



Ardath Rekha's Fan Fiction

Book Editions

Shallng Angels



By Ardath Rekha

Falling Angels

By Ardath Rekha

Synopsis: In the aftermath of the events of *The Chronicles of Riddick*, a presumed-dead Kyra wakes up with new life in her body and a new companion in her mind, to discover that Riddick has abdicated the Necromonger throne and disappeared. On what was formerly a mercenary vessel, Riddick and a tiny handful of fellow escapees flee Helion Prime and Riddick makes a surprising discovery about the woman he believed was Jack... and her adopted sister. And, on a distant world, a reformed teenage runaway discovers that her past is returning to haunt her with a vengeance. Now Kyra, Riddick, and Jack are on a collision course yet again, and the fate of worlds may hang in the balance.

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1.

Black Queen

She was made of pain.

She had no name, or at least, no awareness of name and identity. All she knew was pain. It consumed her, and defined her. After a time it began to fade and she was aware of other things. Cold hardness beneath her. Something sticky on her cheek. Voices raised in alarm.

Voices... were people. With that came the knowledge that she was a person, too.

She opened her eyes.

Grotesqueries welcomed her. She was surrounded by tormented statues and writhing pillars. It was an alien world, anathemic to her and yet...

...Home?

This couldn't be her home. There was no *way* it could be home. And yet some part of her – a part that felt both alien and familiar – insisted that it was.

"She wakes."

The voice was a woman's voice, dispassionate and haughty. Kyra turned her head toward it, frowning a little. *Dame Vaako*. The name came to her after a moment, and then *His* whisper followed in her head: ...*Treacherous bitch!* She felt heat move through her, the heat of rage. Why? The Dame hadn't spoken more than a handful of words to her since her arrival at the Basilica; had, in fact, warned her that resisting the Quasi-Dead would only get her hurt. Why this sudden hatred?

"I would have thought that blow was mortal," came another voice. Fury blazed through her again.

Judas! But she knew that his name was really Lord Vaako.

"Apparently *he* thought so, as well," the Dame replied.

Kyra sat up slowly, aware that while she was being discussed, she was also being mostly *ignored*. That had been the case for most of her life. She'd always been an impediment, something that people tripped over and tried to figure out what to do with; nobody had ever asked her what she might want done with her.

Well, except for two people. There were only two people who'd ever given a damn what happened to her and one of them was—

Where was Riddick? She remembered him hovering above her, his face twisted in pain, asking her if she was on his side. Where had he gone?

Bodies were scattered around the room, ones she didn't remember from the fight. Where had they come from? What had happened? In the middle of the chaos, the old Lord Martial still lay where he'd fallen, forgotten by the people who'd once called him their Master.

I was one of them...

And that familiar but strange voice within her head spoke up again. *Traitors, all.*

"Given that he came for her, I don't think he'd have left if he'd known." Lord Vaako was talking about her again.

"Left?" Her voice, when she tried to use it, was the tiniest thread of a whisper, and pain moved through her chest and back. For a moment her lungs felt like they were on fire, but then the moment passed.

"Riddick?"

"The Riddick fled." Dame Vaako snapped. "He wasn't worthy to be our Lord and he proved it when he refused to complete the detonation."

The what?

An image formed in her mind, a globe of glowing blue fire hovering above a gutted city, then exploding outward, its fire consuming everything in its path, devouring everything on the surface of a far larger globe. *Cleansing fire to purify diseased worlds*, the voice murmured within her.

"My Lord, My Lady..." Another armored warrior approached the dais. *Kolohr*; the voice inside whispered. "We've tracked him."

"Where is he?" Dame Vaako snapped. Both Kolohr and her husband frowned at her.

Her rank is only through her husband, the voice murmured.

Who are you? She thought it, aware that this was like the voices that had sometimes plagued her on the worst nights in Crematoria; a voice that only she could hear, a voice inside her own head. But all of her voices had been female before.

You know who I am, he replied.

No. You're dead.

Death is just a gateway. You've seen what's on the other side of it.

Blazing light too beautiful to look at... sweetness too powerful to stand. Purity washing everything away and the clash of the sword—

No.

Suit yourself, child. But pay attention to what's happening. The voice sounded amused.

Funny how after everything, being called a child could still piss her off. She gritted her teeth and turned her attention back to the trio standing near her.

Kolohr deliberately turned and replied to *Lord Vaako*, as if he had spoken instead of his Dame. “He and the witch stole one of the shuttles and returned to the city.”

“Then we can detonate and cleanse the 'verse of him,” Vaako replied, looking excited.

Kolohr shook his head. “The controls are still non-responsive. Whatever that blast of light was, it did *incredible* damage. The technicians say it will be a few hours, at the soonest.”

“We'll hunt him and the witch down, then!” Vaako turned and began to stride across the floor, avoiding the body of his betrayed and fallen Master as he went. Kolohr and the Dame followed... and so did Kyra.

I thought I was hurt. She had no problem walking, and in fact all of the pain now seemed to be gone.

A lot more than just that, came the voice once more. *And you're even more than that now.*

*God damn it, if you're going to fuckin' talk to me all the time could you at least say something **useful**?*

Certainly. Take the key from my belt as you pass. No one will see.

Kyra grimaced... but what the Hell? Keys were almost always useful anyway. As she passed the body of the fallen Lord Martial she bent down, grasping the key and giving it a sharp yank. It snapped free of the belt as though she'd done it thousands of times before.

Well, it's not like that's the first body I've ever looted, she told herself, and was answered by disembodied laughter.

Gritting her teeth again, she kept following the trio. She caught up just in time to listen in as another warrior approached them.

“He's gone to one of the residences, Lords. There was a woman there, and a child. They're going somewhere with him.”

“Perfect,” Dame Vaako exclaimed, resting her hand on her husband's arm. “He'll be slowed down even more. An *easy* target.”

“Easy?” Vaako growled, and gestured at the bodies strewn around the throne room.

Kyra noticed, though, that several of the senior warriors were gathering their weapons and heading for the shuttles.

Naturally, Zhylaw murmured in her head, his voice purring like a lover's. *They believe whoever kills him will win the ultimate prize.*

Terror clutched at her. *Oh god, no—*

You really do love him, don't you, child? Be easy. They can't stand up to him. He'll escape, as he always does. That's what he's a master at, isn't it?

Zhylaw's voice sounded teasing. Kyra rubbed at her head, wishing that the dead man would shut up and go wherever it was dead men were supposed to go—

That would be the Underverse.

*Fuck-a-doodle-do, and here I thought you talked too much while you were **alive**.* She grimaced as more mocking laughter answered her. *This is **my** head! Get out of it!*

It's not that simple, child. In time you'll be glad I'm here.

Yeah, that would probably be at about the time she decided to take up lace-making or some other grotesquely bourgeois shit.

The warriors were departing. Kyra couldn't decide what to do. Should she follow them, try to impede their hunt?

Don't bother. The Dame is the one to watch, right now.

For a moment she almost did the opposite just to give Zhylaw the finger, but it made sense. She approached the Dame, adopting the mannerisms of a Necromonger acolyte as naturally as if she'd slipped on a coat.

"My Lady?" she asked, her voice deferential. "What... happens now?"

Dame Vaako turned to look at her, the expression on her imperious face both callous and weighing. To the Dame, Kyra was nothing and no one, except possibly a lever to be used against Riddick. Still, that was enough. False compassion appeared on the other woman's face.

"Oh, my dear, now we wait and see whether or not he can escape again."

"And if he can't?" Her throat was suddenly dry again, a dead man's words doing nothing to reassure her.

"He is not fit to rule us, and there is only one way for a new Lord Martial to take the throne. He must die." Dame Vaako was good at dissembling, but Kyra could see the hidden sparkle of vicious glee in her eyes.

I did say she was a treacherous bitch, didn't I?

Oh, shut up.

"Does he have to?" She wasn't sure why she asked that. Was she playing for time? Wheedling? So much was happening here. The rules of the game had changed and she had no idea what they'd changed into.

"It's the only way. You know our creed, girl. You keep what you kill. He who kills the Lord Martial *becomes* the Lord Martial."

More or less, Zhylaw interjected, sounding amused. A little less than more, but their illusions serve our purpose for now.

What the Hell did *that* mean? She couldn't even begin to figure it out. Fortunately, Dame Vaako appeared to misinterpret her head-shake and began piling on the false kindness.

"I know, it's difficult. But in time you will forget the breeder and fully embrace your new life. Perhaps you can serve the new Lord Martial when he ascends to the throne. Now *there* is a goal you can strive for."

Kyra had to contain a shudder. *Eww! I've had enough of horny old goats pawing me up—*

Is that what I was? Zhylaw's voice was full of laughter again. Her repressed shudder became a shiver as she remembered the touch of his hand on her shoulder. *I intended to give you high standing. Not quite **this** high, but it was the best of all possible outcomes.*

*You're probably totally incapable of saying something **simple** like "the sky is blue," aren't you?*

And how many worlds have you seen where that was true?

Hey! That was cheating. *Great. Not only am I arguing with myself, I'm **losing**.*

Another soft gust of Zhylaw's laughter moved through her. *Relax. You'll go unmolested.*

"Come, girl, we'll go to the command center and watch the Lords' progress." Dame Vaako turned and began walking towards one of the sweeping flights of stairs that led to the upper levels of the Basilica. Swallowing, Kyra followed her.

I don't want to watch Riddick die.

Then we'll see to it that you watch him escape, Zhylaw replied inside her head.

*I thought you **wanted** him dead.* She was pretty sure he had.

*It was his life or mine. Now that **I'm** dead, why should I care about that anymore?*

Never met a dead guy who talked as much as you do. She almost grumbled it aloud, and scowled when he laughed at her again.

The command center was bustling with Necromonger technicians, cadaverously thin men and women whose prodigious minds made up for their lack of physical strength. Kyra knew, somehow, that many of them would eventually become Quasi-Dead, once their bodies became too frail to support them. They were working to repair scorched panels on a console in the center of the room.

"What is the Riddick?" Dame Vaako suddenly asked Kyra, her voice demanding. "How did he do that trick with the flash of light?"

"What flash of light?" She was genuinely confused.

The Dame looked annoyed. "We led him here, so that he could complete the purification of this world. When we explained what he had to do, and what would happen, he *refused*. And when my husband tried to complete it in his stead, he did *this*." She waved a hand at the blackened panels.

"How?" Kyra frowned, shaking her head. Riddick hadn't even had a *regular* gun with him, much less a weapon that could—

“I *said*,” Dame Vaako snarled, “there was a flash of light. When we could see again, the controls were disabled and he and that Elemental witch were running for the shuttle bays.”

“I don’t know how— wait... on Crematoria, there was a flash of light. I thought it was a blast from one of y— our... weapons. I thought he was dead.” What was it she’d really seen? How *had* Riddick survived on Crematoria?

The look Dame Vaako was giving her was an even mixture of annoyance and disgust. She could practically hear the other woman’s thoughts, dismissing her as useless.

Good, Zhylaw murmured. We want her to underestimate you.

We do? If other voices started chiming in, she was going to start beating her head against the nearest wall.

Yes, we do. Now watch and listen.

“My Lady, Lord Vaako just sent a message that the Riddick and his companions have boarded a small spacecraft and are trying to take off.”

“Intercept them!” The Dame might not have had *official* authority, but Kyra noticed that everyone was jumping to do her bidding as if she did.

Of course they are. She’s the wife of the Purifier... and most of the fleet assumes he’ll be my successor.

Based on the indoctrination they’d shoved into Kyra’s head, she knew that it *was* the generally-accepted order of things. *Won’t he?*

Great, now she was *encouraging* the voice.

I have already been succeeded by someone worthier.

*Oh! Is **that** why you want to let Riddick get off-planet?* Now things were starting to make sense.

Riddick is irrelevant, aside from the fact that you care about him. He’s not my successor.

...And now *nothing* made sense.

For a second she had a strong sense-memory of being somewhere else, a place too pure and perfect to survive seeing without being irrevocably altered. Of being embraced, held... and released. Of the return of pain, and how much more agonizing the pain was after that immeasurable bliss. But the pain had fled; she felt no pain at *all* now. How was that possible?

You’re beginning to remember. Don’t fight it. The memories will come slowly, but they will come.

Fine, she’d play along. *Memories of what?*

The Underverse.

Somehow, when he spoke that word in her head, it conjured a feeling of home and belonging unlike any she’d ever experienced. Wistfulness and longing and a sense of unfathomable loss. The Underverse was the Necromonger paradise; she knew that from her indoctrination. But now it was something more as well, and something about it made her heart twist and ache, and tears start in her eyes. She hadn’t felt like this since she was a little girl and her grandfather died, and all the love went out of her world. She’d lost something, something so precious that its absence felt like a gaping wound.

Yes, child, now you begin to understand. We stand on this side of the Threshold, exiled. No matter how many we send across to Paradise, we’re trapped here until Underverse Come. Do you begin to understand what we’re fighting for?

*I don’t understand **any** of this!* she protested, feeling hurt and furious. *Why can’t you just **tell** me?*

Very well. Pay attention.

“Asshole,” she muttered, realizing too late that she’d done so aloud. Fortunately nobody but the voice in her head was paying attention to her.

Only a Necromonger can become the Lord Martial. And only the Lord Martial knows the rite for transferring power.

Wait, she interrupted. *I thought it was whoever killed you.*

That’s an aspect of the ritual, yes. The Lord Martial and his successor must give each other matching death blows, and then cross into the Underverse together. There they battle for primacy, and the winner crosses back and returns to his body, with all of the knowledge and power of the Lords Martial imbuing his soul.

So? Something was dancing just out of reach, tantalizing her, but she couldn’t quite grasp it.

You know the answer. Who exchanged mortal blows with me?

Riddick. She was there, she saw it. So how come he said Riddick wasn’t the Lord Martial?

*I gave him no death wound, and he was not a Necromonger anyway. Who **else** gave me a wound?*

She went cold all over, from her core to her skin. *Oh fuck.*

She'd stabbed him in the back—and taken an almost identical wound, herself, a moment later when he'd thrown her across the room. And then she'd *died*, while Riddick held her. Died, not simply passed out. She'd been *dead*. And now...

Yes, Zhylaw whispered inside her, and she could feel how real he was in comparison to any other voice that had ever plagued her. Now you are the Holy Half-Dead.

She surreptitiously slipped one of her hands behind her back and sought out the spot where she'd been impaled. Smooth, flawless flesh met her fingertips under the sticky rent in the fabric. The wound was gone, as if it had never existed.

“Blast it!” Dame Vaako shouted, and for a moment Kyra thought she'd been found out. But the other woman was staring at a viewscreen and pounding a console with her fist. “He got offworld! Now we'll have to pursue him!”

Oh shit. Kyra wasn't sure whether to be relieved or not, but she was leaning towards *not*.

Don't worry, child. Let them chase him.

But—

Even if they catch up to Riddick, they'll be no match for him. And any warrior who wishes the throne will insist on going. While their eyes are turned away towards him, we can consolidate our power. And you can learn more about what we're really fighting for... and fighting against.

The enormity of it all struck her, and then the ludicrousness of it. *If we fought... how did I win?*

You didn't. I defeated you. But of our two bodies, yours is the stronger... and if I rose again in mine, I'd just get assassinated before I could regain my strength. But I could not enter your body without you, so we made a truce. Either we both lived, or the universe would die. When you remember more, you'll understand.

It was too much. She couldn't handle it, couldn't fathom it all. Either she'd gone irrevocably insane, or something even *worse* had happened. And now she didn't even have that nebulous paradise to look forward to; the Underverse's gates were locked against her. And Riddick was millions of miles away by now, and getting farther away with each passing second.

She was alone. There was nobody she could trust, except the terrible voice in her head—

And one other. She had another friend, a *real* friend like Riddick, someone who cared about her for her own sake. Someone she hadn't seen in *years*. Someone who had made sure that Riddick would know how to find her, and that he'd want to rescue her from that Hellish prison.

Jack. If she could get Jack here, she'd be okay.

You need to put aside your old associations with breeders, child. They'll only weaken you.

I need someone I can trust, she snarled back at him. *That's either Riddick, or her.*

She could feel amusement and... was that respect?... in his tone. *And it can't be Riddick. That would bring the assassins right to you. Very well. Jack it is. Don't expect us to go running off to fetch her right away, though. You need to learn a little more finesse first.*

Fuck finesse, I'm sick of you telling me what I—

Now Zhylaw's tone became hard, steely. *This war is larger than you know, girl. If we lose it, every creature in this 'verse will experience unimaginable suffering. Including your Jack, and your Riddick. For their sakes, if nothing else, you need to learn a little patience.*

And then she saw it. Long ago, some well-meaning preacher had fed her some crap about how, for there to be Heaven, there also had to be Hell. She hadn't believed in either one, but now...

Eyeless, marching in eerie formation, the armies of Hell were in motion, and had been in motion for centuries. Insinuating themselves into unsuspecting worlds, infecting the populations, ravaging societies and ecosystems and spreading to the next and the next—

Rykengolls. She'd almost gotten sold to them, years ago.

That's not their real name, Zhylaw told her, but it will do. For now. You'll learn the rest in due time. Now, in the meantime, I suggest you ingratiate yourself with that treacherous bitch. If she takes you in as a servant, you won't have to worry about any “old goats” trying to paw you.

But she's dangerous— Kyra began to protest.

And that's why you need to keep a careful eye on her. Have you ever heard the expression “keep your friends close, and your enemies closer?”

No. What the fuck does that mean?

Zhylaw's voice took on a tinge of annoyance. *It means that if you want Jack to be safe here, you'd better make sure of Dame Vaako first. Do we understand each other?*

He'd played the right card; she'd never let *anybody* hurt Jack. Hell, she'd gone to *Crematoria* for Jack, hadn't she? Four years of grueling misery while she waited for Jack's message to get relayed to Riddick... if she could handle that, she could handle this.

For now.

We do. Am I ever going to get you out of my head?

We're one now, Kyra, until Underverse Come.

Armageddon had never sounded so tempting.



2.

Red Rook

You'd think that a million people calling for help, screaming their lungs out, would keep you awake, right? But that's not what does it. Not when you're bone tired, not when you've made your stand, made your run, gotten away as clean as you can, and it's all caught up with you. No, the screams aren't what wake you. It's the silence. It's that moment when the screaming stops.

There was a movie I saw long ago, back when they thought they could hold me in anything less than a triple-max. Had me in a fuckin' country club with "movie nights" for about a month before I walked. Didn't even need to run. They showed one of those old movies from centuries ago, when nobody really knew what space was like. Part of a whole series... maybe even where I got the idea of hiding out on an ice planet. Anyway. Some old guy felt a whole planet die. He talked about it, too. The screams. And then the silence. Just like this.

That's the moment when you wish the screams would keep on going. People who can still scream still got a shot at living.

He'd been dozing when it happened. The comm had been left on, cycling through all of the Helion System channels one after another, but the only thing it had picked up had been one distress call after another. He still had another half hour before the ship would be in space clear enough to heat up the ion drive when all the channels went dead at once. The silence was louder than any alarm he'd ever heard.

Riddick sat up, shaking the muzzy bits of cobweb out of his skull and looking around. Had he imagined a final roar of heavy static right before the silence? Or had that been some part of his dream?

The comm was cycling through the channels faster than ever, but only soft white noise, the e.m. hum of Helion and distant stars, came through.

What?

He glanced over at the others. Ziza was holding her father's amulet in one hand, her other arm wrapped around a puppy she'd picked up while they were running. She looked confused, glancing from stricken-faced Lajjun to grim-faced Aereon to *him*.

"Mommy?" she asked, her voice quavering in a way that he didn't remember from their meeting, "where'd all the people go?"

That was when he knew. He *knew* what had to have happened. Riddick turned back to the console and started pulling up recordings, looking for any video feed of the planet from the last ten minutes. So many relay stations orbited Helion Prime; some of them had to have caught it...

There.

The whole damn *world* was burning. Behind him he heard Lajjun's strangled sob.

The planet's albedo had dropped massively, its surface coloring going from blue-green to black shot with red. Veins of red were spreading, radiating out from points spaced across the planet's surface at orderly distances from each other. He counted a dozen before he stopped. At his command the video rolled back, the veins drawing into themselves. He wanted to see how it had begun.

Not like I don't know what did it, or nothin'... guess I didn't do that thing enough damage.

The planet was normal-looking again. He let the video play forward. First one blue pinprick, then another, and another and another appeared, hovering above those militarily precise points across the world's surface. He looked at the chrono notation on the video and was surprised. That had happened *hours* ago.

Oh yeah, wait, that thing was floating overhead when I got the holy man's wife and kid. Somehow, at the time, he'd dismissed it as just another sun. He'd been on planets with three suns; why shouldn't Helion Prime have a second one? Just because it wasn't on the nav charts...

Idiot.

So that was the Final Protocol. He sped the video forward, bringing it up to just a few minutes earlier.

The little blue pinpricks began to expand. Suddenly they dimmed, as if pulling some kind of darkness into themselves. Then shockwaves blasted out from them and, for fractions of a second, each one overloaded whatever camera was monitoring the planet. Static obscured the image and for a weird moment he thought he saw Kyra's face in it. Then the planet was back and the red snakes were spreading outward again, devouring everything they touched and leaving nothing but blackness in their wake.

Wonder who set it off?

The weaker part of him, the part he hated, twitched awake. Millions of people had just died, it told him, and that was all he had to say about it? He growled softly back at it. What did it *want* him to say? The two most important ones on that rock had already bought it, and he got the next two out of there with him. Wasn't that enough? Another three survivors, blasting away from yet another dead world...

Four, if you count the spook. He glanced over at Aereon, trying not to look wary. Something about her just felt all wrong to him, and not just because the bitch had put a massive bounty on his head. Ordinarily he'd have ghosted her for it long before now, except she seemed to be half-ghost already.

"Extraordinary," she said, sounding as genteel as if she were commenting on a really good tea biscuit. The urge to slash her insubstantial throat surged back. "I wouldn't have thought they could have repaired it so soon. Furyan blasts can do tremendous damage."

"Not enough," he muttered. Damn it all, so she *knew* about that? She'd better tell him everything she knew, or they'd be down to three survivors again, really soon.

Well, three and the puppy.

"It should have taken them *days* to repair the controls," Aereon continued, her voice calmly insistent. "Only the Lord Marshal could remote-detonate the protocol without them, and you killed him."

She seemed awfully smug about that, too. He wasn't sure why that bothered him so much, but it did. Maybe because she'd had that smug smile plastered all over her face while Kyra was dying in his arms—

His attention jerked away from her at the sound of a high-pitched whimper.

Ziza was crying, hugging the puppy tightly to her. It was wriggling in an attempt to get loose. With an abrupt shake it slithered out of her grasp and dropped to the floor, running unsteadily over to him and hiding behind his legs. The girl didn't seem to notice.

"Ziza." Lajjun's voice was soft, but he could hear suppressed tears in it.

Great. Soon he'd have a chorus of crying women on his hands. *Know how you feel, pup...*

Maybe he'd name it Jack.

"Ziza," Lajjun repeated, her voice more insistent. "Come sit with me and we'll look at the album." She took a picture album out of her hastily-packed bag, one of those fancy-framed things that held and displayed millions of images, even videos. Toys for the rich.

"Thought you folks didn't like graven images," he observed.

Her glance at him was reproofing. "These are not graven. Nor are they false gods. They are records of moments in our lives. They are, perhaps, some of the only surviving records of a once-living world."

And, he realized, her once-living husband. He couldn't really fault her for that.

Ziza, sniffing, slipped off of her chair and walked over to her mother, climbing onto her lap. The puppy was apparently forgotten, except that Riddick could feel it nibbling on the back of one of his pants legs.

"Here, Ziza, remember this day? Your fifth birthday..."

"It won't be the end, you know," Aereon told him, ignoring the others. "They'll come after you."

I'm so glad I have the Mistress of the Obvious on board to tell me these things.

"You think so?" He already had some of the pursuing ships on his scanners. He'd wait until he was ready to engage the ion drive before he pulled any moves on them. Lay in a false trail, send out one of Toombs' decoys... last time he'd wanted them to chase him; it had been part of his plan. Hadn't worked out so well, but they'd acted exactly the way he'd wanted them to. This time, he'd evade them for real.

"They'll be relentless," the spook went on, as though revealing things he hadn't already figured out. "They believe that they must kill you to take the throne of the Lord Marshal."

"Cause you keep what you kill. Got it." He didn't bother looking over at her, but he could *feel* her lips thinning in response. "I killed him, so they figure if they kill me, they get all the magic batshit—"

"Mister Riddick!"

"Sorry, Lajjun." He couldn't believe he'd just said that. What the fuck, why was he apologizing for swearing? This was *his* ship, and they'd all better just get used to the way he talked unless they felt like

walking to the nearest spaceport—

“They won’t, of course.” And Miss Conversationalist was back. For a moment he thought he was talking about the other passengers, but of course she meant the damned Necros.

She must really think this shit is important.

“Course they won’t, lady. Ain’t a one of ’em good enough to take me down.” Especially now that he was apparently a walking EMP. Handy little trick, once he learned how to control it better.

“Even if they *did* kill you, those powers are gone. The chain of ascension has been broken, and there will be no more Lord Marshals. The prophecy has been fulfilled.”

Oh, it just *figured* there was a prophecy involved. *If this is going to turn into some kind of sorcery epic like that old-time movie I was thinking about, I fuckin’ well want one of those cool blades they had.*

“Don’t sound so concerned for my well-being,” he grumped. First space station he found, he was parting ways with *everybody*. Going it alone. Just him, back out in the dark.

There was a sharp tug on his pants leg.

Okay, me and the puppy...

“Do I need to be? You single-handedly destroyed the most feared armada in recent history.” With that smug look on her face, it was almost as if she was taking credit for it herself. “In a matter of months they’ll fall apart, squabbling over the little bits of power and resources they have left, forgetting their religion, their quest, forgetting the way to Underverse or what awaits them there. And then they’ll be no more.”

“That what your prophecy tells you?” Damn, he hadn’t meant to sound quite *that* sarcastic. Losing Jack was messing with his head more than he wanted to admit.

Aereon shook her head and he half-expected a few canary feathers to float away. “It doesn’t have to. That’s inevitable. With no Lord Marshal to focus their power, they have no power.”

“So if the power didn’t pass to me, where’d it go?” The things the Lord Marshal had been able to do had been pretty fucked-up.

“Back into the Underverse where it belongs, of course. And with no successor, no new Lord Marshal, there’s no conduit to hold the Threshold open. That gateway has closed, and there’s nothing they can do to reopen it.”

Maybe that wasn’t such a bad thing. *Yeah, no maybe there.*

“So that was your prophecy?”

She shook her head again. “The prophecy was that, when the sixth Lord Marshal fell, killed at the hands of a Furyan warrior, none of his men would rise to take his place. The rest was inference, but it was enough to send the fifth Lord Marshal’s named successor on a rampage thirty years ago. He ravaged your world in his quest to avert the prophecy and, in doing so, made it inevitable.”

More hoodoo bullshit to deal with. People couldn’t ever just keep it simple.

“So. Now that I’ve fulfilled your prophecy, you gonna pull that bounty off my head?”

“I pulled it off immediately after our first meeting, Riddick. Surely you noticed when your friend Toombs felt compelled to search for another world to turn you in on?”

Guess I did. He’d used that to his advantage, after all... or tried to. He hadn’t exactly ended up helping Kyra all that much.

“Is that Jack?” Ziza’s voice grabbed at his attention with that simple question.

“Yes, my dear, that is. You were still so small. Do you remember her at all?”

Riddick found himself climbing out of the pilot’s chair. Pictures of Jack, back the way he remembered her... this he had to see.

“When did you take this?” Ziza was asking. He leaned in to look.

That had to have been only a few months after he’d taken off. Jack’s hair was still short, much lighter and finer than it had become. She looked so different, exactly the way he’d thought he remembered her but so unlike Kyra—

The picture shifted and, with a cold chill, he realized why.

Jack was in the new picture, smiling at the camera, arm in arm with another girl whose smile was more guarded.

Kyra.

“Who’s the other girl?” He tried to keep his voice nonchalant, but saw Aereon’s head turn towards him.

Bitch doesn’t miss a thing.

“Kyra?” Lajjun said, answering her own question even as she asked it. “Kyra Falnour. We thought it would look less suspicious to people if we didn’t just foster Jack, but another girl her age as well... and it would give her some company. Kyra had gone through a lot of foster homes, and run away from several of them, before she came to us. We hoped the two of them would find balance in each other. Instead, they ran away together, a few months after we took this picture.”

Falnour. A last name. Suddenly he had a much better place to start piecing everything together.

Another picture filled the little screen. Jack and Kyra, playing with a very tiny Ziza in a small garden pool. He’d never seen *either* of them look like that. Laughing, carefree, at ease, no tension, no resentment...

They look so damned happy. Why’d they run away if they were so damned happy?

Yet another picture appeared. This time it was a family shot, the Al-Walids and their foster daughters all together, dressed in their best. Jack’s hair had grown out another two inches and she’d trimmed it into the same kind of boyish cut she’d been wearing when he first met her. Kyra had cut a few inches of her hair off. Their smiles for the camera seemed unnatural, oddly wary.

“I hate that picture,” Ziza muttered.

“I’m sorry, little one. We didn’t realize that your eye infection would show, or we’d have rescheduled.”

Taking a better look at the picture, he could see what Ziza meant. Her eyes were red and a little puffy. He hadn’t noticed, so focused on the other girls.

“You look great to me, kid.”

Lajjun’s expression became a little disapproving, as though she expected him to ask Ziza out on a *date* next.

Every time I’m nice to some kid who happens to be female it’s the same damn thing no matter what—

“Can’t we just get rid of it?” said little girl asked.

“But Ziza, it’s the last picture we *have* of Jack and Kyra. And we have so *few* of them.”

Ziza huffed, her face settling into a grumpy pout. “So what? They didn’t like us anyway or they’d have *stayed*.”

Was this the same girl he’d been talking to earlier? The sweet, friendly kid? She suddenly looked like a stranger. Her expression had become almost *shrewish*.

“Are your eyes hurting again?” Lajjun asked, putting her hand under her daughter’s chin to tilt her face up.

“A little,” Ziza grudgingly allowed.

“She gets frequent eye infections,” Lajjun explained to Riddick as if he’d asked. “Sometimes, when they begin, her temper gets a bit bad.”

“I’m not—”

Okay, that was as much of this family shit as he could take for a while. “Tell you what. It’s been a really long day and we’ve got a few hours of coasting left before we can use the ion drive, if we wanna avoid detection. Why don’t you guys sack out?”

Both Al-Walids wore identical looks of confusion. Had they never heard that term?

“You know, get some sleep. That goes for you too, Ambassador.” He nodded at Aereon, who seemed to have been gleefully eavesdropping. “I’ll keep an eye on things.”

He had a little research to do, too, and it’d go faster if people weren’t chattering.

“That’s a good idea. Come, Ziza.” Lajjun shut off the picture frame and stood up, moving toward the back of Toombs’ ship. It wasn’t luxurious back there, but it could be conformed for sleeping, and it looked like the woman knew how to do that on her own.

Ziza climbed down from the chair, still looking sulky, and stomped over toward the puppy. It backed up and then ducked behind the piloting console.

“Come out,” she told it. “Come *out!*”

“You squeezed him kinda hard earlier.” He wasn’t sure why, but it suited him just fine that the puppy seemed to like him better than the kid. “He’s afraid you’ll do it again. Let him come to you when he’s ready.”

The look she gave him could have taken out another of Helion Prime’s cities. He stared back calmly, keeping his expression not-unfriendly, and not letting her see any sign of the chill that had just moved through him. The handprint on his chest was suddenly stinging.

What the fuck? I’m getting freaked out by a kid! But suddenly he didn’t want her *touching* the puppy... or *him*.

“Ziza. Say goodnight to Riddick and come to bed.”

The little girl sighed and seemed to shake it off. When she smiled at him, it was the sweet smile she’d given him when they first met. “Good night, Riddick.”

He found himself smiling back. “Good night, Ziza.”

Guess that was the eye infection talking. Ain’t a bad kid, just hurting. Not like I’ve never been there myself.

Aereon stood and nodded at him. “Good night, Riddick. We will speak more soon.”

“Night.” *You can damn well bet your evaporated ass we will.*

He waited until they were settled before turning back to the controls.

The puppy – he really needed to give it a name, but “Jack” might still be taken – slithered out from hiding after several minutes and put its paws on his leg. He reached down and scooped it up onto his lap, taking his first really good look at it. Tiny and male, with huge paws... if he wasn’t mistaken, it was a mastiff. Maybe he’d look that up after his other research was done.

Kyra Falnour. It’s a starting point. He started punching in queries, routing them to one of the smaller monitors just in case anyone in back woke up. This was for his eyes only.

It took him a few tries before he hit on the correct spelling, but finally he pulled her records up and got his first good look at who she really was... this girl who had let him think she was Jack. She’d been fourteen – not twelve, fourteen – when she’d run away from the Al-Walids, and there were no reports of her after their missing-persons report for more than a year. Until she was arrested on Pynchon IV for multiple homicides.

Okay, there we go. What the hell happened? He dug deeper. Toombs’ ship had full access to the merc network; there wasn’t a court case he couldn’t tap into.

Outstanding warrants from three years earlier popped up, for the murders of three mining partners who had allegedly “adopted” her.

Nice euphemism for buying a slave, there... So that part of her story had been true. She just hadn’t mentioned that it had happened long before she ever heard his name. Of course, he hadn’t let her get very far in her story before he’d flown into a rage over the merc angle. Jack would’ve known better than to sign up with mercs, but without her experiences, he could see how a kid could end up making that dumb mistake.

Funny that nobody on Helion had any idea she’d done that...

Or maybe the government on Helion had just been way too enlightened to let warrants like that get served. He had to admit, the place had seemed pretty nice before the Necros hit it.

Aside from the understandable paranoia, that is. Almost made him feel guilty for ghosting so many of their guards right before the invasion. *Heh, they’d have died one way or another that night, no matter what.*

But if Kyra had been protected on Helion Prime, and not Pynchon IV, why had she left?

There wasn’t any explanation in the extradition hearing notes. Lots of testimony for the defense, though, from someone named “Audrey Jackson-Badura.” He opened her file, his heart racing.

No priors. No convictions. But she’d been a missing person case for a little over three years and then had mysteriously reappeared, with no explanation of where she’d been on file. A few months after her return, her parents started adoption proceedings for none other than one Kyra Falnour, and that had eventually been picked up by the merc network.

It’s gotta be her. Criminal history was empty; Jack was either keeping it clean or keeping it low-key. He switched over to civil registrations.

And there she was. Jack. Her picture came up along with her licensing information. Her hair was a little longer, her features a little more mature, but she still had that elfin look he remembered and that Kyra had actually lacked. She was nineteen now, just like Kyra, and had licenses to operate both private and commercial vehicles on Pynchon. And—

“A paramedic,” he whispered. The girl was driving an ambulance and licensed to assist first-response medical teams. *And* enrolled in the planet’s largest university, in its pre-med program. Jack B. Badd had gone back home, and gone legit.

So why had the holy man told him she was in prison?

“Only one way to find that out, isn’t there?” he asked the sleeping puppy in his lap. “You and me, we’re going to Pynchon IV.”

Just as soon as he shook off his pursuers and sent his passengers on their way. He had a lot of questions for Audrey Jackson-Badura.

Note: Yes, in this chapter, I'm using the "Lord Marshal" spelling. As far as Riddick knows, it's a name, like "Lord Vaako" or "Lord Toal," so he's not thinking in terms of it being a military title. The contradiction in the spellings and perspectives is deliberate. ;)

3.

White Knight

“Yo Jackson! We’re up in five!”

Audrey turned in the booth and waved at Caswell, giving him an apologetic “I’ll-make-this-quick” smile. She was almost done. She turned back to the call, wishing for the millionth time she could afford a personal comm for things like this.

Yeah, that’ll be in about... ten years...

“...say they’re reviewing the case and will let us know soon. It doesn’t help that she’s apparently been involved in a number of altercations within the prison itself. We can’t use ‘good behavior’ as a rationalization.” Menefee, the man on the other end, was a *deeply earnest* junior Public Defender with the gentlest eyes she’d ever seen on a man. Right now they were apologetic.

“Well, what do they *expect*?” Audrey snapped. “You put a teenage girl in with a whole bunch of violent criminals and how *else* is she supposed to survive?”

“I agree with you, Aud, I really do,” Menefee replied. He was about the only person she let call her that, although she’d never admit that it meant anything. “We’re pointing that out every chance we get. I think we’re making headway but we’ll know when the review board gets back to me. This isn’t our last tactic, either, okay? We’re going to get her out.”

Yeah, she’d been hearing that particular song for three years now. Menefee was a great guy, but her money was still on Riddick. If only he’d make a *move* already...

Damn you, Imam, you’d better have contacted him...

“I gotta go,” she said into the comm. “My shift’s about to start. Thanks for everything you’re doing, Menefee. I mean it.”

“You’re welcome. And don’t worry. We *will* get her out. I’ll talk to you soon.”

She said goodbye and replaced the unit in its cradle, wincing at the charge. Comm calls gouged her no matter what she did. She stepped out of the booth and walked over to her partners.

“Any news?” Caswell was a good guy to work with, and he seemed to genuinely care about her Free Kyra project; he’d even donated a little to it.

“Nothing. They’re still giving us the runaround.”

“Big surprise there,” Teague scoffed. She sighed, reminding herself once more that he wasn’t actually *against* what she was doing; he was just a complete cynic who didn’t believe it would ever pay off.

“Yeah, I guess not...” she sighed. No way was she stopping. *Something* had to turn the tide of public opinion, and she’d find it. She’d keep on digging, keep on finding other stories about girls and women stolen from their safe lives and sold to belt-miners as “companions,” keep linking every single one of them to the story of a girl who’d fought back only to be sent to the worst prison in the ’verse for doing so... eventually people would admit where the *real* crime was.

She just hoped Kyra didn’t have to wait *that* long.

C’mon, Riddick. Just go there and spring her already... Kyra knew their story well enough to pass herself off as the girl he’d known, and his vision was screwed up enough that he shouldn’t be able to spot the differences between them. *Just get her out of there...*

She climbed aboard the ambulance and started its engine, logging her team in.

The guys were in back, checking the gear and preparing for their first call. Since she’d started working with them, they’d never waited more than fifteen minutes before getting one. New Detroit was a huge place, insanely overcrowded, and it never took long for it to mangle *somebody*.

She switched on her audio recorder, playing back the morning lecture. While she waited, she’d listen to her professor explain reverse-transcriptase again.

“This enzyme was first identified on Earth in the late twentieth century, with the identification of the first retroviral strains. Its properties were—”

The comm emitted a harsh, rasping beep.

“Unit six, you’re up. We need you in Purdy. Domestic violence call. The address is on your screen and police are en route. Will update you as more information comes in.”

Hadn’t even taken a full minute. Audrey banged on the door behind her. “We’re up, boys!”

She shut off the lecture and switched on her siren. Damn. She *hated* domestic violence calls.

Pynchon was, by many worlds’ standards, extremely old-fashioned. It could almost pass for twentieth-century Earth, itself, or at least New Detroit could have. People often compared it to pre-plague New York City, minus Central Park. No trees grew on this world. Local evolution had never gotten that far before it had failed spectacularly and everything had died. The amount of petroleum those failed organisms had left behind, though, was astounding, and had led to a renaissance for automobiles on this and nearby worlds. Especially since the planet was also metal-rich. New Detroit cranked out thousands of them every year, along with the more traditional airskimmers and even light spacecraft. Audrey had seen pictures of ambulances just like hers on the streets of those ancient cities.

Purdy was migrant territory, where newcomers from other worlds settled when they couldn’t afford anything else. Lately it seemed to be swarming with refugees from the Coalsack Systems. Nobody was really sure what had happened there; the few refugees who would even talk about it told stories that made no sense. They were jumpy and quick to violence; Audrey hadn’t had a shift yet, since their arrival, that didn’t see her driving into Purdy at least once.

She followed the onscreen directions and found herself pulling into yet another tenement parking lot. Police officers were everywhere, roping off the area and pushing crowds of onlookers back. One of them waved her through, his expression grim. She cut off the siren.

“Looks like we’ve got a bad one,” Caswell said, emerging from the back with his kit. “Any details yet?”

There wasn’t anything new on the screen. Audrey parked the ambulance in front of the building and shook her head. “Guess the cops’ll know.”

Two of them were leading a man out of the building now. He was weeping, his hands cuffed behind his back. Another two brought out a woman. Uncuffed, she was struggling to break free from them. Both were dressed for sleeping; both were covered in blood.

“You *bastard!*” she screamed, trying to lunge at the cuffed man. “You murdering *bastard!*”

Caswell and Teague climbed out of the cab, their kits in their hands.

“Where do you need us?” Teague asked one of the officers.

“You able to sedate her?” The officer gestured to the screaming woman. Teague nodded, opening his kit and prepping a hypospray. “Guy killed both their children. They’re past needing you.”

“You called for the cor—” Caswell began asking and then stopped. Audrey saw the van pulling up alongside hers.

Damn, they’re fast. We only just barely got here ourselves. She didn’t like what that probably meant; they’d already been in the area on another assignment. She picked up the ambulance’s comm.

“Dispatch, we’re going to be inbound soon with a patient, female, mid-thirties, for the psych ward. She’s going to need to be kept sedated for a while and probably put on suicide watch. Where should we take her?”

“Roger that, Unit 6. One moment.”

The coroners were entering the building, wheeling a gurney in. Teague and Caswell were trying to get the woman to hold still long enough for them to sedate her. She’d switched languages, screaming at the cuffed man in what sounded like Chuvili.

Definitely from the Coalsack.

“You need anything for him?” she asked the officer, nodding at the man in cuffs.

He shook his head, his expression hard. “No, he seems to be under control. Bastard was just standing there. Right over them...” His face paled as he spoke.

“Unit 6, there’s a bed open in Mercy West. You can take her there.”

“Roger that, Dispatch. We’ll be inbound in five.” Teague was sitting with the woman while Caswell got the stretcher. Even sedated, she couldn’t stop crying.

“I had to.”

Audrey looked over at the cuffed man. He was thin and mousey, with the look of someone who had spent weeks jumping at shadows. Not at all what she’d have pictured when she thought of a killer, and she’d met entirely too many of those. He saw her looking at him, and his eyes locked with hers.

“I *had* to,” he repeated, his voice almost entreating. There were blood-spatters on his face, partly washed away by tracks of tears. “It wouldn’t stop. They wouldn’t... they wouldn’t stop.”

“Wouldn’t stop what?” the officer asked, *his* tone both resigned and exasperated.

There was a commotion off to the side. The first members of the press were arriving, shouting questions, pointing lights in, and generally trying to get in the way of everything from the other side of the cordon.

“Their eyes. Oh God, their eyes. And the way they’d stare at us... and they wouldn’t stop saying it.” The bloodied man began shaking.

Teague and Caswell were helping their patient onto the stretcher as the coroners came back out. They’d only taken one gurney with them... and that was all they’d needed. The two body bags on it were so small. So pathetically tiny. Audrey swallowed, fighting the sudden urge to cry, herself.

“Saying what?” The officer sounded more intense suddenly.

“To... to truly see...” The man stammered. Audrey’s eyes snapped back to him. He seemed almost afraid to repeat the words. “You must first...”

Cold filled Audrey. No. That wasn’t possible. *No.*

“You must first be blind,” the man finished.

Oh holy fuck, that’s not possible. There’s no way... oh fuck.

Oddly enough, the officer looked disturbed, too. “Where did you hear that?”

“They kept *saying* it!” the man insisted. “They wouldn’t *stop*. And their eyes... their eyes were all...”

Audrey almost jumped when one of her team pounded on the ambulance door, letting her know they were on board and everything was stowed. She swallowed and picked up the comm again. “Dispatch, this is Unit 6. We are now inbound.”

The officer moved away from the side of the ambulance, clearing her some room. She began to pull out.

“...third case like this so far this month...”

She glanced at the coroners as she passed them, loading the tiny bodies into the back of *their* van. They had another filled body bag already in there, that one mercifully full-sized.

This can’t be happening. Not here. Not now. She left the siren off as she drove. The patient was stable, but *she* wasn’t. She was rocked to her core, so this was *not* the time to race through intersections.

To truly see, you must first be blind. She hadn’t heard anyone say that since New Mecca. She’d hoped she’d never hear it again. And that look of fear in his eyes... she remembered feeling just like that, years ago. Sick dread pooled in her stomach.

It stayed with her through the rest of the shift. Two fires, one multi-vehicle collision, and a violent case of food poisoning later she finally clocked out, more exhausted than usual. She wasn’t even the one who had to bear the brunt of those cases; she just drove the ambulance, relayed information and supplies, and on *rare* occasions helped out if her team needed a third pair of hands.

“You okay, Jackson?” Funny how at moments like this it was Teague, the cynic, who asked that, and not Caswell. She looked up at him and nodded, forcing a smile.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. It was just the kids...”

His expression was sympathetic. “Those get me every time, too. Doesn’t even matter that we never saw their faces, does it?”

She couldn’t tell him what she was really thinking, really *feeling*. So she just nodded. But her mind was racing and, after what he’d said, she wondered if that might have made it easier. If she’d seen their faces – seen their *eyes* – would she be feeling any better, or even worse?

“I can’t even figure out what’d make a man do that to his own kids,” Teague continued. “Whatever happened out in the Coalsack seems to really have fucked up a *lot* of people. They’re killing *each other* right and left. Word is Unit 2 had a case just like ours tonight, too.”

“They *what*? How is that possible?” Two families in one night?

Teague shrugged, running his hand through his thinning, graying hair. “I guess eventually you see every possible coincidence in this job. About six, seven years ago, we answered two different calls, across town from each other. Both were fatal motor accidents, and in both cases, the driver of the *other* vehicle – the one not at fault – died instantly. Turned out those two drivers were husband and wife. Crazy, huh?”

“Yeah,” Audrey answered him, her lips and tongue feeling strangely numb and leaden. “Crazy...”

She knew that case well; it had been her mom and stepfather.

Just what I needed on top of the freak-out I already had going... fuck.

She needed to get back to the dorm. The comm service was free there; she could look things up without it costing her a vital organ. And right now, she suddenly needed to, desperately. Well, after she curled up on her bed and did some deep-breathing exercises. Teague patted her shoulder and climbed to his feet. “See you Friday, kid. Don’t study too hard.”

She waved to him in response and then got herself out of there.

Fortunately it was late enough that nobody in her hall was up, because when she got a good look at herself in the mirror she knew *anyone* would have stopped and asked her what was wrong. She hadn’t looked this rocky since her first D.O.A. She turned on her comm terminal and then walked into the shower, remembering to undress right before she turned on the water.

God, I’m losing it...

Wrapped in her bathrobe and feeling the tiniest bit refreshed, she plunked down in front of the terminal and typed in her search phrase.

“To truly see you must first be blind.”

It had never occurred to her to look that up before now. She’d put that phrase out of her head, almost forgotten it.

The search results popped up.

[How Self-Actualized Are You?](#)

Free test from the Clement Institute available ... founder would say, “to truly see, you must first be blind.”

[gl5.core.27.clementinstitute](#) - Cached - Similar

[Church of the Rykengoll](#)

If you’re seeking spiritual guidance, we have the answers ... founder would say, “to truly see, you must first be blind.”

[gl8.core.443.rykengollchurch](#) - Cached - Similar

What the fuck?

Only two results... and identical phrases. She grabbed a notepad and scribbled down the two names: *Clement Institute* and *Church of the Rykengoll*. Something about that second name made her skin crawl. Had she heard it before? Maybe... back on Helion?

Her hand hesitated a long moment before clicking on the link.

Yes. It claimed to have established churches on a variety of worlds. Including Helion. Including the Coalsack systems. And now it was advertising its first “mission” in New Detroit... set up two weeks after the Coalsack refugees began pouring in.

*No. Not here. Christ, not here. Not on **my** world...*

But it was them. She knew it. They’d come.

She went back to the first page and clicked the other link. There was a connection here, and she was sure of it.

Well look at that, guess who set up shop in New Detroit at the exact same time? This Clement Institute was offering self-help courses, all of them innocuous-sounding, but it didn’t take long for Audrey to spot the weirdness in the descriptions.

They didn’t like doctors. They particularly didn’t like psychiatrists. It was subtle, but it ran through all of their pages; institutionalized medicine was bad, and its practitioners were charlatans. Everything, this place claimed, could be healed by the mind, something that had been hidden from the public for the last millennium by those wicked physicians.

Sons of bitches... She wouldn’t have liked these crackpots even *without* their connection to that weird church.

Funny how neither place ever named their founder.

You are totally the same place, you bastards. What the fuck are you doing on my world?

She saved the links and shut down. Her first class wasn't until after noon, but she still needed to sleep between now and then.

Maybe she'd wake up to some *good* news, she thought as she lay in her bed. Maybe Menefee would call and Kyra would be on her way back... they'd finally be reunited... they'd be safe...

Kyra was running into her room, her hair sleep-touseled and her eyes wide, fully awake and filled with fear. "Holy shit, Jack, you've gotta get up, wake up!"

"What's wrong?" She lifted her head, trying to focus.

"She's doing it again. She's doing it again and this time she's got—"

"To truly see," a horrible, gravelly voice croaked from behind Kyra, "you must first be blind."

"Oh fuck..." Kyra swung around, her hands going up. Beyond her, Jack saw the eyes, blazing a gory, impossible red in the darkness.

The voice was unrecognizable but the shape was terrifyingly familiar. "To truly see, you must first be blind."

There was a knife clutched in one small hand.

Jack reached out, grabbing the first weapon-like thing her hand touched.

"*Oh fuck, don't touch me—*"

Audrey found herself sitting up in her bed, her raised arm holding her bedside lamp. Her heart was hammering.

Nobody was there. No Kyra, no eldritch monster. She was in her dorm room. Alone, untouched, inviolate. Safe. She was safe.

No, not safe, she thought as she shakily returned the lamp to its stand. *They've come here. Nobody's safe.*

Suddenly *Crematoria* was sounding a lot safer than New Detroit.

"So who do I have to kill to get sent there?" Audrey muttered, and then felt her gorge rise.

Tiny body bags. A weeping father.

She lunged for her bathroom and barely got there in time.

4.

Cleansing Fire

If someone had asked Kyra what Purification meant even a few days earlier, she might have come up with a lot of possibilities. Sashaying into a reactor core wouldn't have been one of them.

Are you sure this is going to work? she asked uneasily as she walked her most nonchalant walk down the corridor. *I'm not going to glow or anything, am I?*

Not visibly, Zhylaw answered her. It wasn't the most reassuring thing he could have said.

She'd slipped out of the control room at his urging, while Dame Vaako was communicating with her husband and most of the technicians were distracted. A few of them had been left with the impression that she'd been called away by another ranking officer, just in case Dame Vaako asked. Hot *damn*, Kyra couldn't wait to learn how to do that herself. Zhylaw had the power to twist the minds of his people to do his bidding without ever realizing they weren't acting of their own free will... if he wanted to. He claimed it was something he'd almost never done.

Kyra had a feeling that was going to have to change if they wanted to stay in power.

A lenser passed, its handler barely noticing them, but she saw the way the creature reacted to her.

As you were, she heard Zhylaw say in her head, and knew that the lenser was hearing him too. *You haven't seen me.*

It turned and walked on as though she wasn't there at all.

*I seriously **need** to learn how to do that,* she told her mentor. It was a lot easier to deal with this whole thing if she pretended that he was actually walking next to her, like one of the imaginary friends she'd had when she was four.

You'll find it comes easily, he replied, *especially after your Purification is completed.*

Apparently, she hadn't actually finished the process when Riddick had interrupted things. Apparently, even though she was now the Holy Half-Dead, there were still a few channels that needed to be opened within her in order for her to access the full range of powers Zhylaw had displayed. But, *apparently*, she was also strong enough that instead of receiving a slow trickle of cleansing energy over a period of days, she could take a full-on flood of it all at once. So they were going right to the source.

So. I'm not going to visibly glow. But I'm going to glow? She wasn't sure why that bothered her so much.

Yes, and no. You will radiate power. Only a very few others in the Armada are at the point where they'll be able to see that... and none of them will be inclined to speak of it. Any Necromonger who reaches that level of awareness, without passing into Underverse, understands what we're truly fighting for. They won't betray us.

Which Necromongers will those be? She turned, bemused by just how completely invisible she seemed to be to people. Acolytes, apparently, were nothing and nobody. Soldiers and dignitaries walked past in dwindling numbers without a word or even a glance.

The lensers and the quasi-dead. And perhaps a few of the older civilians. Yes, he continued, *laughter in his voice, we have civilians. We have priests, bureaucrats, manufacturers, kitchen staff, mechanics, technicians... all of the things that an armada this size needs to keep going. Crasser people might call them camp followers, but they are our own. We even have foster parents for the handfuls of children we can actually salvage.*

Really? Before she'd been put through the first stage of purification, she'd overheard other Helionites in her line talking about how the Necromongers supposedly killed children on sight.

Yes. You will understand much better soon. It's up ahead now... just walk in as though you belong. I will take care of the technicians.

Kyra squared her shoulders and walked forward, acting – she hoped – confident and purposeful. She couldn't quite believe she was doing this but...

...She trusted him. Bits and pieces of their encounter and negotiations in the Underverse were coming back to her, a little at a time, and her trust in him increased with every fragment of memory. He would make this work.

The technicians ignored her. It was tempting to wave her hands in their faces and sing and dance in front of them, just to see if they'd keep on ignoring her, but she was here on *business*. Even if she *could* feel

Zhylaw suppressing a laugh. Was he resisting the urge to egg her on? She felt like he was. Maybe there was hope yet.

At Zhylaw's mental command, a technician walked over to the inner reactor door and punched in a security code, returning to his post immediately after as though he'd done nothing. The door slid open and Kyra slipped through, closing it behind her.

Did you pay attention to the code? By his tone, she knew that even if she hadn't, Zhylaw had. But no way was she going to get locked into a reactor without knowing how to get out!

Yeah, 7-2-6-2-8-4-8-2-7. Remembering that was going to be a bitch.

Did you notice the letters on the keypad? In the old Earth style?

Yeah, I think so. I didn't think anybody made those anymore.

Our controls are very old, especially in this part of the Basilica. Remember the word "Sanctitas." If you forget the numbers, just spell it out on the keypad.

"Sanctitas?" She punched the numbers in on the next door's pad, noting that it really did spell out that word. He must have known it from the start.

*Purity. In the old Latin, of course. Step through quickly when the door opens. We don't want the antechamber's detector to pick up **too** much of a climb in radiation. Others out of my immediate reach might notice.*

The door slid open and she stepped through quickly, hitting the panel on the other side to close it. *How far is your range?*

She was in a dark, circular room. The ceiling was vaulted, but much lower than the ceilings in any of the other rooms. And there was something in here, something that made her skin tingle in a not-unpleasant way. It seemed to come from the pillar at the center of the chamber.

I can reach across the light-years, child. But focusing on one mind out of many is far easier when its owner is in front of me. I'd rather not send out a generalized command to everyone, especially since I don't want any of them wondering how I managed that while dead.

There he went, calling her "child" and making her want to smack him again. They were going to have to discuss that. No sooner had she thought that than she heard his silent laughter.

Hey! Don't be a dick or I'll have to start thinking about naked men. Apparently that was her one way of genuinely horrifying him.

My apologies. On the central pillar, you'll find a lever. Drawing it down will unshield the core.

Kyra took a deep breath. Moment of truth. *Always heard this stuff'd kill ya.*

You've returned from the dead once already. Don't be afraid.

She pulled the lever down.

It was... beautiful. That was her first reaction as the shielding around the pillar opened up. The thing inside – the core – was the most beautiful object she'd ever seen. It radiated colors she had no name for. It sang. It filled the air with the scent and taste of the Underverse, stirring her nascent memories even further. She wanted to embrace it, to cradle it in her arms and be wrapped in *its* embrace.

Ohhhhhhh... She wasn't sure if that was her mental voice, or Zhylaw's. Maybe it was both of them. Did it really matter? Only a few times in her life had anything come close to feeling like this and every single time, she'd woken up from an intense dream gasping with illusory pleasure. This, though, was real. Nothing in her whole life had ever felt this real.

Oh God, I can see everything... It was overwhelming. She needed to focus on something small. She stared down at her hands, watching as the last of the greens, yellows, and oranges faded away from under her skin. Everything had gone blue. Blue, indigo, violet, *ultraviolet*, shading into incredible colors she hadn't known existed until just now. Underlying it – back in the world of the flesh – her hands were perfectly normal-looking, but this new vision felt even more real and more important than that.

You are clean, Kyra Falnour. You have been cleansed, and now you are truly the Lord Martial. Zhylaw sounded triumphant.

Around her the room looked as bright as if daylight were pouring in – or *out*, from the core – revealing every detail of its walls and floor, and the arched ceiling above. A control panel she hadn't noticed until then was opposite the door, hidden from direct view by the pillar itself.

What is that for?

It's a backup of the main control station. No one but the Lord Martial knows it's here.

Kyra walked closer to the panel, curious as to what it controlled. *And it works? Even with the radiation way up?*

It only works when the radiation levels are elevated. This dose would be lethal to anyone except the Lord Martial and his chosen successor. Under more ordinary circumstances, this is where we come to perform the transition of power. And this is where we can retreat to, should things go terribly wrong.

It was funny; Kyra felt like she knew this control panel intimately, every single command, every single code. Of course, Zhylaw and the others before him had. Now those memories were within her, waking up and integrating into her mind. With this set of switches, she could remotely destroy any of the ships in her Armada. It had been used only twice, on two occasions when Rykengolls had overrun ships very early in the war. And with *this* lever, shaped like one of the towers—

You can complete the Final Protocol, yes.

At Zhylaw's gentle nudge, Kyra turned her attention away from the panel and let it spread out, encompassing the Basilica. There: she could see all of the warriors – *her* warriors – and the members of the court, moving calmly about their business as they prepared for the Armada to leave Helion Prime. The final soldiers were boarding, the ones who would have been left stranded by Zhylaw's earlier panicked order to evacuate. All of them had that same blue about them that she'd observed in her own hands, but none of the more intense, nameless colors. The quasi-dead revealed themselves to her, scattered throughout the ship in pools of deep violet; the lenses looked indigo. And there were the new converts, slowly blue-shifting in suspension. She reached out to them on impulse, caressing them, and saw the shift speed up.

And beyond the ship...

Oh my God.

Yes, Zhylaw whispered as she took in the horror below them. Now you see.

The planet had been ravaged. Not by the Necromonger invasion; she wasn't seeing the fallen masonry or scattered bodies. The biosphere had been *raped*.

They hid in the sewers, in basements of half-fallen houses that had been concealing them for years. Eyeless horrors, human and otherwise, mewling in the darkness, grafting themselves to one another in hideous, maimed matings. Veins of sickly orange pulsed through them, shading toward red, then toward yellow, colors that until now she'd thought of as warm but which suddenly appeared cold and sickly. They weren't merely diseased... they'd been *defiled*.

Embryonic Rykengolls, Zhylaw explained, his voice eerily calm. The blind rising up.

None of the ones that had once been human, she suddenly realized, were even close to puberty. And they were everywhere, in every major population center on the world. Even the plants...

Is the whole world like this? Isn't there anything clean left?

We've taken it all. The lenses found every uninfected survivor, and every survivor whose infection was new enough to reverse, and brought them to us for cleansing and conversion. Including the flora and fauna, yes. We did it while Riddick was on his way to you, and while you and he were on your ways back to us. Few escaped our—there. look.

And there was one. Small. Tiny, in fact. A sewer rat, emerging from a tunnel that no lenser could have reached or seen into. Its life force was delicate, gentle, a blend of natural colors slowly decaying back to black. She somehow knew that its due time – if nothing interfered – was a year away. But just as quickly, she knew that it had scant moments left. The monsters had detected it and were closing in.

She fell to her knees as it happened, as she struggled to reach out across the miles to save it and then realized that she couldn't touch it. It wasn't one of her flock. As her gorge rose, she could almost feel Zhylaw's arms around her, steadying her. She watched as the unclean, infected monstrosities pounced, subduing the rat, tearing out its eyes, ripping open its skin and then grafting it, still alive and struggling, to them...

And she heard the chant, in a thousand animal languages and dozens of human ones. A chant she remembered. She'd first heard it when she'd still been a slave, and it had been ringing in her ears when she fled Helion Prime with Jack.

Oh God, no, not them, no...

Yes. Do you want to save the rat? As much as it can be saved now?

Such a tiny little spark of life, struggling and suffering in the grip of this horrible, seething *thing* that covered the surface of that world. Struggling, suffering, dying as something poisonous seeped into it through

the wounds and the grafts... could she save it?

Yes. Yes! Tell me how.

You must complete the Final Protocol.

Grasping the control panel, Kyra pulled herself back up onto her feet. Her awareness of the greater world around her wouldn't relent. Sickness and rot was everywhere, held back from the ships and towers of the fleet. It hid from the immaculate blue light of the purification spheres that floated above the towers but it seethed close to them, just out of reach of their cleansing rays.

Spread the light, Zhylaw urged her again. This world is too far gone for healing, but we can end its pain. Even as he spoke to her, he was also sending out a subtle warning to the fleet that it was time to take to the sky and get behind shields. She supposed she ought to be grateful that he wasn't trying to control *her* in that way.

Outside, she could feel the rat's terror giving way to despair. In its ears she could hear mangled wailing and warbling surrounding it, tortured vocal chords unified in a demented song. It was a song she knew from... somewhere... a familiar tune that she could almost recognize.

What is it? What are they doing?

They're profaning an ancient and sacred song, Kyra. As everything they touch is desecrated.

Now she could recognize it, and could even almost hear the words that were supposed to be beneath it.

*"I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I—"*

NO!

Kyra's hand slapped down on the miniature tower with panic-fueled strength, desperate to stop the terrible singing. The core blazed, pouring darkness and light into her, through her into the real towers outside. The very fabric of the real ignited and the song ended in a choked gasp. She felt small, powerful detonations in response, closer to the ships; the few Necromongers who hadn't yet made it behind the shields.

Oh no, did I—

They're crossing over into the Underverse. Do not mourn them. Rejoice. Feel what's happening.

The light poured over the diseased flesh of the world, blasting its way through the flimsy barricades of brick and stone that the monstrosities had used to conceal themselves, scouring the whole world with its power. She felt the rat again, felt its pain and despair end and for an immeasurable instant felt the Underverse embracing it – and her through it – before it was gone and she could feel it no more. Here and there, diseased flesh burned away to release a still-intact soul, formerly locked in torment and now springing free. They called her name as they slipped away, gratitude in their spectral voices.

Later, she would look at her chrono and realize that the whole thing had taken less than a minute. But for Kyra Falnour, Lord Martial of the Necromongers, the Cleansing of Helion Prime seemed to last years, centuries, millennia. The light of the spheres touched on every atom of the planet's surface and scoured deep down, miles upon miles until at last it touched the answering blaze of heat from the planet's core. Nothing, down to the least virus, went untouched. Everything either crossed the Threshold or burned away.

Afterward she lay quietly on the floor of the reactor, shivering from time to time as aftershocks of the sensory overload rolled over her and piecing together the different things she had seen. Above the hideous subterranean creatures, hiding their charges and themselves – or so they'd thought – from the Necromonger patrols, had been almost-normal adult humans in various stages of their own odd transformations. She'd felt them dying, some of them fighting to the bitter end to hold onto the monstrosity that had them in its grasp while others fled toward the light as though waking from a nightmare. A handful had been preparing a ship for launch, deformed creatures hidden in its cabins and cargo holds—

"There was a woman there," the Necromonger had said, "and a child. They're going somewhere with him..."

"Oh God," she said aloud, sitting up so quickly that the chamber swam around her for a moment.

"Riddick. Who did you take with you?"

But she already knew. There had been no one else left on this world that he would have felt any allegiance to.

It is ever the case, Kyra. Zhylaw's voice was resigned and gentle. They flee before us and carry the plague to new worlds before we can stop it. They are already spreading it offworld years before we come. You had a touch of it, yourself.

*I **what**?* But she remembered the colors fading from her hands. They hadn't been quite the same putrid shades of the creatures themselves, but they'd been similar to the hues running through some of their adult protectors.

*You were exposed, fortunately **after** you had already reached puberty. You would never have become as they were, but in time you would have been prey to their blandishments. And if you and another exposed person had bred—*

***That's** what you mean by breeders!*

She almost glanced over to her side, as though Zhylaw would be sitting there instead of trapped inside her head. But she could still almost see him nodding there, his expression calm and sober. It was better not to look, better not to break the illusion.

There is no saving a child born of such a union, but we can save the others. Once, long ago, we could save all of them, but that capability has been lost. For a moment she could feel his fury and hurt at some old treachery, trust betrayed and a costly lie exposed too late. She'd have to ask him about that sometime. *Now we can only follow the plague and cleanse it where we find it.*

That sounded so hopeless.

We're catching up to them, he told her, as though trying to reassure her. *It used to be that we only found and cleansed worlds when they were already fully polluted. This time, we were able to rescue a billion souls. It will get better in time.*

Why doesn't anybody know about this? I've never heard of this before. Immediately she wanted to take the words back, feeling his amusement at just how limited her knowledge of the universe was and how arrogant she was in her assumptions. As uncomfortable as the intimacy was, she could sense his vast reaches of knowledge and experience. He hadn't *just* been a man who burned worlds down, in life.

Once, long ago, we tried. We sought more... diplomatic... solutions. Those failed. People did not want to do what was necessary. You know perfectly well the inhumane conditions people can be left in, in the name of humane treatment and non-interference. You lived in them for several years.

Kyra shuddered. She remembered them well, and knew that *he* was remembering them through her. All those times she'd prayed for a hull breach or an accident in the mines, just so her Hell would end.... She'd thought, when she got away at last, that people on the outside would be sympathetic to her ordeal and outraged that it had been allowed; some few even *had* been. But she'd still ended up in prison for the crime of surviving. The rat's suffering, its despair, was something she'd understood on a visceral level. Once, that had been her. And only a sharpened fragment of hull plating had kept her from meeting an identical fate.

Zhylaw seemed to nod, observing her thoughts with quiet sympathy. *If we had found you in that condition and you'd been able to speak to us, what would you have asked?*

I'd have asked you to kill me, she admitted. She'd almost used that little shiv on herself, until the thought of the next girl the miners would buy resurrected her rage and gave her strength she hadn't known she still possessed. They'd never had a chance to deliver her to the abominations that had bought her "contract" from them. Funny how at any other time, the signature of a minor, whether real or forged, was legally invalid—

We would have. And we did, for those who met that fate, when we wiped the belt of their influence last year.

Wish you'd gotten there sooner, she grumbled in her head. For a moment she could have sworn she felt the touch of his hand on her hair.

*So do I. But there's a limit to our reach. Diseases always spread more quickly than their cures. Still, we **will** cure this.*

Why do they cut out their victims' eyes? she suddenly asked. It had been gnawing at her for a while.

*The transformation destroys the eyes, no matter what. It alters the whole nervous system, but the eyes are the first to go. They made a ceremony out of it, possibly to conceal what's **really** happening. But it doesn't stop them from seeing. As you already know.*

She wanted to deny it. She wanted to argue that she knew nothing of the kind. But she'd met them even before this day of days, and had seen the way their eyeless faces seemed to track the motion of everything around them. Her superstitious terror of them, her conviction that they *could* see in spite of their obvious

blindness, had probably saved her life when she fled the belt. And then she'd met one again almost four years ago, not yet eyeless or deformed, right here on the world that she'd just incinerated. But most of all, she'd *touched* them.

As she'd tried to free the little rat from them and heard their terrible song, her psyche had brushed up against theirs. Only half a year ago, while crawling through the pitch-black lava tubes of Crematoria, she'd accidentally put her hand in the rotting corpse of a fellow prisoner who had been killed and partially eaten by one of the hellhounds. The touch of these things on her mind brought back the illness and revulsion of that moment, the sense that she might never be clean again. It had been wiped away by the purifying fire, but it wasn't the only thing she'd felt in that brief contact.

Because, eyeless as they were, she'd felt them looking back at her. And she'd glimpsed, just for a second, the malignant intelligence that moved them.

*Oh God, Riddick. Don't let them take you. Don't let them **touch** you...*

She hoped it wasn't already too late for him.

5.

The Smallest Sentinel

Of all the complications anyone had expected to deal with at the space station – mercs, Necromongers, meddling customs officers or shady space captains – nobody had thought that the biggest drama would be caused by the puppy. And really, it wasn't. *He* wasn't the one howling.

“He's *mine!* It's not *fair!*”

Riddick winced and reminded himself that – generally speaking – he *liked* kids. Ziza had a yell that he was pretty sure could jostle seismographs. He could feel Lajjun's eyes on him, and was just as sure that the odd prickle on the back of his neck meant the spook was staring at him, too.

“Ain't that simple, kid,” he told her. He'd already told her this three times. “See that sign?”

Ziza rolled her eyes. That was right; most kids her age couldn't read very well. He had no idea who'd taught him how to – it had happened in a part of his life that was lost in a suspicious murk – but he'd have had no trouble with any of the signs in this space station when he'd been *half* her age. Not that anybody had known that about him—

Focus, asshole. “It says all animals have to go through quarantine. If we take him off my ship, that includes him. And that means you have to spend a month on the station until they clear him.”

He knew damn well that Lajjun didn't have the spare cash to pay for rooms at the station – much less the boarding fee for a puppy in quarantine – even if a transport to Alpha Tauri V wasn't leaving in eight hours. He wasn't sure why they'd want to go to a place like that; he was thinking longingly of getting back to his cozy little hideout circling Lambda Orionis, just as soon as he got this whole Jack situation settled.

Ziza threw a pleading look at her mother but got an impatient head-shake in answer.

“We have discussed this, Ziza,” Lajjun said. Of course, by *discussed* she meant that Ziza had been told “no” during their initial debarkation, several times during the criminally expensive lunch they'd eaten together in the station commissary, and several more times while Lajjun was negotiating ticket prices for their passage on the *Nebula Queen*.

“But he's *mine!*” the girl insisted again. “I saw him *first!*”

Riddick couldn't really fault her on that one; he'd roomed with way too many convicts who had never progressed past that particular concept, and lots of so-called upstanding citizens didn't seem to have done so either. But it wasn't going to win the day here, even if the whole issue of money wasn't a factor.

“Doesn't matter—” he began, and both Lajjun and Aereon shot him alarmed, quelling looks. They could tell that he was getting dangerously close to shedding his thin veneer of civility and telling her the brutal truth: that the puppy didn't *like* her.

“The *Nebula Queen* can't accommodate dogs, Ziza.” That was Aereon, helpfully talking right over the little girl's head. Hadn't she ever dealt with kids before? The last two days of travel had convinced him that she probably hadn't.

Ziza had an even lower opinion. “You're just using big words to make me feel stu—”

“Good afternoon, visitors!”

Fuck! He'd been so caught up in the argument that his guard had dropped, and he hadn't even noticed the well-coiffed man with matching plastic clipboard and smile until this second. If it had been a merc instead of a crewmate on the *Queen*, he'd have been dead. Lajjun and Ziza both jumped, equally startled, but he managed to contain his reaction. Part of him wanted to glare at the man and chase him off for interrupting, but the rest of him was relieved. Maybe the boarding process would finally get this argument shelved.

“Good afternoon,” Aereon replied in her infuriatingly serene way.

Bitch probably saw him comin' and didn't say anything.

Riddick took a good look at the man. Odds were they'd never see each other again but if they did, he needed to recognize him and remember which names had been used and which lies had been told. From the looks of him, he was ship's crew. Early twenties, with gray eyes and sandy hair that gradually darkened towards its roots. His ship uniform was tight in places, stretching over a body slightly more muscular than it was designed for, but it was the kind of musculature acquired in a gym rather than from manual labor. The

hands on the clipboard were uncalloused, and his bright white smile spoke of regular dental work. He probably surfed or something when he wasn't crewing his ship.

The man seemed to be used to dealing with angry and upset passengers and didn't even try to ask what was wrong. Instead, he went straight into his spiel. "Welcome to the *Nebula Queen*, one of the finest resettlement transports in the quadrant."

Translation: most of the passengers are free citizens, and there's probably less than a one in twenty chance that you won't wake up from cryo. From what Riddick had been able to dig up, it was in the same class as the *Hunter-Gratzner*, with the added advantage of not actually taking the ghost lanes.

Except, of course, that more and more lanes were becoming ghost lanes every year. He had a good idea of why that was, now.

"I'm Cyrus Manadoc, your docking pilot. If you'd like to step this way and present your tickets, we can begin the boarding procedures." Manadoc gestured at an archway up ahead. The words **Only Ticketed Passengers Past This Point** were emblazoned on either side of the arch in a dozen languages per side.

He'd heard Carolyn Fry giving a similar speech to passengers as Johns had wheeled him on board the *Hunter-Gratzner*. From her voice, he'd expected her to be a whole lot bigger than she'd turned out to be. Like Fry, Manadoc would probably stop admitting passengers in another hour or two and turn that job over to the navigator, so he could make his preflight checks and catch some rest before maneuvering the ship away from the station. Nothing had changed while he'd been gone.

Bullshit. A whole lot's changed. Just 'cause they're still usin' the same rituals while they circle the drain doesn't mean anything.

Lajjun had brought out her tickets and was offering them to Manadoc, along with her and Ziza's identity papers. The pilot took them and his professional composure faltered for a moment as he read their planet of origin.

"You're from Helion Prime?" His eyes had widened. Riddick tensed, but the man's expression was astonished, not alarmed. "We haven't had anyone come in from there in more than a week! The last ones said the planet was under attack. What happened?"

"It took us a while to get here," Riddick said before Lajjun could answer. He still didn't trust her to keep the stories straight. "We didn't see much, and barely got off before all Hell broke loose. Somebody was attacking, that much we knew for certain. So I did some cautious flying to make sure we weren't followed."

Fortunately Manadoc was looking at him as he talked, because both Lajjun and Ziza had begun staring at him in surprise. They hadn't expected him to do his best impersonation of Paris Ogilvie, but the man's accent and mannerisms seemed to him to be the best ones for the moment. He'd practiced it a few times, but only for the puppy while the others – even Aereon – slept. Probably he should have warned them.

Nah.

"Smart move," Manadoc said, and gestured at him expectantly. Baffled, Riddick raised an eyebrow at him. "Your ticket?"

"Oh, no, I'm not with them. We have different destinations now. I just wanted to see them safely aboard."

"We have another destination," Aereon added before the pilot could ask her for *her* ticket.

He shot the spook a look. *Wherever you're going, it won't be with me.*

"You're a good man," Manadoc told him.

"No he isn't! He's a thief!"

God damn it, Ziza...

"A thief?" Manadoc looked dubious. That effete, cultured Ogilvie accent was good for *something*.

"He stole my puppy!" Great, she was probably going to keep whining until cryosleep kicked in. At least it wasn't his problem anymore.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Toombs," Lajjun said. She, at least, hadn't forgotten the script. Her apologetic smile to the pilot was genuine. "We rescued a little dog on our way to our ship, and took it off-world with us. But since we don't have the time or money for quarantine, it must stay with Mr. Toombs now instead of coming with us. My daughter is just upset about that."

"It's *my* puppy!" Ziza glared at Riddick. "You *are* a monster! A mean old monster!"

"Enough, Ziza!" Lajjun looked mortified.

Ziza rubbed at her eyes. The pilot probably thought they were red from crying over losing the puppy, but Riddick hadn't seen her shed a tear all day. Her eyes had been clear when they'd gotten off of the ship just a

few hours earlier, and he hadn't noticed them getting redder until now.

Looks like her eye infection's back. No wonder she's feeling crabby. It was enough to make him feel sorry for Lajjun, since she was going to have to handle Ziza's tantrums all on her own now.

Manadoc just grinned. "Aww, I know *I've* been called a whole lot worse than that. No hard feelings, right, Mr. Toombs?"

"That isn't even his real name!" Ziza shouted as he began to reply. "You want to know what he's *really* called? It's—"

Lajjun gasped and clapped her hand over Ziza's mouth, reducing almost all of the girl's next words to an unintelligible mumble. Almost.

"—dick—"

Lajjun's expression turned into one of absolute panic. Riddick could swear he felt his veins icing over.

There were three exits out of this area: two to his right and one behind him. The security guards were most likely to come from the one behind him, if summoned; he'd have to go right, take a circuitous route around the station, and hijack someone else's ship. The odds of managing to do that were slim to none; this place was jittery with the news of Helion Prime's fall, and there were extra security officers stationed at practically every corner. And he wasn't even armed—

Manadoc laughed. "I don't know about you, Mr. Toombs, but I've *still* been called a whole lot worse than *that*."

I could almost thank God for that... He wasn't going to have to kill the man. Good. Manadoc seemed like a decent enough guy.

Lajjun was shaking as she knelt down in front of Ziza, her hand still over the little girl's mouth. Her voice was brittle with fear and anger as she spoke; obviously she knew how close her daughter had come to starting a bloodbath. "Ziza, how *dare* you say such a thing? I don't want to hear another word out of you, do you understand? No more! I will get you another puppy when we reach our new home, but only if you are silent now. Do you understand me?"

Ziza seemed to know that she'd grabbed onto a powerful weapon when she'd tried to say his name. For a moment, mother and daughter stared at each other, eyes locked. Then the girl slowly deflated and nodded against her mother's hand.

That's it. I'm getting off this fuckin' station before that kid can run her mouth again. He'd planned to, anyway, and had made arrangements for his ship to be refueled and re-supplied before he got back to it, but he wasn't going to waste even a second here now.

"I must take my leave," he announced in Ogilvie's mincing tones, very glad that he could hide his own reactions behind the performance. "I have my own departure window, and it's opening soon. I wish you two the best in your new home."

He gave them a courteous Paris-esque smile and bow, catching a speculative and admiring look from Manadoc at the same time. *Shit, is that what this impersonation says I am?*

He decided to run with it. No merc who'd studied his record would ever believe that about him, so if any of them ever interviewed Manadoc, the trail would promptly go cold. He smiled and winked at the guy before turning away.

"See you around the space lanes," Manadoc called after him, his voice both flirtatious and hopeful.

Yeah, I hope not.

He was relieved to see that Aereon wasn't following him and had stayed to talk to Lajjun. That'd give him a head start if she had any designs on staying with him. Once he was almost to his ship, he called the control tower and asked for the earliest departure window he could get. The one they had available was *so* soon that he barely got through his pre-flight checks before it opened. The departure course took him looping past the berth of the *Nebula Queen*.

So long, kiddo. Go ahead and say my name now, if you really want to. He had no intention of ever being seen by any of them again.

Course laid in, he got some of the new rations out of storage for himself and dragged out a bag of kibble for the puppy. It emerged from the back room at his whistle, looking a little bleary and tired.

"C'mere, pup. We still have to figure out a name for you."

Jack was out of the question if the girl was still alive. He hadn't forgiven the Holy Man enough to name anything he liked after him, and he had no idea what the Furyan he'd met on Crematoria had gone by. He

wasn't sure why it was so important to give the pup a good name, or why he felt such a need to name it after someone. A cursory run-through of the names he could think of reminded him of just how few people he actually liked in the 'verse.

"Got any ideas? Suggest 'em now."

The puppy had barely eaten any of its food, but it seemed to be done. It plodded its way over to Riddick's feet and whined. Damn, the little guy sounded tired. Riddick picked it up and set it on his lap. Was it sick with something? Mastiff pups were tricky, from what he could recall. Their energy often ran out fast at this age. Maybe the little guy had been romping before he got back?

The pup whimpered and looked up at him and he felt an echo of his earlier chill. Its eyes were rimmed with red. It scrubbed at one of them with its paw.

"How the fuck could you catch Ziza's eye infection, pup?"

The look it gave him was pleading. He swiveled his chair around toward the console. Maybe there was something in the databases about eye infections, because it was going to be at least a week before they got near a vet. His hand started to reach for the controls before suddenly dropping back to the arm-rest.

Oh shit.

He knew this floaty feeling. Worse yet, he knew the tingling sensation that was building in his chest. He'd already experienced it twice.

Turn around. Turn around.

He had to get himself pointed away from the controls, and get the puppy off of his lap. Whatever the hell it was that he'd done, first back on Crematoria and then in the Battle Room of the Basilica, it was about to happen again. It would fry the controls and probably kill the puppy at the same time.

What the fuck? No! God, not now!

His arms and legs wouldn't move. He couldn't turn or push the puppy off of his lap. Struggling against the rising impulse was like struggling not to breathe. He could hold it back for maybe another minute or two, but it was going to break loose.

The puppy would die. *He* would die. Whatever this energy burst was, it would fry the ship's electronics and possibly even breach the hull. He had to stop it, had to turn away. But his body wouldn't move. He was paralyzed, the way he often was in his worst nightmares of roaring skies, the rhythmic march of booted feet, and a woman's screams—

Fuck! Don't do this, don't let it out... The floaty feeling had intensified when he'd thought of those nightmares, and the tingle was growing. His hands spasmed against the arm-rest but he still had no control over them. On his lap, the puppy whined and lifted its red-rimmed eyes to meet his. *Shit, kid, I'm sor—*

He felt something explode out from him. It was the last thing he felt for a while.

Consciousness returned slowly. He was in almost complete darkness. There was no vibration, no sense of motion. He exhaled and felt more than saw the condensation of his breath. But he could see it, he realized. It was catching the light of *something*.

He glanced down at the control panel.

System check complete.

No damage detected.

Press OK to re-initialize all subsystems.

For a moment he wanted to ask the stupid screen just where the fuck the OK button was, and then realized that it was one of the only three lit buttons on the console, along with ABORT and RECHECK. He pressed it and felt the engines rumble back to life. The lights flickered back on, one bank at a time, and he felt a warm breeze against his chilled skin.

The ship had come through undamaged. He would live.

Fuck, what about the puppy?

He could feel the warmth of its little body on his thighs, but he wasn't sure whether that was a sign of life or just a sign that he'd been insulated from the cold in that one spot. Just how much effort it took him to look down surprised him.

"Are you with me, pup?" Fuck, why had he phrased it like *that*?

Just when he thought the answer was no, the puppy opened its eyes and looked up at him. His heart jolted, hard.

The red rims were gone.

It snuffled his hand and then licked it before jumping down to the floor and waddling over to the food bowl. This time it ate heartily, even though he could hear bits of ice crunching as it chewed.

Just what the hell did I do?

He tried to figure it out while he ran a few system checks of his own and replotted the course to Pynchon, but he couldn't make sense of it. When it finally occurred to him to check for that crazy handprint on his chest, it had already faded if it had even been there at all. And he still had no explanation.

This thing fried the Necro weapons, first on Crematoria and then on their damn ship, but this time it didn't do any damage at all. It knocked soldiers off their feet but didn't hurt a puppy... hell, I think it may have cured the pup's eye infection. What the fuck works like that?

Maybe Audrey Jackson-Badura would have some ideas from her medical learnings when he finally caught up with her. He'd give her bonus points if she could come up with a good name for his dog.

"Just so you know," he told the little guy as it made its way back over to his feet, "I ain't naming you Lazarus."

He lifted the pup back into his lap.

"Or Kenny," he added after another moment's thought.

6.

The Cipher's Warning

“Have you given any more thought to what I asked you?”

On the vid screen, Menefee – *Carl*, but she found that thinking of him as a Carl was much like thinking of Riddick as a Richard – smiled at Audrey. “Oh, I’ve done better than that. I asked *him*. And he wants to talk to you.”

It had come as a surprise to her when, only two days ago, he had mentioned in passing – in one of their conversations that were growing increasingly personal – that he had been assigned to defend a father who had killed his two small children. And not just *a* father, but *the* father who had stammered out a heart-freezing phrase to her while covered in their blood. It had also shocked her just how much she wanted to talk to the man again. “Really?”

“Yeah. But.” The smile had fallen away, replaced with a more serious look that she recognized as Menefee’s all-business mode. “There are a few ground rules.”

Well, *shit*.

It must have shown on her face. “Not actually his. I think he just needs to talk, tell his story. But that’s the thing. I have to defend him, and I have to do it to the best of my ability. So the rules are *mine*, and they’re for his protection.”

She wasn’t sure if that was better or worse. “Okay?”

“First: you can’t talk to him alone. I have to be present,” he told her, his voice firm. Then it softened. A little. “And just so you don’t think I’m being a dick for no reason, here’s why. As long as I’m in the room with him, attorney-client privilege comes into play. What he says and does can’t be recorded and used as evidence at trial. So maybe you wanted a private conversation with him, but there’s gonna be a third party in the room no matter what, and between me and the surveillance system, I pick *me*. And so do you if you want to see him.”

“That makes perfect sense.” And, in truth, as much as she wanted to talk to the man, she realized that she *didn’t* want to be all alone with him.

“Good. Second: if I tell you not to follow a line of questioning, you don’t. There are some things that he could say that even attorney-client privilege won’t protect, and if I know them, I’m obligated to report them. I’ve explained that to him. The standard plea deal in his kind of situation is an insanity defense, and God knows way too many of the people who came from the Coalsack could use it. But last year, a colleague of mine was defending this... *schmuck*...”

Audrey suddenly wondered if Menefee was Jewish. For Pynchon, outside of refugee territory, he was somewhat exotic, and she couldn’t pinpoint his ethnicity any better than she’d been able to figure out Riddick’s once upon a time. Funny how the rest of the Menefee clan – lawyers and prominent politicians, for the most part – seemed completely white-bread. But Carl Menefee, public defender, was an enigma among them, both in his appearance and in his choices. The family Black Sheep, maybe?

On her screen, he shook his head, grimacing. “...And the jackass blew his whole case when they were talking about favorite books. He mentioned that when he was a teenager, his absolute favorite book, his *comfort read*, was *The Darkest Sword* by D. G. Kirk. You ever read that one?”

Audrey shook her head.

“It’s a psychological thriller. But the thing is, this bastard’s wife died from long-term exposure to arsenic contamination in their house’s water pipes, something that was initially ruled as an accident until her family found out that he was the beneficiary of a *huge* life insurance policy that had only been taken out a year earlier, right before she started displaying early signs of low-grade arsenic poisoning. My buddy thought he was gonna have an easy time proving that the family’s accusations were total bull until he brought up that book.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s how the antihero in the book killed his enemy. Slow, low-grade arsenic poisoning. Kaz suddenly realized that the book was a bloody blueprint for that idiot’s murder of his wife. And it’s not true on

every planet, but here on Pynchon, if a defense attorney acquires evidence that could be used to prove first-degree murder and doesn't turn it over, they can be disbarred." He grimaced and shook his head. "Which in a case like that, who gives a damn, right? That bastard *deserves* life with no parole. But I've defended a lot of victims of domestic violence who killed their abusers, and thank *God* none of them have ever accidentally handed me proof that they'd *planned* their lethal act of self-defense ahead of time."

Audrey suddenly remembered how one of the first things he'd told Kyra, when he'd been appointed as her counsel, was that he didn't want her telling anyone, not even or maybe *especially* not him, about any violent fantasies she'd ever had about her "adoptive family," as the prosecution insisted on referring to those scum-sucking miners. Damn, so that was why.

"So you don't want me asking him anything that could... suggest he planned to kill his kids or that he was sane when he decided to do it?" Easy enough. She knew, better than he did, what had driven the murders, and sanity had no part of it.

That dark, terrible night, years ago, Kyra had kicked the knife out of Ziza's small hand, something that had made the little girl howl with anger and pain and *finally* wakened her parents from their oblivious slumber. Shouting and recriminations had followed in spite of the knife lying in plain sight on the floor. Audrey had always wondered what might have happened if disarming her hadn't been so easy... if one of them had been forced to turn the blade back on her. If they hadn't fled Helion soon after, might there have been another night that had ended in a terrible mirror of the Purdy incident?

It had been the last night that they'd slept alone in separate rooms, no matter how many times Abu or Lajjun scolded them. Even locks on the outsides of their doors hadn't stopped Kyra from simply going out her window and, via a series of heart-stopping acrobatics that Audrey herself had never *dared*, coming back in through hers. Those last nights, as New Mecca's high summer reigned, had been full of whispered conversations, increasingly urgent plans, and moments of intimacy that even now stunned her with their power—

"That's exactly it, yeah," Menefee told her, jarring her back out of her memories before they could take her anywhere dangerous. "The last thing is that when we go in, I need you to pose as my legal aid. And not to talk to anybody. If they think I'm bringing in some random lookie-loo, there goes attorney-client privilege all over again. As long as they think you're part of the defense team, though, we're good. So just... act like you're some paralegal I've drafted and don't say more than 'excuse me' or 'thank you' to *anybody* when we're in surveillance zones."

"Okay." It looked, she thought with a suppressed shiver, like she was going to have to go with the plan that had occurred to her two days ago. If she could. But would she be *able* to? "So how would a paralegal dress, and what would she be carrying with her if security was poking around in her stuff?"

She was subtle. Her mother, gods rest her, would have said she was *sneaky*. A few back-and-forths later, in the midst of having him pick out what she should wear and what kind of materials he would give her to tote with them as his Girl Friday, she'd confirmed that nobody – not even, it seemed, him – would think twice if she brought an insulated cup of coffee or tea with her. And he'd agreed to pick her up in the morning.

And then she was in her tiny kitchenette, brewing a tea that she could barely stand to be in the same room with.

People swore by it. It was medicinal, they claimed, and her textbooks hadn't disagreed so far. But the smell...

It wasn't quite the same as the scent that had sometimes come in on the night breezes those final weeks in New Mecca. But it was far, far too close for her liking. The first time she'd caught a whiff of it on Pynchon, in a farmer's market near her father's and stepmother's home, she'd almost had a very public panic attack.

The first time she'd smelled the other scent, the one so much like it but ...different... had been the day she and Kyra had skipped school to look for Djamila.

They had *tried* to make friends with the girls on Helion, the girls in their school, but most of them had just been too sheltered, too sure of how the worlds worked, to feel comfortable with. Their own traumas were still fresh, their experiences with the 'verse so contradictory to how the girls insisted it worked, that it was hard to sit still and listen to them hold forth. Maybe that kind of complacency had been part of why, even when the disappearances were beginning, everyone kept finding plausible explanations. The harder and more real world that Jack – she had still been Jack, then – and Kyra knew was one they refused to acknowledge. But Djamila

had been different. She had seemed to understand, and had kept the door open for them even when other girls would have shut them out.

And then *she* disappeared.

The first day, nobody thought much of it. Spring had been shading into summer and with warmer weather came both a rise in respiratory infections – Audrey had once meant to find out why that was, but she had forgotten until now – and a rise in deliberate truancy. Most of the initial excuses for why she was gone were both banal and plausible.

But the days stretched into a week, and that week into the weekend when the concert that Djamila had planned to attend – and which dozens of girls had desperately wanted to go to but hadn't managed to buy tickets for – was held. Jack and Kyra had gone, courtesy of tickets gifted to them by Abu and Lajjun when they were still feeling generous, and Djamila's seat had been empty. If she had known she wouldn't be able to make it, Jack had insisted during the ride back to town, there were a dozen classmates she could have easily sold her ticket to, not to mention three or four close friends, any of whose eternal devotion she could have ensured, if she'd given it to one of them. Kyra had nodded silently, thoughtfully, beside her.

The “rational” explanations of the other girls rang hollow and hollow, until finally she and Kyra decided to go to Djamila's house and find out the truth for themselves.

They had been to the girl's house once, months earlier, for her birthday party. It had been a well-tended garden home in one of the more affluent parts of New Mecca, much like the Al-Walid house but on the other side of the large swathe of public gardens that dominated the city center. That day, though, it looked derelict, abandoned... like a shell that would soon collapse from hidden rot. The silence surrounding it was strange and oppressive. Jack would have forged on, determined to break in and see if it really was abandoned, if Djamila's family had simply chosen to move and not tell anybody, until Kyra's hand clamped, iron-hard, on her elbow.

“Do you smell that?” the sister of her heart had asked, an uncharacteristic quaver in her voice.

And then she *did* smell it... the strange, almost undefinable scent that had filled her nose and lodged in her throat. Musty, rich, hideous, a scent that evoked a primal desire to run. She had controlled it, but had let Kyra pull her away. It was coming from the house, from somewhere *within* the house. And in spite of the stillness and the silence, Jack had had the terrible feeling that something, perhaps the house itself, was watching them as they backed away. It took all of her will not to break into a panicked run.

Djamila never returned.

That summer, as the days somehow grew darker and they began to plot their *own*, very different, disappearance, the nights had been full of the scents of a New Mecca summer, a mixture of redolent oasis flowers from the nearby public gardens and cooking spices from the nearby market. Even now, those scents could stir a wistful nostalgia in Audrey's heart, a burning longing for a dream of sanctuary that had died in its nascence. But sometimes, the wind would shift. And then the breezes would bring another scent, *that* scent, in through Jack's open window. And beside her, on the bed, Kyra would shudder and pull in on herself, her hand stealing for the knife that she'd taken to keeping squirreled in her clothes at all times...

It was also a scent that had begun to drift into the Al-Walid house from two other, more terrible directions: the cellar that Lajjun no longer let either girl into... and Ziza's room.

Its cousin wafted into Audrey's nose now and she suppressed the urge to retch. Friends of hers *swore* by this tea, she reminded herself. She'd never been able to stomach the idea of drinking it. She hoped she wouldn't have to drink any in the morning, and that carrying the cup or, at most, pantomiming a sip from time to time, would be enough.

By morning, she was convinced that the tea's stench had taken over her whole small living space. She showered, trying to scrub the odor back out of her pores, and then put on the dress she hadn't worn since she'd last gone job-hunting. Half an hour later, she looked as professional as she possibly could... but she was convinced that she still stank of the damned tea. She hoped she was imagining it. Where the tea was concerned, she needed the element of surprise. Reeking of it when she walked in would definitely spoil that.

Menefee – *Carl*, and she really needed to think of him that way more – didn't seem to notice anything unusual... past the fact that she was wearing a dress. She had to admit that he cut quite a figure as well in his Public Defender suit. She had learned enough about telling apart the haves and have-nots, during her time on the run, that she could recognize how much more expensive it was than most of the suits his colleagues wore. It was subtle, but she bet it helped him a lot in the courtroom.

“You look perfect,” he told her, putting a slim leather briefcase into her free hand without a glance at the perfectly ordinary-looking thermal mug she carried in the other. “Exactly right for the part.”

“Thanks! You look...” She considered and discarded a dozen all-too-revealing adjectives. “...incredibly dashing, by the way.”

He smiled. That smile was something that she was a little obsessed with, she realized. It reminded her of the all-too-rare moments during her acquaintance with Riddick when *he* had cracked a smile or even laughed. She didn’t know how anybody could stand up to him, in or out of court, when he smiled like that.

Carl drove. His vehicle was large, very new, and handled so smoothly that Audrey found herself itching to get behind the wheel. She *wished* her ambulance had shocks this good, and the fifth-hand jalopy she used when she was staying with her father and stepmother was a rattletrap. If things really were evolving with Carl in the way they seemed to be, she was a little surprised. People in his social class didn’t usually tend to date outside of it. She needed to stay cautious in case she was reading too much into his friendliness... and into how many of their conversations were no longer about the Free Kyra cause but more personal topics.

The New Detroit courthouse was a huge, resplendent edifice and Audrey hated it. She and her family had come here every day to fight for Kyra’s freedom, only to be crushed under the heel of a justice system that seemed archaically convinced that little girls should shoulder the blame for the perversions of the ’verse. Now that she was back in it, she remembered that nobody was going to care about her coffee mug, much less what was inside it. Any other kind of contraband – and that wasn’t really what it was, was it? – would probably have been flagged immediately, but she didn’t even have to pretend to sip at it. Every third person in the building was carrying one much like hers.

The worst part was the interview room. It was the same one where she and Kyra had said their good-byes, after everything fell apart. Carl’s hand rested gently on her shoulder and gave it a small squeeze. He must be remembering, too, she thought, and wondered how much he’d deduced from their final, tearful embraces. Most of the tears had, of course, been hers. Kyra had never been a cryer, or even much of a hugger except with her.

They sat down on one side of the table, the side with its back to a one-way mirror that observers could stand behind. Carl turned and looked at the one of the small, silver globes in each corner of the room.

“I am Carl Menefee, defense attorney for Yeshua Parvinal. This session is protected by attorney-client privilege and cannot be surveilled or observed by anyone associated with the prosecution. Observing this session or attempting to use information gleaned from it, without the knowledge or consent of my client or me, is a class three felony under the Pynchon legal code.”

The little red lights by each of the camera globes winked out. Audrey heard the soft click of a door closing in the observation room behind them. A moment later, two guards led Parvinal in, seating him across from them and securing his handcuffs to the tabletop.

It really *was* a defense session, too. Carl and Parvinal talked about several things before it was her turn, and she listened with interest. She hadn’t been in the room during many of his sessions with Kyra, and she had often missed these parts of the sessions. She wished she’d seen them, because now she understood why, although Kyra had had no faith in Pynchon’s justice system, Carl Menefee had been one of the only men she’d ever genuinely trusted.

“And now,” Carl finally said, “Audrey, here, wants to talk to you.”

Parvinal, who had spent most of the time with his head tilted down a little, raised his head and looked at her with wan curiosity. “Hello, Audrey. Mr. Menefee tells me that you were the ambulance driver who took my Suri to the hospital.”

Suri Parvinal had had to be sedated twice before they turned her over to the hospital attendants, as Audrey recalled. She’d wondered how sane *she* would be in that position, because Suri had kept being set off every time she looked down at her nightgown and saw her children’s blood sprayed across it.

And this was the man who had done that.

He didn’t *look* like a killer. But then, most killers didn’t. She knew that all too well. He looked like the sort of man who might do someone’s taxes once a year and just vanish into the crowd the rest of the time, timid and unremarkable. His eyes were clear, though, and full of deep sadness. He was grieving, she realized.

“I wanted to ask you,” Audrey said carefully, making sure to meet his eyes the whole time, “about the Church of the Rykengoll and the Clement Institute.”

Across from her, Parvinal flinched, just a little, at each name. In the reflection of the window behind him, she could see Carl staring at her in confusion.

“We... weren’t members of that church,” Parvinal said after a brief hesitation, and she could hear distaste in his words. “Suri wanted to join, but I put my foot down. It was too... it wasn’t a place I wanted to go. Our kids—”

His voice broke on the word and he took a deep breath.

“...They were enrolled in one of the Institute’s nursery schools.”

“What did you think of it?” she asked.

“Suri handled all of the childcare decisions. She said it was nice.” Across from her, she watched his face twist with complex grief and fear. Grieving the loss of his children, dead at his hand but maybe lost much sooner than that. Grieving the loss of a wife who maybe hated him now. Grieving the loss of a life in which innocent children went to innocent-seeming schools and nothing rough was slouching closer beneath the façade...

But did he know what he was afraid of? “Did you ever read any of their literature?”

He should his head. So he didn’t know. He hadn’t heard that awful phrase before, not until his own children began chanting it.

Would things have played out differently if he’d known it was some kind of twisted company slogan connecting the Church and the Institute? Would he have excused it and gone back to bed that night? Or...

“Where did the knife come from?” It wasn’t a question she had planned on asking. She felt Carl’s arm tense up where it rested against hers. In a moment, he might cut her off, depending on where the answer seemed to be leading.

Parvinal shrugged. “The kitchen, probably.”

“Don’t you know?” So it *had* played out the way she suspected.

“I didn’t...” He covered his eyes with one hand and his shaking voice dropped to a whisper. “I didn’t bring it into our bedroom. *They* did.”

Carl’s breath caught next to her. Apparently he hadn’t known that until now either.

“You told the officer,” he said after a moment as he flipped through his notes, “that you had to kill them because they were possessed. You never said anything about them bringing the murder weapon into your bedroom. Why not?”

“Who would have believed me?” The man across the table aimed the most miserable glare that Audrey had ever seen at his attorney. “They were just... little kids. You don’t know what was happening in the Coalsack even before... even before...”

He stopped and shook his head again.

It was time.

Casually, as if it was nothing, Audrey took the top off of her insulated mug, which had been busily keeping the tea inside piping hot the whole time. Its steam was set free.

The moment the scent reached Parvinal, his response was instantaneous. Pale and wide-eyed, he leapt up out of his seat, or at least as far up as he could with his wrists shackled to the tabletop. His chair clattered against the wall behind him. “*What—?!*”

“What the *Hell?*” Carl asked, staring at her.

“It’s okay, Mr. Parvinal,” she said, covering the tea again. “It’s not what it smells like. I promise. But you and I both know what it smells like, don’t we?”

He gaped at her and then closed his mouth with a snap, swallowing. He nodded after a moment.

“Did you start smelling it before or after people were going missing?” she asked, and heard Carl’s breath hitch beside her.

“After,” Parvinal said in a shaky voice, and Carl’s breath hitched again. “After. Sometimes... sometimes I thought it was coming from inside my own house...”

It probably was, Audrey reflected. “When did your kids start having eye infections?”

A look of puzzled awe stole over Parvinal’s face. “Two years ago.”

“Did you have pets back in the Coalsack?” This was the question she hated asking most of all. But the Al-Walid family *had* owned a beautiful little Pomeranian named Habiba when “Uncle Abu” had first brought her and Kyra home with him, until—

“We did. Yes.” If anything, Parvinal’s voice had become shakier.

“And when did they disappear?”

“What—?” Carl began as he righted Parvinal’s chair for him, and then made himself quiet down.

“About a month before our planet was attacked,” Parvinal whispered, slumping into his chair. “Please, I don’t think I can talk about this anymore.”

“I just have one more question, please,” Audrey said, reaching out and touching his hand. He flinched. “Did Suri have a lot of new friends... other mothers mostly... who replaced her old friend circles from, say, even just three years ago?”

From what she knew of his case, their children had been five and six years old. Suri Parvinal would have already had a close-knit group of friends who were also new mothers... whom she would have inexplicably discarded in favor of a different group, just as Lajjun had.

Parvinal’s eyes met hers again and she could see the puzzle pieces beginning to fall into place for him. Naked horror filled his eyes. “Yes. Yes, she did. Did... did you see all of this in the Coalsack?”

Audrey shook her head. “New Mecca.”

Beside her once more, Carl gasped, and she realized that she’d just given away one of the few mysteries about herself that he’d never been able to solve.

Parvinal’s eyes widened. “It’s there *too*? And we...”

His cuffs had just enough give that he could cover his face with his hands.

“We... brought... it... *here*...”

It was the end of the interview. Parvinal began sobbing, and his sobs became so uncontrollable that Carl had to call for a medic and have him transported back to the secure wing of the nearby hospital.

They didn’t talk as they left the building, both of them tight-lipped and pale. It wasn’t until they were back in Carl’s vehicle, sitting in the courthouse parking garage, that he turned to her, his eyes no longer gentle but hard. “What... the *fuck*... just happened in there?”

“It’s hard to explain,” and Audrey had been up most of the night working out a rational way *to* explain it, “but... Parvinal’s wife and kids... they got caught up in a kind of *cult*. The night he killed them... was the night he probably would have died if he hadn’t turned their knife back on them.”

The rest was impossible to explain. Not without sounding completely insane.

Carl stared at her for a long moment before he leaned back in his seat. “Jesus *fuck*. Not temporary insanity... self-defense. But he’s... probably spent years questioning his sanity, hasn’t he? And blaming himself, which just got even easier to do given that he killed them...”

He turned to look at her again, amazed comprehension on his face. His eyes were gentle again. “That church you mentioned. The men Kyra was convicted of killing were members. And you mentioned New Mecca...”

Audrey winced. She and Kyra had sworn to keep their time on Helion Prime a secret. It hadn’t helped, but she’d still never told anybody. Until now.

“It was happening there, too,” she told him. In for a penny... “Kyra and I were in a foster home together. The mom was in the cult. With her little girl. The dad... I don’t know if he understood what was going on. He might have. But things were getting scary, so we bugged out. And came home.”

“They must’ve been *really* scary, to leave a world where nobody could arrest Kyra for one like this.” Carl’s eyes were sympathetic. “Were you on Helion the whole time you were—”

He froze, gasping. For a moment, he stared out at nothing, completely still.

“Carl? Are you okay?”

He shook himself and looked around. When his eyes returned to her, they lit up. “Wow, you’re right here. Look. I don’t have long. Maybe a minute or two. I can’t rightly tell yet. So I need you to listen close, okay? Things are about to start moving really fast.”

“Carl? What?”

“This is important. Riddick’s on his way to you. That’s the good news. The bad news is he’s got a shitton of enemies on his tail.”

“Riddick’s coming *here*? How do you know this?”

“Audie, I need you to focus,” Carl said, his voice and face both earnest and stern and totally unlike him.

Audrey stared at him, dumbstruck. *Audie*.

“Things are going to get bad when he gets here. So you keep the people you care about close to you, and out of the center of town. Got me? No heroics. You hunker down.”

“Why isn’t Riddick going to *Crematoria*?” Audrey demanded, confused desperation loosening her tongue entirely too much. “I need him to go there to—”

“Forget *Crematoria*. It’s history. You need to keep your family safe. Keep your friends safe. And don’t be anywhere near the center of town when night comes. I’m not sure how long it is now but it’s soon, so not tonight, not any night. I mean it, Audie.”

“How do you *know* about that?”

“I wish I had time to explain, but I don’t think I—” Carl froze again, and then rocked backward in his seat. His eyes had gone wide, panicked. But his expression and mannerisms were his own again, if fearful.

“What the fuck just happened? Holy...”

“I don’t know,” she stammered.

“What do you mean you don’t know? Why was I saying those things? They were to you! About you! What the hell is *happening*?”

“I don’t *know!*” she repeated. “Everything’s going crazy all of a sudden! I don’t know why!”

She drove him home. He was too shaken to drive. In other circumstances, she would have enjoyed every second behind the wheel, but it was like driving the ambulance the rest of the night after she’d taken Suri Parvinal to the hospital.

Carl Menefee lived in a condo on the twentieth floor of a building that stood on one of the far hills, well away from the city center but with a spectacular view of New Detroit that must have cost a fortune. No other public defender could afford a place like this, but a Menefee could. It was her first time inside. She had wondered if he planned to invite her, and whether it would be appropriate to accept, but there was no question now. His voice had been *pleading* when he asked her to come up. He was afraid to be alone right now, and could she blame him?

She found herself at one of the floor-to-ceiling windows, taking in the view while he was in his bedroom changing. Below her the world fell away and New Detroit sprawled over the hills into the distance. When night came, she knew, it would look like a spilled jewel box glowing brightly in the darkness. She had the sudden certainty that she would be seeing that view in a few more hours, and that she would be spending the night. She wasn’t sure whether she would be in his bed or on the couch, though.

He called me “Audie.”

Often, in the past, he had called her “Aud” when they talked, and he was actually the only one who had ever done it. It was *his* name for her, and he was the only one, she realized, that she would allow to use it.

And Audie... that had been *Kyra*’s name for her, after she’d confided her real identity to her and they’d begun plotting their escape route back to Pynchon. Nobody else had ever used it. She’d been afraid that she’d never hear it used again, but had never expected to hear it like *this*.

If only she knew what it all meant. What had happened to Carl in the parking garage?

“Aud?”

She turned. Carl was standing in the living room entry, still looking hesitant and unsure. He had changed out of his suave suit and was wearing slacks and a light, short-sleeved, woven shirt that she suspected was raw silk. If he hadn’t looked so desperately lost, he would have looked unbelievably desirable. His comm unit was in his hand.

“Yeah?”

He swallowed. “I...” His voice was strange, husky... tremulous. “I had this idea that I would try to find out more about this cult of yours, on Helion... and I... tried to call a friend there...”

Oh shit, she thought. *I never should have said anything. This could bring my whole house of cards down—*

“It’s gone,” he said, his expression one of baffled horror.

“What’s gone?” Audrey frowned, not comprehending.

“New Mecca. *Helion*. The whole system... it’s *gone*. Like the Coalsack.”

She managed to make it to his expensive leather couch before her legs could give out on her.

“It gets worse,” Carl said, sitting heavily down beside her. “Something... happened on *Crematoria*, too. The prison... the population... it’s all destroyed. Aside from a handful of bodies, there’s nobody there.”

Kyra. *Kyra*.

Had that been her *ghost* talking through him? The thought startled a laugh out of her. Within seconds, that had dissolved into sobs even stronger than Parvinal’s.

Carl's warm, strong arms came around her and he held her while she sobbed. Suddenly she didn't care whether she was sleeping on his couch or in his bed, as long as he didn't let go.

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