felt like I didn't want to be in a fight ever again and I

hadn't just unleashed a pack of killer alien Wolves on my own mom. Still, it was the right thing to do, on this occasion. We were Heroes, all three of us. Ola'an was one of us now, she was family and I would make up for all the lost time.

She and I climbed up the stairs, out of the basin.

We froze.

There, in front of us, stood Jonathan bloody Michaels. He was stoic and domineering, the fully formed legend in the flesh. He wore a grey Elven hunters jacket and khaki cargo pants. His arms folded, with a serious expression on his chiselled face. Next to him, in a chair with her feet on the desk was Lea Ra-Kay. One of the finest pilots in the galaxy and possibly the best looking woman alive. The other side, one arm draped over his shoulder, stood Libby Michaels, his wife. Delicate and poised, though quite able to kill even us, single-handedly. There was a sound as something fell. I turned my head, tearing my gaze from them. There was a feline woman, small and dressed in combat leathers crouched on table. Ria, Jon's bodyguard, *as if he needed one*.

"Raf you may want go get up here," I yelled.

Jon took a few steps, closing the gap between us. Without hesitation, he put his arms around me.

"Ta'ra KI! When Jazz told me you were alive, I couldn't believe it!"

Raf popped his head up over the edge and Libby crouched and took him by the hand, pulling him up the rest of the way with ease.

"Raf! How are you old man?" Jon asked, cheerfully.

We didn't know what to say. We were in the presence of at least three quarters of the Great Family. It was an honour almost equal to meeting the Goddess herself, and now we had done both.

Sure, I had met him before all this started, when he was

mostly a normal man with a memory problem. I had no idea who he would become back then. But now, he was... him!

I was still silent, stunned.

"So Aygah has been keeping you all a secret, has she? When will she stop interfering with everything?" he lamented to himself. "Basilica was leaving the Central system. We picked up a ship on sensors which vanished a moment later. We had to chase a dragon, you know! David spilled the beans as soon as he realised we would find this place on our own."

"Where is the Keeper, then?" Ola'an asked. I was impressed that she sounded so together.

"I punched him and threw him in the air-lock for safe keeping. We'll talk it out later, but I wanted to come right here, when I heard you were both alive. And, from the look of you both, that's more luck than anything else. You three are covered in blood. Go clean up, meet us at our apartment in an hour. I want to hear everything you've been through!"

Not knowing what else to do, I grinned. "Wait, where's Jazz?" I asked.

"That old hunter? I sent him home, he looked like shit. Have you met his wife?"

I realised that all the secrets were finally out, and it felt amazing.

"Lets drink a lot of Elix and get reacquainted shell we? I heard you've had quite an adventure since dying."

End.

THINGS I WANTED TO SAY

- Thank you, Wing, my proofreader, editor, and the only person who pays more attention to Denouement continuity than I do.
- Thank you, Backup for being my dog.
- Thank you, daughter, for listening to me ramble about the people I made up on an almost daily basis.

I will write again, in Denouement 3, a thousand years north. It may well be the final chapter.