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AWAKENED CHRONICLES

TRAVADA

HARLEY AUSTIN

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*For my beautiful angel;
the love of my life and the very best friend
anyone could ever hope to have.*

*And for Chris;
the best brother anyone could ever hope to have
and my number one fan.*

TRAVADA

PRELUDE

Andromeda?!" Carson dropped his pen onto his desk in disbelief. "I think you two overestimate our abilities here."

Denton glanced at Mitch. He'd said nothing during the short meeting and so far things had gone exactly as badly as Dark had said they would. Abject disapproval was written all over the Director's face.

"We're talking about newbloods in hands of the Imperial Ra, Carson. Nothing good is going to come of that."

"I get it, Dark. I wasn't born yesterday." Carson frowned. "I guess we found our back doors the Ra have been using for getting their troops onto Aden."

"I don't think so," Dark corrected. "Yin genetics are needed to access the anchors. Probably the main reason why

Darius has been destroying the Yin home worlds. If he can't use them, no one will."

"Then how is Dane able to resupply his forces?" Carson got up from his desk. "We put down one insurrection only have three more pop up in their place."

"He's trying to weaken us, through attrition." Denton finally spoke up.

"Trying nothing—it's working," Carson corrected.

"He's toying with us, Carson," Dark continued. "Thank the gods for the Kir and Admiral Vise, otherwise this world would have fallen by now."

"No doubt, Dark," Carson agreed. "Precisely why the answer is no. We need every available vessel, man and woman here protecting Aden."

"Atlantica disagrees." Dark's gaze was direct.

"Is that why you're here, Denton?" Carson suddenly looked even unhappier.

"It is."

"This war is bad enough with Underworld halfbloods joining the Imperium, now I have to deal with an important ally in dispute of my leadership?"

"No one's disputing your leadership, Carson." Dark stated firmly.

"But you already knew I'd say no."

"I did tell Carissa that."

"So she's making this a royal request."

"We are," Denton nodded.

Carson sighed. Actually he fumed. "I read the reports on Lieutenant Wynn and his fellow incarcerates at Mount Logan months ago. That volcano isn't showing any signs of going dormant again anytime soon," he added. First Shasta and now another active volcano along the Ring of Fire was just fueling not only rumors of prophecy among the Humans of

the Dominion, but the halfbloods as well. People were getting nervous.

"I can't spare the manpower, Denton. No matter how much Carissa's new husbands were attached to these other people. I know they were friends."

"Prince Parker and Prince Michaels are—"

"I know who they are, Denton. No need to remind me."

Denton kept quiet.

"Even if I could help, I wouldn't. Besides that, the fact is, we don't have any vessels capable reaching Andromeda. intergalactic jumps are one thing, extragalactic," he shook his head, "that wasn't trivial even for the Masters. We're not prepared for anything we might encounter at Andromeda."

"The Ganymede is capable." Dark offered.

"Get serious, Dark. The most powerful weapon in the Dominion arsenal and you think I'm just going to send him gallivanting across the cosmos leaving Aden unprotected?"

"I'm just saying, he's capable."

"That's news to me."

"It was to the rest of us as well."

"Don't tell me Rion's onboard with this plan of yours?" He gave them both an incredulous look.

"Interra has already agreed to provide whatever support we need," Denton offered.

"I'm sure they have." Carson glared at him. "And what about General Nereus and Admiral Vise? What did they say?"

"We didn't—actually ask them." Denton admitted.

"Because you knew what they would say. No."

Denton pursed his lips.

"You two are risking the lives of billions on mission to save what, seven?"

"Eight," Dark offered. "Scott North is with them as well."

“Perfect. Amy’s protégé.” Carson managed to look even unhappier. “Maybe you could manage to leave him behind?”

Dark raised his brow. “Is that a yes?”

“No, Dark. It’s an ‘I don’t really have a choice.’ Now do I?”

Neither said anything.

“Royalty or no, your sister has expended her last ounce of favor with me, Denton. I’m done. This is reckless. You’re endangering all of Aden with a rescue mission going God only knows where after people you don’t even know are still alive.”

“They’re at Travada.”

“I know where they are. That nebula is five times the size of Orion. And the Imperium has likely amassed one helluva a base of operations there. Every inhabitable world in the vicinity of Travada will be crawling with Imperial Ra.”

“We thought as much as well.”

“You have one week, Dark.”

“Carson—”

“I’m not leaving Aden unprotected. One week.”

Dark nodded.

* * * * *

“My lord—” the spy bowed deeply.

“Cadin.” Dane lifted two glasses from a tray that was suspended by nothing as it drifted closer to the two of them. He handed the dark-clad officer one of them. “I was surprised you were back so soon.”

“I have news. News that could not be trusted communicated over subspace.”

“It must be important.”

“There are newbloods at Andromeda.”

Dane's eyes shifted and then focused on the spy.
"Impossible."

"Not impossible, my Lord. The Seven accidentally discovered an ancient anchor, to a formerly destroyed Yin world. They were seen at Travada."

"Interesting. We've had our suspicions about Aden for some time now. The last of the Yin home worlds, this one likely sports more than it's fair share of their anchors."

"To be sure, my Lord."

"So beautiful, these towers. Pity my father keeps destroying them."

"If we were to capture the newbloods. They appear to have acquired some of the Yin knowledge."

"Indeed." Dane's brow lifted. "That would be a most valuable find. Who are they?"

"A small family of siblings related to the Celtic branch. A Brazilian and American, also, oddly, a Tellarian."

"Tellarian?" Dane's brow lifted. "How did he end up on Aden?"

"*She*, actually, and apparently via one of Aden's anchors."

"So this, woman, accesses the Yin knowledge. Obviously a newblood."

"There's more. She bears the stigmata as well."

Dane rolled his eyes. "Oh, gods. These promethean will be the death of me, Cadin, I swear."

"Do not say that, my Lord. There is some good news; one other is with them. A friend, Scott North."

"Well now. Scott is with them?"

"He is, my Lord."

Dane scowled.

"Is there a problem?"

"No doubt Scott is trying to return them Aden."

"That would be my observation as well."

"My father will have no doubt been made aware of their presence at Andromeda by now."

"Agreed, my Lord."

"Hmmm, so why hasn't he captured them?"

"Obviously he's using them."

"Obviously," Dane sipped from his glass. "But to what end?"

"It is curious, my Lord."

"You know, Cadin, there was a time when I could predict my father's movements well before he carried them out. Now his actions challenge even my own intellect. His logic is mystifying."

"Perhaps the new Seer who advises him?"

"Obviously." Dane gently swirled the contents of his glass. "That being is a menace. Still no one knows who he is?"

"No my lord, it is all but rumor and conjecture. It is as if he appeared out of nowhere."

"Hmmm," Dane mentally reviewed the events. "Surely the Dominion is aware of this disaster?"

"My intelligence tells me that the Dark are preparing a rescue mission of sorts. A small fleet in fact—the Ganymede will performing extragalactic jumps, taking numerous vessels with it."

"Foolish." Dane sported a rare scowl. "Such incredible ability—"

"I would say reckless. Your father will take whatever vessels they manage to send."

Dane nodded his agreement. "You have a slight change of plans now, Cadin."

The spy half smiled. "I anticipated I would."

"Of course you did. Send a, small detachment to Travada and retrieve our Mr. North and his companions."

"What of the rescue mission?"

Dane looked annoyed. "Whatever their plans, we cannot have Sixth Era Reflex falling into my father's hands, Cadin."

"Agreed."

"If you cannot convince them to leave the Travada, destroy their vessels wherever you may find them, preferably *before* my father is able to secure them."

"As you wish, my lord." The spy set his half empty glass onto the tray and prepared to leave.

"Cadin—?"

"Yes, my Lord?" the spy stopped to look over his shoulder.

"This, Tellarian—is she really as beautiful as the stories say?"

"Apologies. The stories egregiously err, my Lord."

"Do they? How so?"

"She is beyond beautiful, more so than any pen could ever describe."

Dane's brow lifted high as he watched the clandestine officer leave.

1

Massive searing bolts of intense ions bounced and splashed off the shields of a chrome-hulled luxury cruiser barely five miles long, while a blizzard of fighters and combat drones swarmed the vessel in hot pursuit. Above the sleek cruiser a colossal thousand-mile long space-control destroyer and its small fleet of support vessels all bearing down on the stubborn fast ship.

“Direct hits from forward primary batteries, Admiral.”

“And they’re still moving?” The seasoned commander moved across his open bridge viewing the fleeing vessel on a holo-monitor beneath his feet. The vessel was only a few thousand miles from his grasp.

“Aye, Admiral. It looks to be the same vessel Captain Naram encountered entering the Travada last month. We

can't seem to get any kind of tractor lock. It's pulling away from us."

"So it is, Captain." The admiral watched in amused admiration of the elite little vessel. So this is what real money could buy within the Imperium.

"Shall I charge the main Reflex cannon?"

"Stay your course, Captain. Continue with forward batteries until they jump to warp."

"But they'll get away."

"They will."

"I thought the Emperor wanted them—"

"Taken captive, Captain. Not destroyed."

"Warp energies surrounding their hull, Captain," an ensign reported.

"I can disrupt their envelope and prevent them from leaving."

"And then what? Stand down, Captain. That is an order."

"But it will take days, perhaps weeks, to find them again!"

"Indeed it will. I said stand down."

Both watched as the vessel suddenly seemed to vanish in a flash of starlight.

"We had them within our grasp!" The captain complained, holding up his black-gloved fist and locking angry eyes with his superior officer.

"What you had, Captain, was something nearing very close to a Court Marshal."

The Captain frowned and lowered his fist.

"The Governor may have given you regional control of this sector, but I assure you, my dear Captain, my authority comes directly from the Imperial Committee—the Emperor himself, no less."

"My apologies, Ambassador. I appear to have been all too caught up in the chase."

"No worries, Captain. We've been after this pirate for a thousand years. A few more won't make any difference."

"She grows more and more powerful with each new encounter."

The Ambassador chuckled.

"I said something humorous?"

"She's *been* more powerful since the day that vessel was first sighted off the shores of Tannis, on the other side of the galaxy."

The captain fumed, simmering his disgust. "These Yin are evil. She'll likely head for the portal and try to return them to Jasis and then back to Aden."

"And that is what every other officer in the galaxy will be thinking as well, Captain Gant."

"You have another theory, Ambassador?"

"I do. The portal is far too well protected. A million ships would not stand a chance invading there, even if by stealth. No, they entered Andromeda by another means. Bring the fleet around and set your course for sun moons of Ember."

"Ember? There's nothing out that far. No habitable worlds. It's just a rogue star flung well outside the galactic disc. It'll take days to reach, even at high warp."

"Precisely why we're heading there. Go where your enemy is not, Captain Gant."

"Your logic fails me, Ambassador, but, as you command." The captain stepped away from his superior. "Recall the squadrons. Assemble the fleet for deep space, then set a course for the shores of Ember." The captain gave the Ambassador an askance eye. "Will there be anything else—Ambassador?"

* * * * *

"Let's not do that again, please." Bryn was still holding onto the arm of her youngest brother, Kieran, while Jan and Kevin stood around them. This vessel looked nothing like how typical Ra cruisers were designed.

"A menial scrap, Miss O'Brien." The captain's near feline features belied her genetic heritage. Exquisitely dressed in a blue and white formal uniform of unknown origin, the clothes hugged her every slender curve and left nothing to the imagination. It was clear the woman was not Ra, but some other Humanoid race entirely. Most of the crew aboard the vessel were similarly feline-featured, with tipped ears, cat-like eyes, and sharp-tipped well manicured claws at the end of otherwise Human fingers. The species also sported long tails. The captain's Ra was well-born and precisely enunciated.

In the few months they'd been trapped at Andromeda, Bryn's brothers had been re-awakened as newbloods. Brooke's promethean genes had left each of the young men, Kevin, Jan and Kieran, enhanced and even more handsome than they'd been before. Perhaps it was their look as brothers that had persuaded their new captain not to toss all of them into the brig as stowaways. They all looked like runaway slaves to her.

"The four of you must be quite the illicit cargo," the captain half grinned. "The Imperium doesn't send star-class destroyers after just anyone. Who are you?"

The four of them just stared at her but said nothing. None of them said a word.

"Well, I see. You do realize that you place me in a very precarious predicament, my young friends. Or should I even call you friends?"

"We are your friends," Bryn spoke up.

"Bryn," Kevin glared at her, his feelings all over hers warning her to keep quiet.

"She's obviously on our side," Bryn continued to speak out loud.

"Actually, I'm not, Miss O'Brien," the captain corrected. "I'm on my own side. It remains to be seen whether or not I take yours. Now 'fess up. I want the truth. Your race is odd to me—you look Ra but your mannerisms are unfamiliar. Your unusual accent of our tongue is quite intriguing. I want to know where you're from and why the Imperium is after you?"

All of them eyed each other. The captain wasn't sure if they were communicating or just exchanging unsure glances. Finally, Kevin spoke up.

"The Imperium wants us, Captain—because we're not Ra. We're Human." Kevin's gaze met hers.

Murmuring broke out all over the bridge.

"Humans?" the captain now looked genuinely surprised. "On my bridge?!"

"We just want to get home," Bryn implored.

"Your race is beyond mere contraband, Miss O'Brien. If the Emperor discovers—"

"He already knows we're here," Kevin began. "In case that last little 'scrap' as you call it didn't make that evident enough."

"Then you have deliberately marked this ship and this crew. I would never have allowed you to stay onboard had I known. Every enforcement jurisdiction will be alerted to us now. There will be nowhere for any of us to hide."

"But there is. Take us to Ember," Bryn offered.

"Ember?"

"It's outside the Imperium," Bryn assured, recounting what Brooke Lear had told them.

The captain half chuckled at the notion. "Nothing is ever outside of the grasp of the Imperium, my dear. Ember is indeed remote to be sure. Why Ember?"

"Our people once lived there."

"*Your* people—" the captain scoffed. "I assure you, Miss O'Brien, no Humans have ever inhabited the stars of Ember. All of Andromeda is quite aware of the Separatist home world of Aden and its indigenous populations called Humans. There could be only one reason and one reason alone the four of you would be even remotely seeking passage to Ember. It has long been speculated what the Aden home world is. You are without a doubt not just Human, but Yin."

All of them looked at each other once again.

"Yes." Kevin affirmed. "Some of the Humans are Yin."

"Some?" The captain raised her brow while briefly pacing her bridge in thought.

"The blood of the Yin flows in the veins of Humans. As does that of the Ra," Kevin continued.

"I see. Now I believe I more fully understand why the Emperor seeks your destruction. Why he has become so fearful of Aden."

"Can you take us to Ember?" Kevin asked.

"Mr. O'Brien, not only do you ask me to sacrifice my kin and crew, but now deliver you to a system anathema to the Imperium? Are you mad?!"

"You said it yourself. Your people here, your crew, you're dead already. Your only hope is *our* only hope, to find another Yin world. One that can maybe take us back to Jasis, and Aden."

"I have heard only fairy tales of you Humans. Part Yin and part Ra. Evolved with the gifts of the Universe itself. Yet you come before me in rags."

"It was our disguise, Captain," Kevin admitted. "We meant no harm. We simply needed a vessel and we stowed away on one. We had no idea where it would lead."

"I see," she folded her arms half fuming but also half curious—very curious. Then she locked eyes with Kieran again.

"You place me in the most precarious of positions, Mr. O'Brien. Damned if I do by the Imperium and well damned if I don't by the Fates."

"Perhaps it was fate that brought us to you," Kieran spoke up, his eyes never leaving hers.

"Indeed. So it would appear." The pirate captain rolled her fingers along her folded arms in thought. "I have heard that it is a terrifying sacrilege to kill a Yin. The Universe looks very unkindly on those who have. I would suppose that would include a Yin-Human as well."

"We mean you or your crew no harm, Captain," Kevin pleaded. The other O'Brien's were nodding their agreement.

"I'm still trying to decide if you are telling me the truth or not, Mr. O'Brien. It is said that the Yin are the most beautiful creatures in the Universe. Your attire would dissuade me from believing that."

Chuckles lifted from the assembled crew.

"Still, we are told that to even look upon a Yin but once is to fall impossibly in love." The captain's eyes met Kieran's briefly once again.

The youngest of the three brothers, Kieran had already been watching her the moment he'd been ushered onto her bridge. His empathy had already lightly touched her; but now his feelings moved warmly into hers. She watched as if intrigued as he approached her. His awakening had left Kieran with a deliciously cut build, beautifully sculpted muscles, and youthful handsome features beneath the dirt and rags of his slave clothes. The only one shirtless of all of

them, he moved deliberately into the captain's personal space, his face just inches from hers. Their height nearly the same, their eyes easily met.

What the gods was this! The feline-looking captain thought to take a step back, but that is not what her instincts wanted. Some of the others had the foulest odor about them—but not this one. She fought back the urge to purr but failed. His arm moved around her unusually slender waist; bringing them warmly into a snug embrace.

Several of the security guards, their hands already on their weapons, immediately drew down on Kieran, ready to blast him the second their captain gave word.

She purred her lips into his, her fingers softly kneading his fine pectorals as her tail began swooshing back and forth, the lifting high. Soft chuckles now floated all around the bridge as the two kissed and tongues slipped over teeth and short fangs. The captain realized too late that her fingers and claws were gripping, kneading, slightly digging into his ass over what remained of his shredded short pants while his own fingers gripped her ass over her sleek uniform.

With more willpower than she thought she had, she broke off the kiss suddenly, drawing a deep and badly needed breath. "That—" she came up for air but still in his embrace. "That will be," she exhaled deeply, desperately wanting more but she maintained her decorum, "quite enough for now, Mr. O'Brien."

Reluctantly, Kieran lifted his hands from her ass, then her hands from his, then tore himself away from her when it was obvious she didn't have the willpower to. Kieran stepped back from her, his long tall bulge pushing out from the front of his shorts did not go unnoticed by either the captain or her bridge crew; his eyes still locked with hers.

"For now," he whispered, his Irish infecting the words of the Ra tongue he spoke delivering them in a smooth sultry,

sexy accent. He moved back to stand again with his brothers and sister. His feelings still not quite fully removed from hers.

"I—" the captain caught some breaths as several other officers and security now surrounded her from behind, their weapons at the ready. "I must say. I have—" words temporarily escaped her. "Put away your weapons," she ordered, taking another deep breath.

"You heard the Captain," her second in command ordered again. The tall heavily muscled officer in a similar but more masculine uniform, reminded them of a lightly tanned puma—of sorts. More humanoid than feline, his features were still very cat-like.

"You may stand down. Return to your posts," he ordered on her behalf as she was clearly recovering from her brief encounter with the young Yin god.

The assembled officers and security staff holstered their weapons and began moving away, their eyes still very focused on their captain and the small group of Yin-Humans.

"And I will remind all of you that what happens on this bridge STAYS on this bridge. Do I make myself clear?" the First Officer added.

Aye's surrounded him from all of who were assembled on the bridge. He turned his attention to his captain, who was still having some difficulty trying to not look at Kieran.

"It appears some distance is in order, Captain. With your permission, Ma'am, I will take our honored guests below and assign them proper quarters. And see that they are bathed and fitted with more," he reached out to the ragged, half-shredded shirt Jan O'Brien had draped over his broad shoulders and lifted some of the smelly ragged material between his fingers, "befitting attire."

"Very good, Mr. Blaze." The captain turned to the rest of them. "My First Officer will see you to new quarters. In the

meantime, I will confer with my staff about what to do next. I assume this will meet with your approvals?"

All of them were now nodding.

2

Now where are we?" Chase Tyler whispered only minutes after their sturdy wooden crate they'd been hiding within had stopped moving.

"I heard someone say, Rancina," Cierra Romero offered. "Does that sound familiar to you, Brooke?"

"No," she shook her head. "I'm sure is a local name. I'm not even sure what planet we're on now."

"Where is Scott when you need him?" Chase grumped.

"We don't need him," Cierra quipped, obviously still perturbed at the guy.

"You really don't like him, do you?" Chase chuckled.

"No," Cierra stated crossly.

"You slept with him—"

"Don't even remind me," she glared.

"I think he's sweet," Brooke offered.

Both Cierra and Chase glared at her in the darkness of their crate. Clearly Brooke had an attracted infatuation with the guy.

"We are talking about the same guy, right? You know, the asshole who left us to rot in a slaver's jail cell?" Chase popped the lid of the crate open and stood as seeds of grain poured off of his shirtless body and out of his ragged shorts. He stepped out of the bin and onto another one where theirs had been stacked, leaving grain seed everywhere. The girls extricated themselves from the crate as well, spilling seed everywhere as well.

"Good thing they're taking their time stacking these. We'd have been stuck inside that thing for another two days." Chase watched as the girls shook grains out of their long flowing hair. All of them looked like vagabonds in their ragged slave clothes and seed dust all over them.

"I don't think pretending to be slaves was such a good idea for a disguise," Cierra grumped. "Scott sells us and then skips town with the coin."

"I thought it was a good plan," Brooke offered.

"But we lost the others," Cierra agreed with Chase. "I hope they're okay."

Chase nodded. "I think they'll be okay. Bryn and her brothers seem like they have pretty level heads." He watched Cierra unbutton her ragged shorts, slip them off and try to shake them out. He'd seen her without clothes and had been sleeping with the two of them for months now, but her curves always garnered his attention and took his breath away.

Brooke giggled.

"What?" Chase smiled back at her.

"I always like the way you look at Cierra. How she makes you feel. It's sweet."

"I can't help it." Chase shrugged. "Cierra looks at you the same way."

"I do not!" Cierra retorted, pulling her shorts back on.

"Do too," both Chase and Brooke said together.

"What we need to be doing—" she buttoned her shorts again, "is finding out where we are. We need to get to Ember somehow."

Finally dusted off and free of the grain that had been infesting their shabby clothes and worn-out shoes, the three looked around, finding themselves on the inside of a large wooden barn. Far from rustic, the huge thick beams of the barn were smooth and lightly oiled. The larger beams bore detailed decorative carvings of random designs and images of forests and fields. Chase moved his hand over the finely finished wood. All of the beams were either held together with shiny polished copper or other wooden pegs and tongue-and-groove joints. The floor was a smooth charcoal-toned concrete. The place looked spotlessly clean, except for where they'd exited their crate.

"They don't build barns like this in Brazil," Cierra marveled.

"Or Kansas," Chase added.

"There are people outside," Brooke interjected. All of them could feel others working close by. The trio moved to a shuttered thick glass window and looked out over vast fields of growing grains and other green-leafed rows of vegetables and tall stalks of something that reminded them of bamboo-corn. Beyond the fields they could see rows and rows of orchard trees and vineyards running up the slopes of hills in the distance.

"This really doesn't look like Kansas," Chase now quipped, "More like Napa Valley."

"Look at the people!" Cierra's eyes drew wide.

Brooke was suddenly smiling. She began bouncing up and down again like she did whenever she was happy. "It's a Kit world!"

"A what?" Chase asked.

"Look at the people," Cierra pointed his attention.

Chase got his first good look at some of the farmers not far off. "They're cat people?"

"No—Kit," Brooke corrected.

"They look like cat people to me."

"The Kit are cousins to my people. We share the same Yin heritage."

"Your people started life as reptiles, Brooke," Chase reminded.

"So? Everyone started somewhere," she glowered.

Chase shrugged.

"So these Kit, are they friendly?" Cierra asked.

"Not to the Emperor they're not."

"Well, that's at least some good news."

"But will the be friendly to us?" Chase asked.

"Let's find out—" Brooke began heading for the door.

"Whoa, Miss Fancy Pants," Chase wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her back toward himself. "You're not going anywhere half dressed and your tattoo hanging out."

"Oh. I keep forgetting."

"We need to lure one of them in to the barn and talk to them."

"I'm sure if we wait long enough, someone will show up."

3

I wish I was going with you.” Carissa wandered through Denton’s spacious undersea home following him as he packed just a few things.

“I know what you’re up to,” he smiled briefly at his sister. “That request would have a snowball’s chance in hell from the Interran Council. Atlantica needs her queen—badly right now.”

“Why do *I* have to be stuck here as queen?”

“Because you married Thorin, the king—remember? Now that he’s gone, you’re the Queen. That’s how it works.”

“And that twist of fate sentences me to a lifetime of perpetual bureaucratic boredom?”

“Take it up with the Fates.” He lifted the small dark backpack of personal things over his shoulder.

She moved up to him.

Denton took Carissa into his thick arms and warmly kissed her on the forehead. "We won't be long. A couple of weeks at the most, if that."

"But Carson gave you only a week—what if it takes longer?"

"Then he can find himself a vessel and come and get us. Truth be told, the Dark don't really need Carson's permission anyway. Rion gave the Ganymede over to the Dark, not the Dominion. Besides, I have a feeling we'll be back within a few days." He moved away from her giving her a reassuring smile. "Parker and Brayden are waiting."

"Come home to me, Den. You're all the family I have left."

"You are married now, you realize that? You have two husbands."

"You know what I mean," she frowned at him.

He nodded. The Dark and Atlantica had forged an alliance with the marriage of Atlantica's King Thorin and the Dark Princess Carissa, his sister. Even Denton himself had wed Thorin's sister. It seemed the two clans were now inseparable, and all but invincible to the Seven.

For hundreds of years Atlantica had been a tightly-knit and rapidly growing clan of halfbloods living life within the safety and seclusion beneath the sea—well out of reach of the Human agents of the Seven. Or so it was thought. Until tragedy struck. ~~Both~~—Thorin and Denton's own bride was ~~were~~ clandestinely murdered. The killers were never found.

But it would be only a few years after Thorin's death that the queen would find a new love—a Human no less. But Atlantica's peoples would be fearful and disdainful of the new relationship. She would be forced to live life exclusively now beneath the seas and away from Humanity—including her love—a man by the name of Winter Parker.

But the Fates had other plans for Parker and Carissa. She would be destined to fall in love with not one, but two men, both newbloods no less. Parker and Brayden had now been added to the Atlantean royal clan. Some within Atlantean society excitedly accept the newblood gods as their own, but others had not. Both Parker and Brayden were still very Human in their culture—a culture both were trying very hard to adapt to what was more acceptable to Atlantica’s higher society.

But no marriage would ever replace the bond that Carissa and Denton shared as brother and sister growing up in the Dark Clan, trading one kind of royalty for another beneath the seas.

“And you know I’ll be back.”

She nodded, watching him vanish in a subtle sound of rushing air.

* * * * *

“Majesty on the bridge!” one of the security guards called out as Parker strode out of the executive halls and on to Ganymede’s main bridge that looked a bit like the most ostentatious football stadium he ever seen. Jesus, this ship was opulent. In the few months he’d been at Atlantica, he’d had the chance to visit numerous vessels, even train for a couple of weeks in fighter planes, but nothing even came close to comparing with this! If there were such a thing as an expense to the Ra who built him, they’d spared none of it. The vessel was beyond vast—to him anyway. No it wasn’t anywhere near the size of some of the Imperium’s epic vessels, but knowing what he knew about Reflex and this Sixth Era vessel, he’d put the Ganymede up against anything the Imperium could summon in a fight any day.

Parker moved past several commanders who were chatting quietly in small groups within the vast room until he came to the executive commanders gathered toward the center.

"... I wholeheartedly agree, Admiral Dark. Ah, it appears the princes have arrived." Vise's avatar nodded.

Dark turned to see the new prince approach in formal Atlantean dress attire.

"Welcome, Prince Parker. A pleasure to meet you, finally." Admiral Vise bowed slightly.

"It's just Parker, Admiral. Please."

"As you wish, my lord." Vise smiled.

Parker rolled his eyes.

"You'll have your hands full with this XO crew, Admiral," Vise smirked at Dark. "I'll expect you to show them their proper place within the commands."

"I believe they're getting there, Admiral," Dark assured.

Vise raised his brow to Parker. "Indeed."

His avatar winked out of existence.

"My *proper* place?" Parker looked at Dark.

"You're married to the queen, Parker." Dade smirked. "That means you outrank all of us."

Parker scowled "Not hardly."

"Commander Wynn is correct, Parker," Dark assured. "Vise is right. There is an ancient chain of command here, especially aboard this vessel and with her crews. We've long allowed our Human cultures to override the ancients. But I'm in agreement with Vise. You did marry Carissa. That makes you and Mr. Michaels both heirs and executives; like it or not."

Parker nodded. He hated the thought. What did he know about these commands and their structures? Some. But he'd not been trained to command a rowboat let alone a starship. He was technically still in the Academy.

"You're still a cadet too, Dade, why are you here?"

"Because he's a god, Parker," Dark answered.

"I didn't realize gods got special treatment within the commands."

"Within the Dark commands they do. Most of the people on this vessel are halfbloods. Without people like you and I and Dade, even the Ganymede wouldn't survive leaving the cloud."

"Where's Brayden?" Dade asked Parker.

"Sightseeing. I left him back on the promenade watching the Northern Lights ..."

"Fascinating, aren't they?"

"Huh?" Brayden looked at the young Indian-looking half-blood woman who now stood beside him while looking out of the sixty-foot tall windows that lined this part of the hull promenade.

"The lights. How they protect the Earth from the sun's solar wind. I mean, the lights are the effect of the solar wind passing over the Earth's magnetic field."

"Oh—yea, that's what I've heard too."

"You're Brayden Michaels." She held out her hand. Brayden took it for a firm shake. For a halfblood, the woman could easily pass for goddess, the way she looked anyway. Maybe she wasn't as beautiful as some, but girl had cute down well. "I'm Mira. Chief Science Officer. Newly assigned to the Ganymede."

"Nice to meet you, Mira. I *wish* I knew what I was."

"Besides a CPA?"

"Something tells me standing on a ship that's almost five-hundred miles long, looking out over the Earth—I picked exactly the wrong degree in college." He smiled.

"I read your bio. Sorry to hear about your mom."

"Thanks," Brayden nodded.

"So how does it feel?"

"How does what feel? To be a new god?"

"No. To be a new prince."

"Honestly, I'd rather be tending bar and talking to customers."

"Really?" she slipped her arm around his. "Because I just happen to know where there is a bar and you can pour us both a drink."

"There's a bar—on a warship?"

"Mister, you have absolutely no idea ..."

4

Our new passengers are making themselves comfortable, Captain.” Blaze entered the captain’s private quarters, the fine white doors sliding closed and secure behind him. “Can I get you some refreshment?”

“Please. I think I could use a good bash about now. Make it a double.”

“I’ll have the same for myself, if you don’t mind.”

“Honestly, Mr. Blaze, there’s no need to ask. One does not drink alone. How crass is that?”

He poured and then handed her the glass. Both tipped the edges of their shots and then savored the smooth warm liqueur as it descended.

“You’re trying to decide if the presence of these Yin aboard *The Sovereign* is a good or bad omen.” Both looked out at the passing stars with their vessel now at low warp.

"That depends, Mr. Blaze, on who one is."

"Thankfully, we're not Ra."

"Not, hardly, but this is a privateering vessel. I need not remind you. I leave ships on fire while securing their bounty."

"And you deliver that bounty to our people in need," Blaze reminded. "And now the Universe has delivered a whole cadre of Yin into your hands."

"Probably the most valuable cargo *The Sovereign* has ever carried—bar none."

"Without a doubt, Madam." The first officer took another elegant swallow.

"What do the crew say?"

"They are suspicious, to say the least. It is as you say, we are not honest merchants here, looting the bourgeoisie and the aristocracies. Many have indeed died in the process. The vaults of our people have swelled on the spoils of the Ra. Perhaps the Yin have returned to exact their judgment upon on us?"

"It has long been told that a single Yin once destroyed the entire Fourth Fleet, Mr. Blaze. Yet there are now *four* such beings on my ship. A bit overkill for such a small vessel, don't you think?"

"The thought had crossed my mind, as well, Captain."

"Of course it had. Why else would I keep you around, Mr. Blaze, but to check my logic?"

"My astonishing senses and keen eye for detail also come to mind, Madam."

"That as well, Mr. Blaze. No doubt." She offered him an approving smile as she sipped again from her glass.

"Taking our vessel and crew to Ember is dangerous. Not our typical excursion."

"Agreed. But I am most taken with these Yin."

"Their fabled attraction appears beyond that of even the Ra."

"So it is. I wonder—" she mused out loud.

"Ma'am?"

"Nothing you should concern yourself with, Mr. Blaze. Find out what these Yin-Humans prefer to dine on and prepare an informal table for dinner, here, in my quarters. Only you and myself will attend with our honored guests."

"I will see to it personally, Madam."

"I thought you might." She flashed him a sly grin.

"Please, Captain—"

"Don't bother trying to hide anything from me, Mr. Blaze. I can see right through that professional demeanor of yours. I already noticed you trading glances with one of the Yin."

"As expected, Captain. Nothing escapes your notice."

"These Yin are—potent, to the extreme. I'll expect all due protocol, Mr. Blaze, if you please. I'll not have this ship turned into a brothel."

He finished his glass. "I will do my best, Captain."

* * * * *

"What in the name of Saint Michael were you thinking!?" Bryn fumed at Kieran, her Irish dander steaming.

The four of them had bathed and were now dressed in fine tailored Ra clothes that, like their hosts, left little to the imaginations of the fine muscular builds beneath the thin ornate fabrics, especially below the waist.

"I don't know, Bryn. No need to get bent," Kieran defended.

"I thought it was good move, myself." Kevin entered the conversation, his Irish just as thick as his siblings'. "We all felt what was going on with the Kit people on the bridge."

"But Kieran didn't need to make such spectacle! With the captain, in front of her whole crew!?" Bryn continued to complain.

"Says you," Kieran jabbed back.

"It looked like a good kiss, Kieran." Jan entered the conversation with a smirk, if only because it was ruffling the feathers of his sister. "Do you think you'll ask her out?"

"You most certainly will not!" Bryn shot back.

"Cool your jets, Bryn; that means all of you," Kevin attempted to calm tempers. "We knew some of the races would be attractive, not just the Ra. Scott warned us about the Kit before we ever met one of them."

"Don't you find that a little odd?" Jan's empathy was moving through all of them, still keeping their conversation private. "It's like Scott North has been here before."

"Yes, I noticed that, practically the first week we arrived."

"I get Brooke knowing things and different people, races I mean," Jan continued. "But he already knew about *The Sovereign*."

"It fits his personality," Bryn retorted. "Of course a scoundrel like North would know about pirates."

"A scoundrel, is he?" Kieran smirked. "Apparently you like scoundrels, sis."

"Oooh," Bryn frosted. "Say that to my face!"

"He has a point, Bryn," Kevin continued. "You've been attracted to Scott like it's nobody's business. No one's faulting you for it. Kieran is obviously just as drawn to our new captain."

"He should be more discreet."

"Oh, you mean like you were the other night when Scott was ridin' you like a buck?" Kieran quipped. "In the same room as all of us, no less."

Kevin quickly took hold of Bryn's arm, keeping her from advancing on their brother. "That's enough now, the both of

you,” he scolded. “The point is, as long as the captain is drawn to Kieran we’re safe. Thank the Saints it’s not a ship full of some mundane race.”

* * * * *

“Araq [“Eric”]?” the elder Kit called out to his son.

“Yes, Father?”

“Fetch a shovel-spade from the tack in the barn, if you please.”

“The longer or the shorter?” the younger stocky thirty-something Kit asked politely.

“Probably the longer for this rock. It’s being very stubborn.” The thick-maned farmer watched his son half run to the barn and enter it. A dusk-like shadow fell over the fields as he looked into the sky to see the massive destroyer move across their skies obscuring their suns and casting its shadows as an ever-present reminder of who their masters were and would always be.

Araq moved through the barn and past the new seed stock on his way to the tack room when he stopped next to a freshly stacked set of new crates. Seed grains littered the floor and top of another new crate the hands should have stacked just this morning. The lid of the topmost crate looked open. With feline-like reflexes and strength, he gingerly jumped to the opened crate and looked inside.

He frowned. Nearly half the grain was now missing. Thieve hands. Not again. There was a time, and not so long ago, when the Kit could not find a single felon on their entire continent. But times had turned difficult for the Kit. The Imperium was selling families faster than their tiny worlds were able to produce litters. His own brothers and sisters were long gone. The only reason he was still on their farm

was to seed other females and produce more of their people for the slavers to sell off world. In another few centuries there wouldn't be much of their tiny race left—if any at all.

He sighed. Father would not be happy with the news. The thief hands were practically picking their farm clean now. But stealing seed? That was the lowest of the low. Without adequate seed rations, the farmers themselves would starve. No doubt the seed would be sold to other farmers looking to turn fast coin and buy up the smaller farms like their own.

Araq quickly found a broom and swept the space spotless again, putting the precious seed back into the crate and re-sealing it. He was about to head back to the tack room when he felt something, odd, like a presence. He'd never felt something so strange before. Like someone was standing not just beside, but *inside* him.

"Don't be afraid." He felt the presence say.

"I think it's a little late for that," Araq spoke out loud. He was all but shaking with the presence he felt within him.

Then the presence giggled. He felt her—her?

"What's so funny?"

"You."

"Who are you? Why can't I see you?"

"It's not just me. It's us actually."

"Us? Did you take my father's grain?"

"No."

"Someone's coming." Another presence said, a male presence this time. He felt younger.

"Probably my father. I was sent to fetch him a shovel-spade. He's likely wondering what happened."

"Please don't tell him about us."

"I don't keep secrets from my family."

"We won't be a secret. Not for long, anyway. Please." The female voice was almost pleading. *"We'll tell you more; once we're alone again ... please."*

"Araq, son. Did you get distracted?" the elder Kit had already entered the barn on his way to the tack room.

Araq felt the presences leave.

"No, father. I found one of the grain crates opened. Almost half the grain is missing. I was cleaning up the mess."

"Almost half?"

"Yes, father."

"Oh. No. This isn't possible." He was shaking his head. That was our ration for the next season. We'll go hungry without it."

"I'm sorry, father."

The elder Kit sighed. "It wasn't your doing. Better to know now than next season just before the planting. We'll have to find a way to make it work."

"I'll get the shovel spade for you now."

"Bring the other one for yourself. It'll take two of us to move this rock out of the field."

His father had already left the barn when Araq passed by the seed crates again with two of the long hefty digging tools, one in each hand of his thick muscular arms. He looked around carefully to make sure no one else was in the huge barn. "I'll be back tonight— whoever you are," he whispered.

"We will be waiting."

Araq ran out of the barn.

* * * * *

Tempers had long settled among the O'Brien's. After dinner with the captain and Mr. Blaze, each had retired to nicer quarters than all felt they should be staying in as stowaways.

Bryn was finally glad to be alone now. With the simplest of thoughts, the crystalline armor she'd found herself gifted with from the now destroyed anchor quickly grew up and over her skin, replacing her new fine Ra clothes with nothing, until she was covered in the faceted transparent platemail that moved effortlessly with her, like it was transparent living crystal covering her skin.

Her armor shimmered with a subtle unworldly soft illumination. Hers was the only one that glowed with its own light. None of the others' prism armor did so. She already knew why. She'd known why the moment after she'd driven her golden spikes into the tower and infused it with her own psionic ability to keep it alive just long enough for the tower to imbue them with its gift of their new armor. It was at that moment Bryn discovered that Brooke was wrong. Their tower *did* have a guardian—they all did. It just wasn't always obvious.

Under assault from the UN forces and fracturing, the tower was dying, being shattered from the outside by the armies of the Seven. Bryn had felt its presence—his presence. He was weak by the time they neared the portal; barely conscious. In the instant of time her mind had met with his, she could see what he was doing to help them. Together they sealed his gift that would rescue all of them—and then she rescued him, drawing his essence into the crystalline lattice of her own armor. He'd protested. But he was too weak to resist her psionic will and what she was doing. In his weakened state, her will easily overcame his own as the tower that had been his home forever crumbled all around them. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. Guardians never left their anchors, not alive anyway. Their minds lived within the neural lattice of the structures. It was who they were. But now his mind, his soul lived, infused within her armor, his intricate presence visible whenever her armor was.

In the three months Bryn and her friends had been marooned at the edge of Andromeda, his presence within her armor had been their secret. Scott had become suspicious of something unusual about her, after all hers was the only armor that shone with his soft white light. But she was almost sure he didn't know exactly what had happened.

The one thing she did know is that after months of being so close to the ancient being who'd been part of the tower, she'd grown a little more than just fond of his presence. His name was Canaan. Whenever her armor was "up" as she called it, he was there, with her. Surrounding her. Shielding her. Comforting her. Talking and laughing with her. She slept in the crystalline platemail whenever she got the chance, whenever she wasn't flanked by the others hiding out together on some barge gliding between stars.

The two had grown close as the months had passed. He never failed to thank her for rescuing him. Canaan may have been ancient, filled with memories and stories she could only begin to imagine, but he was also kind and more than just a little charming. He could make her laugh. She also could feel his admiration of her, not just because of what she'd done for him, but because of who she was. Her heart felt pure to him. A little calloused from the scars of life and war, but Canaan could see and feel all that she was. One day he'd show her all that he was as well.

The armor's intricate lattice easily gave him the structure he needed for survival, but it was Bryn's mind that gave him the sustenance he needed to live. No longer connected to the ancient anchor, each person powered their own armor, but with two of them living within Bryn's, his own essence was all too visible. The new goddess was powerful and could easily keep him alive within the armor's crystalline structures—for now. But both knew they could not keep living like this—he was slowly draining away her life as she

gave him what he needed to survive. He only took what he needed to live, but even that left her constantly tired, fatigued. They would need to find him a new home. There were other towers at Ember. He'd told her so. Now she'd taken it upon herself to see him safely to the sun moons; from there she could return to Aden and find another anchor, to give him the home he needed to live. She wanted him on Aden, wanted him in a place where the two of them could be together. He secretly wished she wasn't corporeal, but it was precisely her being that allowed her to feed his cerebral existence. He was slowly killing her and it needed to stop, sooner than later. Still, he'd grown more than just fond of being this close to Bryn. Both had more than just a symbiotic relationship. As an empathic psionic, she could touch him in ways he'd never known before; but within the physical armor, he could touch her in ways she'd never known as well.

The lights of her fine cabin faded low, she slipped into bed feeling the soft sheets that flowed over her night-lit crystalline skin. She didn't need to speak audibly. He was already moving into her feelings.

"It's been over a week," he snuggled into her feelings.

She audibly sighed. "I'm sorry. It's been a long journey."

"Tell me—"

Her thoughts and feelings relayed the stories of her adventures over the past few days.

"So you're a slave girl now?" Canaan chuckled.

"Oooh, if I ever get my hands on North again—"

"Shhh, Bryn," he calmed. "Everything happens for a reason."

"You always say that."

"Well, there's a reason."

"I know—I don't listen."

"I didn't say that."

"Brat. I can feel you."

"Hmmm, and I you," he smiled into her feelings and then touched her in a way that sent tiny ecstatic tingles down her spine.

"You're being naughty," she chided, but still enjoying the feelings that rippled into her fingers and toes.

"Only a little. I think you could use some distraction after a week like this past one." He touched her feelings with a tender warmth again, only this time it made her fold her arms under her crystalline breasts and writhe softly pressing her thighs together. But he wasn't the only one who could play this game.

"OOOHH!" she felt him elate after she'd touched his feelings in an intimate way. From the inside of her armor, the crystal that encased her face easily flexed and kissed her from the inside. Like her lips moved against warm, soft living glass that flexed and moved with hers. She loved the sensation and the way he physically kissed her, even though there was nothing physical about his form that inhabited her armor.

"I missed you, Bryn—" Canaan surrounded her skin, able to touch her bare skin everywhere all at once.

"I missed you too," she dove into his kiss as the crystal mail felt like it was tenderly constricting around her ass and between her cheeks.

Canaan loved the way she felt moving through his mind and feelings. Although physically very different, they were also very similar. Bryn had a beautiful mind, but she was also a physical being as well. A soft, slow vibration moved through the armor that grew snug between her legs, like gently constricting g-string.

"AAAHHH!" Bryn gasped audibly, at least it would have audible been had Canaan's crystalline lips not been parting hers, concealing the sound.

Her hands now moved over her body, smoothing over his glass-faceted skin while both teased and kissed. She rolled

softly under the sheet, her emotions building with his, the glow of his glass skin growing slightly brighter.

“AHHH. We’re going to make a mess again—” Canaan warned.

“I don’t care—” Bryn threw caution to the wind. “I want you again. Like last time.”

He knew what she meant. Her feelings were igniting and her body demanded ignition as well. Corporeal beings were so odd. Still, within the armor, he now shared the same odd existence. She was physical and in many ways now so was he.

Bryn felt herself being rolled to her tummy, her legs drawing in while her knees spread. Canaan embraced her as her ass lifted high. She bit her lip suddenly feeling herself yielding as something hard and thick intimately parted and began extending and filling her with its smooth, warm vibrations.

“OOAAAHHH!” she gasped feeling Canaan move slowly, intimately into her. His thick glass cock felt warm and slick, but it wasn’t all smooth. He’d give himself some unusual ridges in just the right places that touched and bumped over g-spots within her. Some she didn’t know she had before making love with Canaan. Her hips rocked softly as his phallus vibrated softly within her, his long width spreading her tight and deep, filling her completely. Canaan easily brought Bryn to a full and screaming climax, her ass rocking high and heavily, her body completely out of control, while he squeezed taunt around her tight nipples vibrating them unmercifully. He loved watching her so elated and out of control. But Bryn wasn’t the only one who could find themselves out of control. He’d never in his life experienced what she could do to him until the two of them were together. She knew just how to touch him, intimately, powerfully. It gave him a rising elation that made his whole being, every synapse, tingle with euphoria. It would build slowly and

steadily with the way she touched him, not just inside with her feelings, but he made sure his intimate feelings were being touched by the intimate parts of her body as well. His glass cock wasn't just vibrating now, but throbbing as he slipped and withdrew forcefully within her. Wrapped tightly around Bryn's goddess body and her feelings meshed just as tightly with his own, a kind of euphoria was rising fast within him. Feeling her wet skin intimately connected to his crystalline one; feeling all over her touching him as his crystal skin constricted over all her body like an intimate body-glove, suddenly Canaan's feelings could climb no higher. His euphoria detonated in a spectacular strobe of golden-white light that splashed from within him like nothing he'd ever felt before meeting Bryn. Wrapped by him, Bryn felt every euphoric moment of his climax as his crystalline skin seemed to explode, spraying and filling their room with a fine scintillating light, a light that now clung to everything like a fine illuminated oily dust. If he could have called out audibly he would, but even then his glass lips were tightly folded into Bryn's. Canaan continued to rock and lift her hips, continued to strobe and elate into her for long moments soon covering their room with his luminous euphoria. On the inside of her armor it was no different. Bryn was covered head to toe with his excitement, soaked in his fine luminescence.

"I don't know how you do this to me—" Canaan was still wrapping her tightly; still rocking himself deeply within her, as the final strobes of his elation pulsed and soon subsided, their room and bedding covered in his soft light. Both collapsed onto the bedding into a sweet spoon-like hug, holding onto each other while sizzling-hot emotion slowly cooled.

"I don't know—" she kissed him softly with both her lips and her emotions. "It just feels like something you need."

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" he rippled his emotions through hers.

"I don't think the armor would let you hurt me."

She felt him nodding. "Perhaps it protects us both from the intensity of each other."

"I love having you all over me." She could feel herself slipping within their armor now, like she was covered in his seed, or whatever it was.

"Ohhh, don't say that," she felt him grow shy.

"No, don't pull away, I love you all over me like this."

"You do?"

She assured him, giving him an intimate hug that gave him a soft sensitive jump in his feelings.

"HAAA!" he flexed. Then recovered. "I'm all over the room again as well."

"I love you."

"I love you too, Bryn." He sighed.

"What was that for?"

"You know. We're so different."

"And yet the same," she reminded.

She felt the armor nodding her head, wrapping tightly all around her in a body hug. "We are the same."

5

There you are." Both Dade and Parker entered the massive lounge that had perhaps only a dozen or so people scattered within it.

"Oh, Parker, Dade," Brayden stood up from a table where he and Mira were sharing a plate of nachos and tall frosted glasses of branded Mexican beer. "This is Mira. Ganymede's science officer."

"No, no, don't get up," Dade smiled at Mira. They'd met months ago. Parker winked at her. She was cute.

"Are you guys hungry?" Brayden continued. "We were just sharing a snack."

"Are we interrupting?" Parker asked.

"Sit down, Parker," Dade took a chair. "You're both married. It's not like they're dating."

Yes, both he and Brayden were married, to the same woman and to each other, but Dade still had a few things to learn about decorum—and newbloods, and attraction.

“Actually, we were just talking about you, commander,” Mira smiled her eyes at Dade.

“Uh-oh,” Dade suddenly met eyes and empathy with Brayden. “I hope you’re not sharing dirt on me,” he cautioned out loud. “Because I categorically deny everything.”

“Prince Michaels was telling about how you stared down the Seven militia while in the prism forest. Very brave.”

“I’ll deny that too. It was arrogant and stupid.”

“I disagree.” Mira smiled again. She’d seen similar traits in other friends, most notably Jake.

Two more frosted glasses shimmered into existence on the table in front of each of the guys. Dade lifted the lime from the edge of his glass and squeezed it into the well-filled glass.

“I hear we’re going to be making the jump in the morning.” Parker changed the subject while nodding out the windows of the bar and helping himself to some of the still very warm nachos. Stars appeared to be streaming by as the Ganymede headed for the edge of Jasis at high warp.

“It’s not technically a ‘jump’. The maneuver is called a ‘fold’. It’s the only ship in the fleet that’s capable.”

“How long does it take?” Parker asked.

“Theoretically, it should be instantaneous.”

“Theoretically? You mean we haven’t done this before?” Brayden asked.

“We haven’t. The Masters did. Apparently all the time. The last of the Sentinel Masters were the architects of the Ganymede. The vessel’s barely twenty-thousand years old.”

“Oh,” Dade snarked, “just barely.”

Both Parker and Brayden looked around at the pristine elegant décor.

“It still looks new,” Brayden mused, impressed.

"The knowledge of the Ra doesn't age, guys. When you can manipulate atoms at a sub-molecular level, things don't deteriorate with age. Time stands still with vessels like these."

"So what happens at the edge of the Milky Way?" Brayden asked.

"You know, I've always despised that name," Mira half grumped. "Call it a pet peeve."

"You don't like 'Milky Way' for the name of our galaxy?" Parker chuckled.

"No. It's a stupid name. Trillions of stars with some of the most beautiful nebula and planets in existence and we're stuck using a name that fell out of Egyptian fertility myths. At least the ancient Chinese called it the 'Silver River' or Heaven. A little more apropos, don't you think?"

"You think you engineers think way too hard, Mira," Parker grinned.

"I think I prefer 'Jasis'," Dade agreed with her.

"It's the first time I've heard our galaxy called that."

"It's the name given to it by the ancient Ra."

"Really? My Ra is still a bit rusty. What does the name mean?" Brayden asked, grabbing a sip from his glass.

"It's a verb actually—it means 'ascension'."

"Ascension? Ascension to what?"

Mira met eyes with Brayden. "The ancient Ra believed that Jasis was the legendary gateway to Heaven."

"Heaven, huh?" Dade politely munched on a nacho chip.

"So Jasis was their ascension to heaven."

"Not just heaven, but the way to ascend to the very Throne of the Gods."

* * * * *

"You're up late." Rion's avatar shimmered into existence within Dark's quarters.

"So are you. Where's Serena?"

"Out with the Kir."

"Hopefully not drinking, she's pregnant you know." Dark smirked.

"Yea, we knocked her up but good," Rion grinned.

"Speak for yourself. I only gave her one."

"I may have gotten a little carried away," Rion admitted.

"You didn't come all the way out here to talk about our pregnant princess."

"No."

"It's going to be fine, Rion. Trust me."

"I should be there with you."

"The last of the Steele Dynasty returning to Andromeda. Now? Not a chance. Not while Darius is still on the throne. Your life wouldn't be worth a plug-nickel."

"I know. I already got read the riot act by the rest of the Invictus Council."

"Like it or not, buddy, you're royalty. Get over it."

"Oh, and you're not?"

"Nope. On purpose."

"The hell you're not. You're married to an Apostle. That makes you a Dominion 'Eminence'."

"Still not royalty."

"You're also related to Carissa."

"Yea, not going there."

"I heard Denton's with you?"

"I wanted the backup. Just in case."

Rion took a chair in the spacious chamber. "He's going to know where you've gone."

"You mean Dane?"

Rion nodded. "My guess is he'll be waiting for you."

"Probably."

"And what if Darius is as well?"

"Then it will be a really short trip. I'm not sticking around to get into a fight with the Second Fleet."

"No, I wouldn't either."

"We'll be fine, Rion. Ganymede's the fastest ship in the Universe. Not even the Kir could defeat him."

"It's not just that, Mitch. The stigmata are beginning to appear now."

"Yea, I wished you told me about these people a few years ago."

"Only my parents knew. It was a secret of the Masters."

"So, Ty knew as well?"

"Of course."

"Probably another reason I'm not cut out to be royal. You kids of the Masters keep secrets like the dead."

"Yea, well here's another secret you're about to be let in on—I want Lyris returned to Aden."

"Yea, well that's kind of the whole point of the mission."

"No Mitch, you don't understand. You have no idea how critical she is to us. She has to be here for the Meridian."

"I thought these people were just signs. That's what the prophecies say."

"No. They're not just signs."

"Now you tell me. And what happens if she's killed or we can't get her back in time?"

"Then the Meridian doesn't appear and Darius wins. It will be an eternity before the next cycle appears again, *if* it ever appears again. By that time all of us, will be long dead. The Ra will overrun the Universe. And eventually destroy it."

"You mean destroy all life within it."

"It will become a wasteland of dead empty worlds."

"No pressure—" Dark scowled.

"I'm sorry. You wanted secrets. Now you have secrets."

"I think I was better off not knowing." Dark scowled.

"You have only one mission objective now, Dark—I'm overriding all the others. Including Carson and Carissa. Your only mission is to retrieve the Tellarian promethean and return her to Aden—at any and all cost."

"So that's why you suggested we take the Ganymede fully fledged. I thought it seemed a little overkill to me."

Rion nodded. "It is, Mitch. I'm sorry I couldn't tell you sooner. The Council thought it better to wait until you were underway. It needed to look like a simple rescue mission."

"You can tell our Council I'll be giving all of you kids a piece of my mind when I get back," Dark half fumed.

"We can't be too careful. The Dominion has been compromised. Dane's spies are everywhere."

Dark refrained, but still fumed. "No, I get it, Rion. Thanks."

"I'm sorry. I tried to prepare Ganymede as best I could. I even assigned Kent and Mira."

"I noticed. Don't apologize. We're at war. You're right. We can't afford to be too careful."

* * * * *

The curves of the aristocrat female felt warm and fine under the prince's softly dancing fingers as they explored beneath her dangling swimwear. Her fingers had already found his thick tall spire beneath his swim cloth as they kissed on the secluded beach under a miles-high dome of artificial sunshine as crystal-clear waves caressed the beach.

"Begging your extreme pardon, my lord," the servant spy appeared in avatar.

"Yes, Cadin, what is it now?" Dane smiled against her lips.

"The Second Fleet readies to speed toward Travada!"

"Yes, I know," he kissed.

"But the Yin are discovered."

Dane rolled to his back lifting himself to his elbows, his half transparent swim veil completely indecent with the aristocrat's fingers bumping along his fine abdominals but stopping short of getting more intimate with a messenger present.

"Yes. The Yin-Humans tarried too long on the Kit home worlds. My father now suspects their presence in the Travada."

"They were intercepted by one of the regional destroyers."

"Interesting. That I did not know. They were captured, obviously."

"No, my lord. Mysteriously, they escaped. Reports are that they evaded capture by boarding a rogue pirate vessel, known to the locals as *The Sovereign*. Tales are that it is a ghost vessel, my lord."

"Ghost vessel, is it?" Dane breathed a smile. "Well now."

"They did evade capture, my lord."

"Of course they did, if they were on a *ghost* vessel." Dane mocked the report.

"Why would your father allow them to escape?"

"My father's reasons could be many, but this is unlike him to be so generous. Again, it would seem that someone else advises him—against his characteristic judgment."

"Again, the new seer perhaps?"

"Indeed. And a shrewd one at that."

"Where will they go?"

"Please, Cadin; they are Yin after all."

"Ember? It has long been rumored that the Yin once inhabited—"

"Please, Cadin," the prince interrupted. "You are too simplistic in your logic. You should be more precise. Ember is far too remote for anyone to bother with."

"Agreed, my lord. Where will they seek to hide?"

"They are not seeking to hide, my friend. They are seeking a way home."

"Then Ember would be—"

"You need to be more familiar with the Yin, Cadin. Humans are not the only race the Yin infested."

"The Kit, my lord, of course."

Dane smiled. "Search the sun moons of Ember if you like; but you will not find any Humans or even any Yin there. I suggest you focus your talents on the Keena systems. Let me know what you find." Dane rolled himself back over and onto the beauty, his lips refinding hers over the warm sand.

* * * * *

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