

RISE SIREN FIVE

(EXCERPT - PART 1)

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ONE

Debbie beeped.

Deep Space Debbie. Debbie for short. If Debbie beeps once, the arrays have picked up something with serious potential to be interesting.

If Debbie beeps three times, the arrays have picked up something real good.

When he first started working here, Nate Reynolds Jnr jumped into action at every solitary Debbie ding.

Tilds scoffed at him. But his eyes still tracked him, furtive and hopeful, all the same.

Debbie had just dinged three times. Tilds was maintaining his aura of cool detachment, but his eyes were glued to Nate at the OBO tracker.

OBO. Off-World-Black Ops. Uber level of security clearance required to be anywhere near this thing.

“Son-of-a-gun. This guy’s a genius.” Nate rested his hands on the desk and peered closely at the incoming stream.

“What?” Tilds said, aiming for casual. Almost making it.

“What?” he repeated, just a tad impatiently when Nate didn’t answer right back.

“Cooper Pierce R9,” Nate replied, easing back from the screen. “He’s done it. He’s off Moethiica.”

Tilds whistled. “Well won’t that make the powers that be happy. Golden boy on his way home again. Son-of-a-bitch.” He picked up the phone. “I’ll call it in.”

“Who’s picked him up?” Tilds queried Nate, while he cradled the phone against his shoulder. “Can you see them?”

He shook his head at the non-answering phone and held the receiver straight out in front of his face. “Hello? Earth to OBO Incorporated. Important news to report. Favorite son on his way home. Anyone want to freaking answer me?”

“No, I can’t see them, but...” Nate leaned in close to the display again. “Fuck,” he said quietly.

“What? What?” Tilds slammed the phone down and clumsily negotiated the exit route from his desk. Nate Reynolds Jnr, was a gentleman and a scientist.

And he never swore.

The bar had now been officially raised above real good.

“Holy fuck.” Tilds skidded to a stop beside him. Unlike Nate, Tilds swore often. He was as much of a scientist. Definitely not so much of a gentleman.

“He’s got her. He’s freaking got her,” Nate said eventually.

“I don’t believe it,” Tilds breathed.

“Believe it,” Nate replied. He pointed to the screen. “She’s right here in front of us. Heading fast our way.”

Tilds’ phone rang loud and sharp. They both jumped.

“Fark. Ok,” Tilds exhaled deeply, cranking his neck and rotating his shoulders.

“Tilds, just answer the phone. Tell them he’s got her,” Nate rolled his eyes at him. Such a drama queen.

Tilds reached his desk and picked up the phone.

“This better be good, Array Boy.” It was Jonassen. An arrogant bastard. But around Off-World-Black-Ops, you got that here and there.

“Oh it’s good, Jonassen,” Tilds smirked. “It’s more than good.”

“Yeah, what?” Jonassen asked skeptically.

“Golden boy. Everybody’s favorite, long off-the-grid, Off-World Agent, has gone all exit stage left on Moethiica on us.”

“Pierce is off? You can see him?” Jonassen was excited now. And the best was still coming to him.

“Oh yeah he’s off,” Tilds replied. “And he’s bringing you a little friend to play with Jonassen.”

“Cut the crap, Tilds and spill it. Who’s in transit with the Agent?”

“Siren5, asshole. Siren5.”

There was dead silence. “You’re shitting me,” Jonassen said.

“No, I am not. Patching you to the Debbie data.....now!” He hit the last key with a flourish.

“Oh. My. God,” was all that Jonassen could say.

“The most coveted freaking asset in the cosmos, Jonassen,” Tilds gloated. “The most coveted freaking asset in the cosmos and we got her. Little low tech, bumbling baby earth just outplayed the lot of them. Yeah baby!” He pumped his fist excitedly and then recovered himself.

Nate looked up from Debbie to smile at him.

“Jonassen you still there?” Tilds put on his best serious voice. “Don’t you need to go tell someone?”

“Yeah , yeah. I do and I’m out,” Jonassen replied, shaking himself. He went to hang up and paused.

“Hey Tilds you think she’s hot as in smoking hot?”

“Of course she’s hot,” Tild replied. “She’s a freaking Veil Portal opening Siren, Jonassen. Sex, wings and magic baby. Oh yeah.”

“Cooper Pierce is a lucky bastard.”

“Cooper Pierce is a freaking legend. And professional beyond all reason. He ain’t gonna tap Priority One, Man. No matter how hot she is. She got important work to do down here.”

Jonassen grunted, "I would."

Tilds laughed. "And that is why Cooper Pierce is on his way back from OBO Mission Moethiica1 with said Siren in tow, and you're still working a desk job."

"Fuck you, Array Boy."

"Aw, sorry Jonassen. I'm officially off the market. Gotta save myself for all that Off-World pussy that'll be coming through, once that little cosmic doorway opens"

"Tilds!" It was Nate. Looking pointedly furious.

"Gotta go. Gotta go. Go tell the big brass, Jonassen. Later."

Tilds hung up the phone and managed to look sheepishly apologetic. "Sorry Nate." He held up his hand to him. "Can't blame a man for getting a little distracted though."

Nate shook his head and turned back to Debbie. "You're depraved Tilds. This is huge. This is history. This is the gateway to the denied worlds. And we got her. We got the key. Which means we control it. We own it."

"No way anyone is going to cheapen this by trying to get laid by the Off-Worlders who come through it."

Tild shook his head. "Nate, Nate, Nate. I admire your sentiment, brother, I really do. But I wouldn't count on it."

He winked at Nate and picked up the phone to make the next call.

TWO

Moethiica. Far, Far Away. 24 Hours Earlier.

"Hurry up," Marcs hissed behind her.

"Shut up," she laughed at him. "I want to savor it. It's my last time."

She settled herself again, drew a breath, and hurled the canister.

It was a good throw. The target was impossibly high. Impossibly angled.

When she was little she had practiced for hours on end, every day, for months for this.

Just for this moment.

It had to be perfect.

It was.

The canister hit true on the sensor, way, way above them. And the rock doorway to the run, slid open.

Rise turned and beamed at Marcs in delight. She eased herself through the narrow opening and felt him close behind her.

Marcs could not throw and hit that sensor. He had a cheek in rushing her. But this was the last time here with him too, most likely. And she would not let any small annoyances bother her.

She pushed through the next opening and came out on to the ledge, into the sunlight.

The sun was directly overhead now. It heat red rock and honey-suckle. Godds she loved that smell. She wondered if she would smell it after today.

“Unlikely,” she said to herself, breathing deep, and stepping closer to the edge.

Her last run. She had come of age that morning. And that meant only one thing to a female like her on Moethiica.

They would come for her.. They would take her to the Echelon. And she would become their play thing.

They would take her wings away.

Tears pricked her eyes and she let the hot breeze take them.

What would come, would come, but it would come later. They would not spoil this last moment on Junar Run.

Because Junar Run was Paradise. Outlawed and abandoned.

A local street crew looking to loot whatever they could find from the long abandoned weapons facility had found the entrance.

They got precious little in the way of loot. But they were an enterprising lot, many of them winged. They began to fly the old runs and hold races.

Only the best of the best, and those who could be trusted, were invited to join them. It became a profitable little venture for them. Rise had certainly forsaken many a meal to race here.

But it had been worth it. Oh, so worth it.

They were not here now, and she and Blake had the place to themselves. A bonus.

Blake had never beaten Rise on this run. No-one had beaten Rise on this run the last three years.

But they had beaten her enough before that. Years. Junar Run had been her life for some time.

Rise looked around her, savoring every precious detail of it.

Home. Freedom. Friendship.

The ravines of Junar are narrow.

And they bare the scars of war.

There are parts of Junar where the ledges have caved in from the blasts. And parts where the holes in the hard, red dirt floor have been blown through.

This was ground never meant to be disturbed.

Hot bursts of smoldering air erupt from the floor. They join with the warm eddies that rush through the ravine to form a wave of hot, fickle, unpredictable air. Eddies of hot winds that rise from the bowels of the earth and rush through the narrow passages of the ravines.

No-one knows where they come from or what causes them. But if you have wings and you catch one at the right time, you can ride them.

Ride them dizzyingly fast through the turns and twists of the run, and pray the eddy lasts until the end, where it will drop you outside of the rocks. It is an adrenalin rush like no other.

This is what they ride and race and fly.

Rock sprites live in the caves here. Other creatures as well. If you get caught on the run, it is a rock sprite who will come rescue you.

Pray it is a rock sprite anyway.

You would not want the other creatures who dwell here coming to your aid.

There is a stillness that is not stillness that comes over you before flight. It is being. It is fluid. It gives only the illusion of being still.

You become one with yourself and one with your surroundings.

The breeze stopped abruptly. The hot desert air hung heavy and dry.

Silence.

Rise waited. At one with herself.

The eddies came.

Soft, teasing, caressing. The first one lifted a tendril of dark hair from her forehead, already damp with sweat.

It was all she needed.

She dove.

And Marcs cursed, already half a second behind her. She had gone early and she sank dangerously close to the ground before the full force of the eddy caught her wings.

She surrendered to it. She was lifted. She soared.

She banked hard into the first turn. Her body and the elements one. In perfect sync with each other. Each lending the other to its cause.

The feeling through her wings was of ancient winds, hot earth, swirling air, rising heat, cool ocean mists. She felt all these things through her wings. She felt this air's journey. Felt where it had travelled. Felt where it had been. And now it was hers. Now she had become part of its journey. Now it was lifting her.

The third turn is sharp to the right and up after the comparatively gentle curved ease of the second left. It comes quickly upon you, and many a first and even tenth time traveller of Junar Run, comes to an early end of the ride here.

Of all places Marcs chose this particular turn to make one of his more outrageous passing attempts.

They slammed.

They slammed into each other hard. And before they could disentangle themselves from each other a freak up blast of a current propelled them up into the web of vicious overhangs above them.

That's the thing about Junar Run. The overhanging ledges stretch out far, almost touching on certain parts of the run. And their underside is a tangle of strange rock formations. Gnarled swirls and nasty hooks of rock.

As if some great giant knew to what purpose beings would come here. And added his own evil twist to the game, wrought in stone.

They struggled vainly, only making their situation worse and securing themselves even tighter in the overhangs.

There was nothing for it. They could only wait for the rock sprites. They would come rescue them eventually. All they must needs do is wait. And find some pieces of rocks they could cling to with their hands to take the weight from their wings to their arms.

The sun beat down steadily and Rise was saturated with sweat by the time Marcs spoke.

"Sorry," he grunted. Wincing as he shifted his weight.

They were saving what they could of their wings but their arms were taking some brutal punishment.

"It's Ok," Rise exhaled deeply through her mouth and adjusted her position slightly.

They waited longer in silence. The salty sweat poured into Rise's eyes and her biceps screamed with pain. She couldn't hold this much longer. But if she swung her legs up to try and get a purchase on the ledge above she would rip her wings.

And she really, really didn't want to do that. No matter what was coming later, she would preserve them as long as she could.

Rise closed her eyes and counted backwards from 100.

She could hold for another 100. A rock sprite would surely be here by then.

22.

It was no rock sprite.

Rise felt the base of her skull tingle, and the hairs rise along the back of her neck.

He came to sit cross legged on the rock face above them and rested his bemused head on his right hand.

It was a Pann Lord.

And he was magnificent.

His horns were enormous.

They were black obsidian but beneath them was a rainbow of color. The rich, jewel colors of the cosmos swirled, spiraled, spun. His deep brown eyes sparkled. Deep pools. Ochre, mocking, seeing, sensual. His lips were full of red promises. The beautiful, masculine face was framed with dreads pulled back high on his head.

His body was muscle. Lean, hard muscle. Muscle that could leap and bound and engage. There were braided bands of leather around his biceps. His ink was awesome. Symbols. Glyphs. Swirls.

His presence radiated. Depths of wisdom, ecstasy and exquisite sorrow. Laughter. Love.

Rise swallowed, wide eyed, feeling the rush of him.

"That was somewhat foolish." His voice was rich, dark, resonant.

With a fluid grace he was suddenly on the overhang directly above them. With gentle and expert hands he untangled Rise's wings first, lifting her effortlessly on to the ledge beside him. Then he did the same for Marcs, setting him beside her.

He smiled at them. And pointed behind them. Showing them the entrance he had used and their way down.

And then in silence he settled cross legged on the middle of the ledge and closed his eyes.

Rise and Marcs stared, mesmerized.

Pann Lords are the kings of the land. Guardians, spell singers, keepers of mysteries. Masculine. That rich, deep, dark masculine that brooks no trivialities and is capable of the deepest joy, the most profound love and the richest laughter.

They initiate few outsiders to their mysteries.

They like to play.

And those who have been lucky enough to partake in the sensual arts with them have a knowing smile and a larger presence about them afterwards.

Rise had only ever seen one from a distance. Even then she could feel his vast presence. Feel how different he was from everyone else around him.

But never like this. Never this close. And never where one had his attention on her.

His attention was exquisite.

Rise stared transfixed until Marcs tugged gently but firmly on her hand to leave him be. Reluctantly she turned to leave but not before she felt the brush of the Pann's awareness against her mind.

He connected with her. Ever so gently, he connected with her. He was immensely powerful and immensely gentle and immensely pure. And in Rise he searched for some depth she was not aware existed.

This she felt. She did not understand it completely. But she was immensely honored. She turned to look at him. He was still as the rock which supported him and gave no acknowledgement of what had passed between them.

Marcs tugged on her hand once more and Rise followed him reluctantly into the mountain.

Light into darkness. The ground sloped away beneath them. Then the walls of the tunnel sprang to life. Crystalline sparkles. Rich walls teeming with gem told stories.

Slivers cut and set cunningly in the rock wall in the formations of the stars and nebula and galaxies. These gems of the sprites are sacred. They lit their path beautifully.

As they descended lower and their path spiraled more deeply into the depths of the rock, there were paintings. Images etched in rock in ochre and blood. Ancient stars and ancient giants. They told stories of things as ancient to them as they were to Marcs and Rise.

They told as best as they could of themselves, with the rules and materials afforded to them.

Marcs stopped suddenly and Rise crashed clumsily into his back. "Dead end," he whispered.

They turned to their left and as if on cue, the opening appeared to them. Narrow and hidden, the soft glow of blue light from whatever lay beyond it beckoned them in. Gingerly they eased their way through.

It was a cavern. And what a cavern. The vast sapphire blue lake was midnight depths of night sky and starlight. Sandy banks of white, golden grains edged back to rounded walls of gleaming obsidian rock. Jewel blue stalactites hung over the sapphire depths of the pool. It was a place to sing within yourself.

Rise felt the voice in her throat soar. She felt her mind quieten. She felt the endless chatter cease. She felt him again. The sunlight on him. On the rocks. As one with his surroundings. As one with the air. As one with the breath. There was no separation. The separation was an illusion. There was no he, no air, no breath. They were all one. And they danced together in endless spirals. Endless twirls.

Rise felt something in her awaken. And then he was lost to her. Gone. As if he had never existed.

"He wanted you to see this." It was an older female sprite. She touched Rise's arm and Rise saw the sadness flicker across her eyes when she turned to meet them.

Gently, she touched Rise's wings.

And then it hit her. Physical and not physical all at once.

She felt the foreignness of it, the shock of it. She screamed for
Marcs. And then the pain hit her like a tidal wave.

And then there was blackness.

And she felt nothing at all.

THREE

He ran his torch over her from top to bottom. She was violet eyed, dark haired and exquisite. Smoking hot. A beauty. Whatever you want to call it. Winged.

L4 hated what those bastards did to the winged ones.

The sprites had dumped her and the guy on the outskirts of the run. The guy had come to just as they got close. He'd left her there the little bastard. Done a runner.

If he knew her, and knew what was coming to her, that made him a right prick.

But that was Ok. L4 had a good eye for faces. And the lights from their craft had illuminated his face nicely before he'd run. He would see the violet eyed beauty's friend again and teach him some manners.

L4 ran a hand through his hair. She had come to only seconds after the other had run. Instantly alert. Airborne. Straight up at dizzying speed. It had thrown him for a second. He'd never seen anything quite like it.

Two shots to take her. He didn't need two shots to take anything. C7 hadn't hit her at all. Her speed had taken them both by surprise.

"How the fark did she get up that far and that fast?" He mused.

"Determined little Minx," mused his fellow officer, C7. "Bind her. ID her. You know the drill."

L4 deftly bound her. Wings, wrists, ankles. "She's a beauty," he said wistfully. Fark knows what those sick bastards would do to her.

“She’s only just come of age this morning according to her ID,” he said to C7. Sure we just can’t leave her somewhere?”

C7 hesitated, but then resolutely shook his head. "It's protocol. And she's already triggered the alarms on the Runs. They'll know something's up out here. They'll have ID'd her from that."

L4 grunted. “I know but...”

"I know," C7 agreed quietly. “But you feel like going up against the Echelon tonight brother?” he said pointedly. “I sure know I ain’t no match for them.”

L4 sobered at that. “They’re wrong. They’re just wrong.”

“That they are,” C7 agreed. “And there ain’t one damn thing we can do about it. Come on. Let’s get it over with.”

L4 lifted Rise effortlessly in a fireman's carry and followed C7 back to their patrol craft.

It was the newest model. Sleek and highly maneuverable. It had capacity to fly as high as the first layer of the webs.

They had taken it up there just hours before. C7 was having problems with his girl, and had welcomed the distraction of checking into their designated night shift a couple of hours early.

It was a distraction alright, but creepy as fark. The rainbow colored strands were duller than they expected them to be. Almost sickly looking. And they were few and far between. Most of them were a weird grey white. Off. Like they needed a wash or something. Thick and sticky too.

They could see the seemingly infinite layers of the webs beyond. Coding stations dotted in their midsts. Strange, unidentifiable creatures moving in the shadows.

"Fark!" they yelled it in unison as one of the shadow creatures appeared from nowhere and scuttled unexpectedly close.

C7 cursed repeatedly as he fumbled at the controls and got the ship further away from the web.

Creepy as fark.

But at least now they could say they'd seen them up close and personal. Moethiica's famed webs.

"What do you reckon it feels like being on one of those worlds that doesn't have this shit?" L4 gestured at the scene in front of them.

"Man! Shut the fuck up!" C7 hissed at him. "Don't be saying shit like that right up here and close to them."

"Doesn't matter where I say it," L4 retorted. "If these webs work how they say they work, they can hear me wherever I say it. Hell, they probably programmed me to say it."

C7 shook his head. "You can just never give it a rest. Can you?"

"I'd just like to know what it feels like, is all," L4 replied. "Hardly the stuff of rebellion and revolution."

"It's rebellion and revolution enough for her," C7 replied glumly and L4 grunted.

They sat in silence for a few more minutes and then C7 swung the flyer back in sharp descent to surface level. He had seen all he wanted to of the webs.

They had reached the flyer now and Rise moaned softly, coming to a little on L4's shoulder. "Steady on there violet eyes," he said.

As he settled her in the flyer he gave her a shot of sedative. It was a small mercy. But the best he could do for her.

"You're a softy for these winged hotties," his partner chided him.

"I'm a softy for everyone," L4 remonstrated light heartedly.

C7 snorted, swinging his hard muscled bulk into the flyer. "Not likely," he muttered.

And L4 laughed in spite of himself, and where they were heading, as they took off into the late afternoon sky.

FOUR

The Black Gates of the Echelon. L4 and C7 stood reluctant before them, Rise still over L4's shoulder. They did not want to be here. No-one wanted to be here. Ever.

It was the Echelon's own compound in the city. Buildings on three sides around a large central courtyard. Smaller, private courtyards off the other, outer sides of the buildings. A maze of rooms and tunnels underneath the ground. The Entertainment Rooms are amongst them.

"We'll just leave her with you then," C7 was saying.

"The Upper now in session would have you deliver your gift to him personally," the Echelon Guard replied. "He is 'entertaining.' And would have you join him."

C7 opened his mouth to protest. But, knowing it was hopeless, thought better of it. One did not protest with the Echelon. One just did what they were told.

"Take them," the Guard barked at an underling.

He was identically clothed, gloved, booted and helmeted to his superior. Only the red insignia over his heart gave away his rank.

And he felt different. Not long in the helmets, L4 thought to himself. They connected themselves right into their heads these helmets. Programmed them. Linked them. Fed them. Made them even more freaking farked up than they were to start with. If that was possible. Old One soldier hybrids with magic tricks. Nothing better.

The Senior Guard tilted his visored head at him, regarding him steadily. L4 shook himself. They had mind-cept these bastards. Not only the power to read, but the power to steal. He stilled his thoughts to silence. The Guard moved slightly into him as they passed. It was a light touch but still felt like being jostled by a wall.

Icy, black tendrils washed over him. L4's skin crawled.

The underling led them to stairs at the rear, right hand corner of the courtyard. The entrance was straight out of the ground. There was suddenly a large stained, grey flagstone missing, and a gaping hole opening up before them.

They went down one flight of stairs in darkness. A small landing, and then the stairs headed off to the left. At the foot of these stairs, a dank, narrow, stone walled corridor ran into the earth. But there was a room on the right. Another small landing at the entrance and another small flight of stairs.

The underling herded them down into the room. And then turned and left.

It was long and narrow. Dark. A glittering bar with a huge black mask suspended over it took up the very far wall.

Ornate chairs and small black lacquered tables were pushed back against the walls on either side of the long room.

The trophies of the Echelon hung on the walls above them.

Huge. There were three on each side. And each contained a set of female Moethiican wings. Bloody and torn.

In the centre of the room a circle of Echelon with their black cloaked backs to them, blocked the view of the current '*entertainment.*'

They had a woman in there now. The sound of her in the Echelon silence, unmistakable. C7 swallowed visibly and tried desperately to think of anything but the woman. He thought of their helmets.

Like a living part of them, it was said they became. The rush of power they gave off when the needle passed through the brain barrier was supposed to be addictive.

“Would you like to try one for yourself?” C7 drew in his breath sharply as the sea of Echelon parted and the Upper walked through to stand close to him.

Arc.

He needed no insignia to identify him. But he bore it anyway. It was larger, more elaborate, more imposing, than any other Echelon here. Like his presence. Which identified him beyond question.

Dark Mage of the Old Ones. Echelon Leader of Moethiica.

He moved up close in front of them as the silent, unseen guards behind them, pressed in close from the rear.

C7 gasped. He looked down at his stomach, not yet believing. The tip of the Echelon blade protruded only slightly out.

The guard behind him kicked him off of it, and he fell dead, face first to the floor.

L4 began to struggle wildly, only then realizing they had injected him with something. He could move his upper body only slightly. He could not move his legs at all.

Arc stepped in even closer. He ran his black gloved hand ran down the still unconscious form of Rise.

He spun around to face the now attentive Echelon.

“Brothers, shall we see what our generous friends have brought us?”

There were soft murmurs of agreement.

L4 crashed to the ground as they withdrew their support from his weight. They cuffed his wrists and left him there to lay where he had fallen.

Two of the bastards had Rise upright now, arms stretched out hard between them. Another was holding something vile under her nose. Undoing the tranq and the sedative.

L4 tried to move, but he was paralyzed and could do nothing.

Rise coughed and came to, blinking rapidly.

Her vision was blurry at first and it hurt to look straight forward. She shook her head to clear it and the glint of light on glass caught her vision.

She looked up and beheld the bloodied wings in the closest trophy case. She looked about her and beheld Echelon all around her.

Rise screamed, struggling madly.

And the Echelon simply stood regarding her. Unmoving. Silent.

Arc had been standing off to the side but he stepped in close to her now, his black visored face the only thing in her vision.

And even Rise knew who he was. And she screamed even louder.

"Oh please don't waste your screams now my dear. There will be plenty of time for screaming later."

He had a small, jewel handled knife in his hand.

He used it to cut every last inch of clothing from her. No rush. He was slow and deliberate.

He stepped back and took her in, up and down, just as slowly.

"Oh my dear you are exquisite."

And then he stepped back and revealed her to the others.

"Behold my Brothers. What a delightful gift has been brought to us."

The silent Echelon all took one step forward.

Rise desperately tried to throw her wings open. Break through the bonds that held them.

But L4 had bound them tight as law demanded. They were too strong and she was powerless.

You are never powerless. The voice was male, dry, amused. It was almost always amused. A mind-voice. She had heard it since she was very young. Not with any great frequency. Just here and then. Random.

And every time she had heard it she had ignored it and schooled her mind to silence. Mind-voices here would have you killed very, very quickly.

The Echelon, Arc, tilted his black visored head at her. Curiosity emanated from him.

Rise swallowed hard with fear. Pray to all the gods he hadn't heard it.

He moved in close to her, so close her naked breasts pressed in hard against the raised red insignia of his jacket. With a gloved hand he gripped her chin hard and painfully.

"There is something very different about you my dear, isn't there?"

Rise shook her head trying to free it from his grip. She pushed back, trying desperately to get her body away from him.

But they had her held fast and she cried out in frustration, her eyes furious and glaring at him.

"Shhhh." Still holding her chin, he traced the other gloved hand down her face. "Shhhh."

Down her throat. Her breast. Down the side of her body. Over her hip. He stopped, his gloved hand cupped between her legs, barely touching her.

Horror, repulsion and terror pulsed through Rise and she braced for the worst.

He released her.

He stood back and gestured to the other Echelon.

They parted on cue and revealed the cleared space behind them.

There were more Echelon behind them. At the back of the room and to the sides of them.

And in the centre of them was a winged female, like Rise.

Her wings were unbound. But they were broken. They moved jaggedly along the floor with each small thrust of her body, leaving small dots of red blood in their wake.

Her arms were held tight back and behind her. There was a helmet-less Echelon between her legs. His gloved hands held her legs apart. And he was licking her.

Rise felt sick, and spun her head away from it. But at a gesture from Arc, one of the guards behind her grabbed her head roughly in his hands, forcing it back again.

"Do you see what I take from her?" Arc looked from the winged on the floor back to Rise. His voice was cold, clinical, detached. Like he was giving a lecture.

"Not the physical," the Echelon continued. "The physical is but a Veil. I pierce the physical Veil for the gems underneath it. And they are much more interesting. Much more powerful. Much more fun to play with."

"Pierce her," he threw over his shoulder to the Echelon on the floor. And his gaze returned to Rise.

She closed her eyes. She would not watch this. Would not be a party to it.

"Do you see it?" His voice was a whisper, wrapping itself around her, compelling her eyes open and to the scene on the floor, in spite of herself.

The winged woman's eyes flickered open. Violet and stunning like Rise's own.

And Rise recognized her.

Soar. The rebel. The legend. The only winged in current times to have escaped them. She was believed to be in hiding in the desert, waiting for a sign. She believed she was the one. The one who would embody the Siren of the 5th, open the Portal, and raise the might of the Original Makers against the Old Ones. Against the Echelon. Against all like this and everything they stood for.

Rise looked at Arc and back to Soar in horror.

The pace between her legs quickened. Soar moaned.

White mist danced on her forehead. Arc's outstretched arm was towards her, palm up. He drew his long gloved fingers, upward, up-right and together. The mist began to gather and form itself. And Rise saw it spinning. The size of a tiny egg. White gold. Glittering. Like a diamond.

He was drawing it out of her, from deep within her. From her mind's eye.

Essence. Power. Magic.

It moved up out of Soar and towards him.

Without a second thought, Rise willed the mind-diamond back to Soar with everything she had.

And the mind-diamond hesitated, wavering.

Arc merely twisted his fingers ever so slightly, and Rise felt his gloating satisfaction as the diamond flew toward him.

"No!" she cried, but the diamond tumbled over and over, unwavering on its path to meet him.

"No!" cried Rise again. This time more frantically. Still it sped towards him.

"To me!" she flung at it, just before it reached him. And the power of her voice shook the room.

The mind-diamond changed its course.

And slammed itself into her.

It felt like white fire cutting into her. Her entire head blazed with it.

Gods. What have I done? Only then did she begin to panic. Desperately she willed the thing back to Soar.

But it was having none of it. She felt it wash over her. Connect itself tight to her own essence, her own power, her own magic.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to Soar. But Soar smiled a small, weary smile at her. And Rise swore she saw another much dimmer light settle back into the woman's head.

And then wave after wave of undulating power broke over her. Sweat formed on her brow. She blacked out momentarily.

She came to with Arc's fingers around her throat. "Well you are just full of surprises aren't you, you little winged whore."

"Bring me the Nephliim Blade!" he yelled, without turning from her.

A Nephliim Blade? Here? Then she felt him push into the base of her skull like the Pann and she forgot all about the Blade.

Because it was nothing like the Pann at all. There was no gentleness and nothing pure. He tore into her mind, seeking, searching.

He began to pull at her essence and her power. He would void her. She would be void to her Maker, void to the Creator. He would cut her threads to them and make her nothingness, but eternal and aware with it.

And he would feed his own power with hers. All of them here would have a taste of it. A taste of her. She would feed the monsters.

No.

She did not say it out loud this time. The walls of the room did not shake with the power of it. But her own walls did.

The Echelon tightened his grip on her throat until she saw stars.

And then the Nephliim Blade was brought to the room.

Amongst the Nephliim only a Prince could wield it.

And for the Portal to open a Veil Siren must be holding it.

A riddle. One that had never been tested truly. Because there had never been a Veil Siren at a Portal Opening with a Nephliim Blade.

And there had never been a successfully opened Veil Portal.

They had it wrapped carefully. Even amongst the Echelon only Arc did not seem afraid of it. But even he loosened the wrappings from the blade itself carefully. And took care to keep the handle well covered.

He held it before her now and the power from it shuddered through her.

And then he placed it flat against her bare flesh and the world turned golden.

That was all she could see. The gold and the light.

And the golden light illuminated the part of her the Echelon was searching for. Not to him, but to her.

And she knew instinctively that if he saw that part of her, she was done for.

The Echelon froze, sensing it. And the part of him that roamed inside her sped to it.

Rise panicked, not knowing what to do or how to block him.

But suddenly there was warm red rock. Sunlight. A cavern. Rise sat on the sandy banks of its shore, looked at the blue sapphire water before her, and waited.

She was safe here. Here was protected. Here was a haven.

The Echelon howled with fury. He stepped back from her and raised the Blade in both hands.

From her spot on the sandy shore, Rise looked calmly up at the Echelon and waited for him to plunge the Blade into her.

So be it. Here it would end. The others would not have what they wanted. But neither would these monsters.

And the Rise who sat on the shore thought it was ironic, that of all Blades, it should be this one that was used to kill her.

For she recognized it now. And a small smile played across her lips at its memory.

In the still ranks of Echelon behind the Upper with the Blade there was suddenly movement.

Arc whirled.

One of the Echelon was forward. Too far forward. He had broken ranks. This was unheard of.

"Do you have a problem, Brother?" Arc was now focused entirely on the Echelon who continued to move slowly towards him.

"Yeah. Yeah I think I do." It was a strange accent. He took another step closer to Arc. One step further away from his ranks.

As he did so, Rise leaned back into the ones holding her and kicked out straight and hard with her right leg, foot flexed.

The Echelon did not drop the Blade as she'd intended. But his head whirled towards her. It was enough. The Echelon who had broken ranks drew the gun concealed under his cloak and fired point blank into him.

He had other things beneath that cloak. Gas smoked the room. And Rise heard the sound of other small canisters popped and landing on the hard stone floor.

Behind her L4 staggered to his feet, hurling himself into the one remaining guard at her back and freeing her. The guard turned on him and lunged for her.

"Run!" L4 screamed at her before the gun shot took him. "Run!"

Rise did so.

FIVE

Up the stairs and into the night.

There was no time to think. She could see shadows moving across the courtyard towards her.

Rise sprinted for the building opposite.

She burst through an open doorway and skidded to a halt. The main passageway stretched before her.

Another passageway was just a little way ahead up on the right. She bolted to it and through.

There were explosions coming continually from underneath the ground now.

A huge echoing one shook the ground violently and sent plaster crumbling around her.

She shielded her hands over her head and ran the length of the smaller corridor.

She felt a rush of fresh air on her face and exalted.

Dead end.

The small, private courtyard she emerged into was old and cracked. Broken pillars were wrapped with creeping vines. Lush, green plants overran their pots. Huge statues lined the walls towering above her

Huge statues of Echelon.

Rise shuddered and halted, paralyzed with fear.

Statues. They're only statues, she said to herself, breathing deep.

But she was not alone in here.

She could feel it.

And he was stillness. Complete and utter stillness. He did not even appear to be breathing.

And then he was on her. So fast. He slammed her hard into a pillar. His hands were tight around her throat. His black visored face was a hair's breadth from her. He raised it back as if to head-butt her.

"Freeze asshole." It was another Echelon. The red tracer beam from his gun hit the black visor of the helmet. And for just a second, Rise thought she saw the eyes behind it. Dilated, pupil-less and cruel.

"You have no idea what you are dealing with here," the Echelon holding her said smoothly.

"Oh I have a fairly good idea," the one with the gun replied. "Now back away from her, and keep your hands up or I'll blow your brains out. In 3, 2,"

The one holding her did as he was asked and took one small step away.

"Come here," the one with the gun held out his hand to her. She bit her lip and hesitated.

The Echelon who had slammed her pulled a gun of his own.

Too late. The other guard shot true. But the charge on the gun was weak. The Echelon fell but rose again with speed. An explosion shook them. A large chunk of pillar falling hard on the Echelon attacker's bowed head.

"Nice," the other male muttered. He looked upwards. "I owe you one. Possibly several," he added as Rise made a desperate bid to bolt past him. He grabbed her with ease and she felt something heavy settle around her shoulder. With surprise she realized it was his cloak.

He threw her now securely bundled form over his shoulder.

The jolt when it came was unexpected. It staggered him for an instant. And he looked around for the source. It felt like her. But it couldn't be her, could it?

It shot through him again and then the auto-protect on his helmet kicked in, and he made haste out of the courtyard through the barely visible opening on the left wall.

He had to hurry. He had a ship waiting for him.

SIX

"Steady on violet eyes." Violet eyes. There was someone else who had just said that to her.

She stilled for a second.

The Echelon took the opportunity to inject her with a tranq and re-shoulder her.

He checked his wrist comms at the same time he used his mouth to recap the shot. The tranq was fast acting and he took a few precious seconds to readjust himself under her newly dead weight.

The opening from the courtyard led deep into a maze of corridors, twisting and turning.

Boom! Another explosion rocked them. It hid the sound of approaching boots until the very last moment. At least three pairs of them. The comms remained stubbornly blank. The approaching boots became increasingly louder. He had no choice. He had to move.

He went left.

He went left again.

The boots were louder now.

His pace quickened.

The comms clicked.

His eyes flicked to it.

Ah, so close. The door he needed was a mere ten feet up on the right. But they were on him. He couldn't risk it. His comms showed a concealed hold to the left. It would do. It would have to do. He

tripped the override circuits as the first set of boots rounded the corner.

He slung Rise through, quick to follow and close down the circuit, tripping the door seemingly sealed shut from the outside once more.

Pressing his ear to the door he heard the boots move past. All but one pair. At a silent command, their owner had stayed behind, waiting.

And so he would wait too. It was now officially a waiting game.

He hoped the ship had got the memo and was also down with that.

At least he had power. He could charge the gun. Not his first choice of firepower. But it had served its purpose and remained undetectable to them to the last.

It hooked seamlessly into the wall currents. He left it charging within easy reach and eased himself down to the ground to check the asset. Those startling violet eyes were closed now. Lips softly parted. She hardly seemed to be breathing. Gently he lifted her wrist and checked her pulse. Slow with the tranq in effect but she was fine.

He lost himself for a second, with the sudden, uncanny thought that he knew her. That he had touched her like this before. It felt almost intimate. To hold her wrist like this. He felt oddly possessive of her. He felt...

What the fark was he thinking! He didn't know her. He shook his head and dropped her wrist. It was the cloaking meds again. It had to be.

Ever since he'd been running on empty he'd been losing it like this.

The pain jabbed in his head again and he felt the momentary disorientation. The worlds flashed before his eyes like shards of glass. Shades of this one. Shades of others. Too many others.

His cloaking implant came with an expiry date. It could be topped up, but that option had dried up some time ago. He was running on an empty tank and it was farking with him. But this is what they trained for. Like Ghaniia12. It was like Ghaniia12 all over again.

Three's a charm. But three, in this instance, had not been so charming.

His first two OffWorld Ops had been short and successful. He was the toast of the program. They had never had an agent do so well so early. He took to it like a duck to water. One of his Commander's joked he must have the blood of the Nephliim running through his veins. Cooper had laughed. He was a good height, broad shouldered, muscled, strong, but no towering seven foot giant of the cosmos.

"We're a literal lot here on earth" his Commander had replied, a far away look in his eyes. "We interpret everything through the physical. Big mystery, big actions, big ideas, big presence, big feet."

He had clasped him firmly on the shoulder. "Look past the physical Son. See through it. The real things happen behind it."

He left for Ghaniia12, six months later. Another classified Op to a place the majority of the good people on earth, did not even know existed. Hell, most of them wouldn't have believed him if he'd even been at liberty to tell them.

He would have been locked in a mental institution.

Maybe that would have been preferable to Ghaniia12.

It too should have been a short mission. This was still early days for Off-World-Black Ops. OBO. It was so off the grid Black didn't even begin to cut it. Noir Ops? Nah. Just didn't have the ring to it.

The ship to collect him had never come. For two years he had been forced to keep his cover on a supply of dirty, black market cloaking meds. The first lot almost killed him. The second, third and fourth lots weren't much better. But he built up an immunity to them.

The residents of Ghaniia12 were close enough to human forms that he could pass for one of them, barely. Still, he had to keep out of nice society and away from their security forces.

He worked the mines. Backbreaking work. Awful. Full of men like him, trying to hide. But a good place to make contacts and subtle enquiries.

He got back to earth on a string of promises. On a rebel ship under the alliance of Cortex. Cortex had been keen to make contact with the covert military operations on Earth for some time. If he could get them an Earth landing and in contact with his powers that be, they could get him home.

He did his best. Confident they would honor their promises. They honored none of them. Cortex and his rebels were forced to leave him at the Transitioning Station in the Webs. No landing granted.

He had been naive. He realized that now.

But at the end of the day it was one of Cortex's ships that had answered the call to take him home again.

Home.

Was it?

There were no heroes welcomes for OBO Agents. Few friends. No steady girl. No family. That he talked to anyway. They were ghosts. No-one knew they existed.

He'd seen things most people could not even imagine.

And he couldn't talk about it to anyone.

After Ghaniia¹² he threw himself back into his work as soon as they cleared him. Mission after mission after mission. World after world after world. And then this, Moethiica.

He looked down at Rise. Potential. Potential and then some. As soon as they'd been prepared to kill Soar, he'd known she was no longer a Potential. The Echelon and the Old Ones needed the Veil Siren alive before the Portal as much as anyone.

But with Soar all they'd wanted was what she carried. And until they'd released it from her he'd been unable to ascertain exactly what.

Mind-diamonds. The Echelon knew more about the mind-diamonds than anyone. How they were linked to the sensual energies. How to mine them from those who knew they had them.

Mining them from those who didn't know they had them was relatively easy. If only people knew, they might be tempted to guard them more carefully.

But a mind-diamond that big, that distinct. This was ancient knowledge. Secret, sacred and powerful.

Secret, sacred, powerful. Echelon house specials.

Like the Potentials.

They knew. The Old Ones knew. Earth knew. Before the Veil Siren was revealed would come the Potentials. And in the end, the Star would know, or the Star would choose? Details were a little vague and foggy on that one.

Well they would know soon enough, no matter whether it was a choice or a knowing. Because the Star had risen and was hurtling at a rather alarming rate towards them.

She was in this corner of the cosmos. Whichever of the Potentials it was, they were here, or on a world close to it.

No doubt there were other peeps on those close by worlds who thought exactly like Cooper did now.

But they were wrong.

Because she was here at his feet. Siren5. Priority One. Freaking eventuated.

He just knew it. On some level he just couldn't explain, she sang it to him.

He felt the pulse in her wrist again. Still slow. She was still heavily under.

The world lurched, the shards of all the worlds cut like jagged bits of glass before his eyes. The pain in his head was unbearable and he futilely pressed his hands to either side of his black visor.

His comms lit up. They couldn't wait any longer. He had to move now.

Fark, the scout was still out there. He could sense him. He was going to have to take him out with Rise on his shoulder.

Bang. He tripped the override and burst through behind the cover of a steady stream of fire. The scout was down before he knew what hit him.

But there were more boots coming in this direction now. The first shot came fast as he tripped the landing door to the private port.

Rise jolted and murmured but stayed under.

"Cooper-Pierce-R9! Move directly to the flyer. I'll cover you."

The Second Mate who'd issued the command delivered on his promise. And Cooper was immensely relieved that the firepower now being unleashed on his pursuers was modern weaponry at its finest.

He was even more immensely relieved when the door closed behind them, and the flyer lifted instantly and smoothly away.

SEVEN

The flight to the mother ship was short and sweet. Incandesca3. The current pride of Cortex's fleet. An old deep space prison hauler.

Cooper was impressed. The ship was massive.

They took the flight deck cleanly and exited the flyer at speed. Cooper Pierce was still running on adrenalin. Rise was still unconscious in his arms.

"Targets secure and on board," the Second Mate relayed into his wrist-comms and then moved to take Rise from Cooper.

Cooper shook his head. He had strict orders not to let this asset out of his sight once secured. "I got her."

"Cooper Pierce you're shot," the Second Mate pointed to his arm.

Fark. He hadn't even realized. Still, he didn't want to hand her over.

But then the pain in his head jabbed, searing again. Shards of worlds like jagged glass through his eyes. The Second Mate caught him underneath the arms as he stumbled awkwardly.

There were several pairs of hands there now to take the asset.

The blackness took him and the hand that still clutched her fell loose.

"Sorry," he mumbled. As they took her away.

"Get him to the Med-Bay," the Chief Medic ordered as she took Rise's pulse. "She's fine to go straight to her quarters. A light shield grip only please."

"A *light* shield grip? Is that wise Chief Medic?" The voice was whiney. And offensive.

"Perfectly wise Celcius, and also humane," the Chief Medic, CM Gemini, replied sharply. "A value your father holds quite dear," she muttered under her breath.

"But she's a potential danger," Celcius, son of Cortex, protested.

"She is the being your father has searched the cosmos for," CM Gemini reminded him. "She'll have a light shield grip on her until we ascertain her awareness of herself and her intention. It is more than enough Celcius." She glared at him and the guards who blocked her path.

"Now, I have a patient needing surgery. If you'll get out of my way please."

Celcius stared at her, making her wait. Then he gestured his guards aside, giving the Chief Medic, and loyal serving member of his father's ridiculous rebel alliance a mock bow.

"Bitch," he muttered under his breath. Just before she passed out of earshot. But not quite.

CM Gemini ignored it. She had been called worse, and louder, in her time.

Again she wondered how an apple could fall quite so far from the tree. Chief Medic Gemini had very little time for Celcius. They had all served his father loyally for years. But two more different men she could not imagine.

Still, he was the Commander in Chief on this ship. Cortex, declaring himself too ill to even make the flight. He was dying. They all knew it. CM Gemini pushed the thought from her mind.

"We'll take the service elevator," the Second Mate called back over his shoulder to her. He and another Aide had the stretcher with Rise.

"I'll be down to examine her as soon as I can," CM Gemini replied. The main elevator doors closed on her words. "Keep the pressure on that wound." She instructed her new Aide, Della.

She checked his pulse and nodded to herself satisfied.

"Shouldn't we take off his helmet?" Della asked, reaching for it with her other hand.

"No!" CM Gemini grabbed the woman's wrist sharply.

"This is an Echelon helmet. Connected straight through to his pineal. Not something you remove lightly or easily. He will need to calibrate from it when it comes off."

She studied it. "It certainly won't hurt his breathing. If anything it will aide it. For all their horror, in terms of keeping someone alive and breathing under all manner of circumstances, there's no equal."

Della shivered. "It's scary looking."

"It's meant to be," CM Gemini replied. The elevator doors slid open on the Med-Bay.

The main theatre bed was already prepped. Mach, another Aide, with military field experience, took over from Della in applying pressure to the wound once he was on the bed.

A Med-Bot scanned the length of him. CM Gemini read its output and drew in her breath sharply. "How on....? That can't be right."

"What is it?" Della was at her side in an instant.

"Prepare an interim Generic Cloak and an implant unit STAT. The bullet wound's simple. But we're going to need to replace that cloaking implant."

"Oh my godds." Della stood staring open mouthed at the screen. "How is he even.....?"

"STAT Aide!" CM Gemini cut her off and moved quickly to her patient's side. The Med-Bot hovered nearby ready to anesthetize.

The visored head turned CM Gemini's way. The body on the bed began to buck and struggle.

"Bot!" CM Gemini backed away and the MedBot was on it while Mach held him down.

She scrubbed in quickly while the anesthetic took hold. They would do the bullet wound first. It wouldn't take long. Standard procedure.

The cloaking implant though. And where and how they'd inserted it. She'd never seen anything like it. CM Gemini frowned at Cooper Pierce while she took his pulse. Boy, what have they done to you?

"Aide, is that implant ready?"

"Just one second," Della drew out the words. "Ok. Ready now."

"Give it to the Bot. Bot configure to patient scan."

She looked at both Aides. "Alright, scrub in and then let's get started people. We're going to be here for a while."

EIGHT

They were there for a while.

It was many hours later when an exhausted Chief Medic Gemini checked on Rise.

She was still out cold which was odd, even for such a heavy tranq. "Has she come to at all?" CM Gemini asked the ship's guard watching over her.

"No," the guard shook his head. "And one of us has been here the whole time."

"She's a little warm but not too bad. Pulse is fine." She stood. "She'll keep until I've had some sleep. May as well get some of your own. I'll instruct whoever's on night watch to keep an eye on her via the flight deck monitor. If she's not woken by now, like as not she'll sleep through to morning."

The security guard nodded gratefully at her. "Thanks Chief Medic. It's been a busy couple of days."

CM Gemini gave him a small, exhausted smile. That was an understatement. Lifting the pair of them off of Moethiica had been no easy task. They were all exhausted to the point of ridiculousness. They'd probably had six hours of sleep between the entire crew in the last forty eight hours.

CM Gemini detoured through the flight deck on the way to her quarters. The ship was on auto-flight. The First Mate had had some much needed sleep and was taking second watch.

"Was there no heavy pursuit from Moethiica?" she asked him. She was often not aware of such things when she was operating.

"Token., he grunted in reply. "We took some small damage to the rear left of the Hold. But Cortex is right. She's a beauty." He patted the deck console before him appreciatively.

"Were you able to repair it?" She shivered. The ship was a beauty. And the fact that they'd been able to penetrate the Moethiican webs with it and remain completely cloaked and shielded, no small feat. She liked its capabilities. She just didn't like its history. Prison haulers were evil beasts.

"We can't get down there," the First Mate replied. "Celcius's got the Hold completely sealed off. Only he's got the codes. He took a look at the damage assessment and said not to worry about it," the First Mate shrugged. "Can't argue with the Commander."

He patted the console again. "She'll hold until Vade5."

"Hmmm." Ridiculous on this particular flight they should even think about stopping on Vade5. But Celcius was adamant. Other business, equally as important, was all he'd say.

CM Gemini yawned. Gave the First Mate strict instructions to wake her at the first sign of movement from either of their two new passengers.

She took herself to bed and fell instantly asleep.

Three hours later and the ship was quiet and still. The First Mate rechecked the monitor. The winged Moethiican female was still asleep. In-fact she didn't even looked like she'd moved since he'd first looked at her.

The Earth Agent was still out and still in that damn helmet. They all had strict instructions not to remove it. Not to even touch it. Under any circumstances.

"Not that there's anybody who'd want to touch a damn Echelon helmet," the First Mate muttered to himself and turned away from

the monitor to busy himself with some minor repairs on a malfunctioning comms unit.



It was the heat that woke her. She was so warm. Blinking her eyes she kicked off her blanket. Blanket? Where had she gotten one of those from?

Rise sat up and looked slowly around the room. Her head was ridiculously groggy. Even the smallest movement seemed hard.

She knew that heavy feeling. They had a shield grip on her. She began to panic. And her heart began to pound.

She'd had a heavy one on her once when she was younger. Hideous things.

Technology designed to adapt itself to your essence and link to your very core. Transparent, virtually invisible, the weight of a shield grip is like mountains bearing down on you. Physically, emotionally and mentally it weighs you down and drains you.

They make the smallest movement hard. And painful. And escape impossible. This was a light one. But even with a light one, the same rules applied.

Escape.

Memories of recent events came flooding back in, vague and disordered.

She drew her knees up and hugged her arms around them. The heavy fabric encasing her was course against her arms.

There was a shuttered window beside her. She reached out cautiously and tested the mechanism. Locked but un-lockable.

Coming on to her knees in front of it, she unlocked it quietly and eased it up a fraction.

It was dark outside. Strange lights. She waited, heart pounding and counted to ten. Nothing. There mustn't be anyone out there. She pushed the rest of the shutter up.

Rise's mouth dropped open. "Oh my godds." It came out almost as a whisper.

Desperately she blinked her eyes and shook her head. She shut her eyes tightly for thirty seconds and reopened them. Slowly. But it was still there. No mirage. No illusion.

Her heart was beating so loud and so fast she thought it would burst out of her. She put both hands on the thick glass pane and looked out at the scene before her in wonder.

Stars and moons and nebula and meteors and rocks, and the odd bit of space junk, moved gracefully before her in an exquisite dance on the background of an ink black sky.

Space. She was in space.

As high as she flew on Junar Run was as far as she'd ever been from the surface of Moethiica.

She was in space. How long had she coveted this? Rise smiled.

She was so distracted by what was before her, she didn't feel the pain.

It was the light flashing in the reflection that caught her eye. Because it was coming from inside the room, right behind her.

There was heat too. Right on her back. Pain. Twisting and turning she scrambled from the bed to the small adjoining bathroom.

Rising up out of her cloak, the upper tips of her tightly bound wings were glowing. And the visual on the pain knocked everything sharply into focus. They were burning. Her wings were burning. And she had to get this cloak off of her.

She pulled at it and screamed in agony as her melted wings came with it.

Rise flung herself into the shower, and blasted herself under a torrent of cold water.

It did nothing. If anything it felt like the water was making her wings burn hotter. When she looked in the mirror there were flames shooting up about her.

She hit the cabin door. Locked. She pounded, kicked and screamed for help while her wings burned. Over and over again.

The small view hatch opened.

A pair of eyes stared in at her.

"Open the door! Godds! Help me! Please help me!" Rise screamed.

But the owner of the eyes did nothing. Just watched her. Desperately Rise tried to reach her hand through the hatchway.

The owner of the eyes stepped back. Smirked at her. It caught her hand. Painfully.

Rise screamed again and then she heard a door explode open. A man's voice yelled, "Stand back!"

The hand released her. A male voice answered. "I was trying to comfort her. All the doors are stuck."

He moved to the side out of her vision. Another face appeared in his place, his eyes growing wide and a little panicked at the site of her. "Get away from the door. I'm going to blast it."

Rise stumbled back into the bathroom doorway. She was in so much pain now it was hard to stay conscious.

A goodly portion of the door exploded in the blast. There were more voices and footsteps out there now. Someone threw a fire blanket over her.

Two of them lifted her from the room.

Her head lolled. The pain was too much. Rise was getting mighty sick of people injecting her with all types of shiz, but she would have welcomed any form of oblivion now.

It came, but her own body supplied it. She was safe. It let itself shut down completely. The body is clever beyond all reason and merciful like that at times.

NINE

In an ancient tunnel on Moethiica, two beings passed each other silently. The stones under their heavy boots were well worn over many thousands of years.

The roof of the tunnel curved gently over them. Above that roof, above the many layers of hard packed earth it rested under, snaked the inner sanctum of Moethiica's power hub.

The silver enclosed tunnels and corridors zigzagged and curved and connected the various levels in a maze like formation. One had to know exactly where they were going to get there successfully.

That above however, was all for show.

It was beneath the surface, in these ancient tunnels that those with real power walked. And where real decisions were made.

One of these beings wore the uniform of a Moethiican Echelon. The other did not, but he was also disguised. The mask that covered his face was more ancient than these walls and used only for meetings such as this and for ceremony.

He breathed in the power of it as he walked. And it was even more intoxicating and addictive than the ceremonies themselves.

The two beings passed each other.

They did not stop.

Only one of them spoke.

And he spoke in a tongue that was as rare as those who had access to these corridors of power. Who even knew they existed.

It was a very Old Tongue.

A magical tongue. Able to bind and render.

But it was not used for magic here. It was used simply to convey and disguise a message.

It was a message many had waited for and would set a chain of pre-planned actions in motion.

"The Siren of the 5th has awoken."

There was no acknowledgement.

But the Echelon felt the power contained in the mask lash out at him as he passed it.

A feeling of nausea and revulsion washed over him as it touched him. Fear prickled his skin.

It knew. Somehow it knew she had eluded and escaped them. But the man behind the mask did not need to know that.

He winced slightly, still in pain from the spy's gun wound. He was lucky to be alive at all. But the man behind the mask did most certainly not need to know about any of those events either.

A wild night gone awry. They had explained away the entertainment room explosions.

He closed his mind on those thoughts and pushed his way through the fear. He sent the power behind the mask images of what his men had done to the bitch winged rebel, Soar.

The power behind the mask was pleased with that. It responded with a heady rush of power that was intoxicating.

The power behind the mask was hungry and eager for the coming war.

It was imperative that when the Veil opened, it should be them in possession and control of the Siren.

He would leave on the morrow.

But first, there was other business to attend to. The rebel, winged whore was still a little bit alive. Not enough to do much but enough to feel everything he had planned to do to her. He smiled to

himself. He must stop thinking of her as winged. Because those had long been torn from her.

She would suffer for passing the mind-diamond to the Siren. And she would plead for her death before he gave it to her.

TEN

When Cooper Pierce came to he could feel the scars. The old ones. And the fresh new ones.

It hurt to move. But he was conscious, he was breathing. It was a vast improvement.

“I need this helmet off.”

Chief Medic Gemini had looked at him doubtfully. “Are you sure you’re up to calibrating? It will take a lot out of you.”

He shook his head. “I don’t need to calibrate straight away. So long as I do it within the next seventy two hours I’ll be fine. But they are tracking me. I can feel them. I need it off Chief Medic. Now.”

The eyeless visor had fixed her with a stare. If that was possible. It was creepy. You sensed the face as clearly as if you were seeing it. But it was amplified. Every nuance of the face amplified in emotionless blankness.

CM Gemini shook herself. They were designed like that. It was meant to.

She looked away, letting the Bot watch over patient and process. It seemed a private thing to remove something so intimately attached to you.

She heard a hiss as the final part of the mechanism released. And then a grunt as he removed the pineal needle.

“No. I’ll keep it with me.” CM Gemini turned as the Bot beeped and moved back. It must have reached for the helmet.

She had dealt with a similar type of helmet used on another Old Ones world. Even without it on he would still have its energy running through him for a time. And he would be possessive of it.

It would be better for all of them when he had calibrated and the thing was well and truly off. Or as off as something like that could be. He was like to be a tad aggressive until then. They had best tread carefully.

As for the helmet, it was a CyTech living thing. She did her best not to look at it.

But she could not miss the blood on the pineal needle as he retracted it into the helmet before settling it beside him.

CM Gemini shuddered. She would not look at the helmet. She would look at Earth Agent Cooper Pierce instead.

Because he was a vision.

Chiseled face. Square jaw. Strong brow. Close cropped, dark, sandy blonde hair. Masculine. Military. He looked every inch a soldier. A drop dead gorgeous soldier though, to be sure.

CM Gemini stood gazing at him too long for just the tiniest of seconds.

And then those penetrating eyes shot up at her, alert and ready for action.

And food. "Any chance of a meal CM? I'm pretty hungry."

"You'll be sick this soon coming out from being under," she cautioned him.

She was rewarded with a smile. "I've been under and come out the other end ravenous many times CM. Never been sick. Not gonna happen now."

"Ok." She turned to Mach.

"I got it," he replied without being asked, leaving Cooper to the administrations of the Bot and CM Gemini.

"When can I get up?" He asked her when they were done with their scanning and testing.

"When I say so," she responded drily.

She had explained already what had happened to his cloaking implant and how they'd fixed it.

He got how serious it was. But he was like many soldiers she treated. Once something was fixed, that was the end of it. He was not going to spend a whole lot of time thinking about it and fussing over it.

It was an admirable sentiment, but in the case of most of them, and especially the impatient one before her, could have done with some tempering.

"Rest," she had commanded him as she left him. "You'll not leave that bed until I say so."

"Aye, aye, Chief." She had been rewarded with another smile.

Jackdaw was hovering outside. He and Cooper had a history and a friendship, that much she knew and no further.

"Can I see him?" Jackdaw asked. He was a nuggety fellow with a wizened face and farseeing, sombre eyes. He was an exceptional pilot, a recruiter, a jack of all trades, a loyal soldier of the rebellion.

More Cortex's son than Celcius, CM Gemini thought to herself. And not for the first time. It was a thought echoed by many of them.

It had been a shock to all of them when they boarded the ship and found Celcius there.

Not only there but in command. She wondered how Jackdaw was taking it so well and smiled at him.

"Yes. But only for a few minutes. And absolutely no mention of the girl."

"I promise," Jackdaw nodded.

"Alright. A few minutes," CM Gemini reminded him and then went on her way.

"Cooper," Jackdaw grasped his hand. "Friend, it's good to see you."

"And you, Jackdaw." He raised his eyebrows. "Not the way I would have expected though."

"Happens to the best of us," Jackdaw smiled. "You'll be up and about in no time." He settled back in a chair close to the bed and folded his arms. "From what I can gather you're a bit of a miracle man. Gemini has no idea how you managed to keep cloaking yourself on Moethiica of all places."

"Practice?" Cooper shrugged. "I've had to do it before."

"Yeah, but Moethiica?" Jackdaw said incredulously. "Amongst the Echelon? That's got to be the toughest gig in the Cosmos."

Cooper grunted. "It wasn't easy, especially towards the end."

Jackdaw shook his head again. "But you did it. You still did it. I can't believe you... How did you find her?" He leaned forward intently.

Cooper grimaced. "I'd infiltrated but only as a lower. Towards the end I knew one of the Uppers was on to me. He confronted me one night. Alone. His mistake."

He paused and took a sip of water, the effort to talk obviously wearing on him.

"I took his Helmet. His uniform. His place amongst them. I kept my mouth shut. Right place, right time. They brought her into an Upper Meet and I was there."

Jackdaw whistled and looked at him appraisingly, knowing that this version of events was a greatly simplified version of the actual events that had actually transpired. But as much as anyone was like to be getting. Typical Cooper. He didn't press him further, simply

commenting. "You are one lucky son-of-a-bitch. Someone up there likes you."

Cooper smiled grimly. "You don't know the last of it." Confirming his suspicions.

"And the Blade?" Jackdaw asked him.

Cooper shook his head. "Did my best. Couldn't get it."

"A shame," Jackdaw mused. "But at the end of the day, she's the most important part." He smiled at Cooper. "And they'll have to bring it with them to Earth now anyway."

Cooper grunted. He looked suddenly grey and tired and Jackdaw reached out a strong hand to lay on his arm.

"You're exhausted. I'll leave you to rest." Jackdaw rose to leave but turned back suddenly to him.

"It's good to see you friend. Now rest up. It's a while before we get to Vade5."

"Why are we stopping on Vade5?" Cooper asked curiously and suddenly very much more awake.

"Picking up some essential cargo," Jackdaw replied, rolling his eyes. He raised his hands in the air when Cooper looked mutinous. "Out of my hands friend. It's Celcius calling the shots here now. Rest," he added pointedly.

He was almost out of the door when Cooper asked, "How is she?"

Jackdaw cursed silently before he turned back to him.

Cooper pounced on the pause.

"How is she, Jackdaw?" he repeated, a little bit more forcefully.

"She's fine, friend. She had a bit of a rough patch first night on board but she's going to be fine," Jackdaw said brightly. He turned quickly in the direction of the door.

Cooper's voice grew quiet. "Jackdaw. What's going on? Talk to me."

"Nothing's going on, Cooper Pierce. And you need to rest. Gemini said I was only allowed a few minutes. I'll come see you again tomorrow."

"Jackdaw!" Cooper called angrily.

But he was gone and it was the Chief Medic who poked her head around the door. "Everything all right?"

"Fine," Cooper replied steadily. "Everything's fine." One cheek muscle twitched just a little as he said it.

"Alright," she replied a little hesitantly, not sure whether to believe him or not. "Well, rest Cooper Pierce. And lots of it."

"Yes Chief Medic."

She pursed her lips and looked like she was going to say something else, but then just rolled her eyes and disappeared out the door. It had been a very unconvincing 'Yes Chief Medic.' But she knew his kind. There was little point in arguing with him. And she had a remote comms consult to get to re Rise.

Adrenalin is a wonderful thing. And the adrenalin of knowing something was seriously fucking wrong was coursing through Cooper's veins.

It would not be the first time he'd left a Med-Bay bed early and against a Chief Medic's wishes.

He pulled the IV from his arm with practiced efficiency.

He wondered where they had his weapon. It wasn't much but he would rather be with it than without it. He'd back himself against anyone and three of their closest friends hand to hand any day.

But weapons were always handy when everyone else was carrying them.

He eased himself from the bed and made his way cautiously out the door.

The ship appeared to be standard Federation design.

Cooper wondered idly how they'd gotten their hands on it, and was thankful that they had.

The Federation were not much into design innovation or deviating from the plan in the layout of their ships. And Cooper was more than familiar with said layout.

He had been in room three. There would be only two other Med-Bays like it on this ship. He would check these before he headed for the quarters.

He could hear CM Gemini's voice in the second room. It sounded like she was consulting with someone via remote comms.

The first room then.

An Aide turned suddenly into the corridor and Cooper concealed himself quickly in a small supply and gurney alcove.

The Aide was in and out of the first room quickly.

She did not look happy.

The golden yellow glow of a Stasis Chamber glowed as she shut the door quietly.

The Aide knocked quietly on the door to the second room, and entered at CM Gemini's bidding.

Cooper moved quickly across the corridor and into the first room containing the Stasis Chamber.

He shut the door quickly and quietly behind him.

He moved in close and looked down into the chamber.

He clenched his fists, taking a well schooled deep breath and exhaling deeply.

"Who did this to her?" He got it out low and a rumble, almost like a growl, between clenched teeth.

He had heard someone enter the room behind him.

"Who did this to her? Don't bullshit me." He repeated.

"We believe it was the Echelon Cloak," Mach, the Aide, replied cautiously. And not convincingly.

"What else?"

Mach hesitated and then squared himself. He was going to see the footage anyway.

"Her room was locked on the outside. She couldn't get out. Celcius was there. But he didn't open the door. Said he couldn't. They blasted it open eventually. But when they ran the data it was his over-ride code that had locked the doors and taken out the cameras."

"He watched her burning." Cooper said it briskly, business like.

"Yes."

Cooper nodded. "Where do I find him?"

"His quarters? The bridge?" Mach shrugged. "I don't know. Cooper Pierce, he's Cortex's son and Commander in Chief of this ship. And you should be back in your bed. You can't do anything to him. We just have to watch over her."

"Thank you." Cooper looked up at him from Rise. "Where is my gun?"

"I don't know. Cooper Pierce, you can't. He's his son."

"Thank you," Cooper replied. "I'm well aware of who his father is. I know him well. Stay with her. I don't want her left alone again."

The way he said it was cool, calm, matter of fact. The look on his face was thunderous.

"Oh, fuck," Mach cursed as Cooper stormed past him.

Shit was about to go well and truly down.

ELEVEN

Cooper found him on the bridge.

Cooper was not at his best.

But it's hard to be at your best when you should still be in your Med-Bay bed and have no business being up and about and in people's faces.

It gave Celcius false confidence.

He stayed close to the Third Mate. He'd stayed close to the crew since the 'incident.' Mainly because it prevented them from talking about him. Now it was more about safety in proximity and numbers.

Cooper Pierce was sans helmet and sans uniform. And when all was said and done he'd been an imposter in the helmet and uniform anyway.

But you don't get to imposter a Moethiican Echelon, without being a little bit all sorts of dangerous and scary on your own. Sans uniform, sans helmet, sans anything.

But substance is as substance does and people with little of it, too often judge the world in their own likeness.

Celcius judged Cooper poorly. And not only that, he smirked.

The hit was guaranteed. The smirk simply made it land harder and truer.

The bridge stood in conscious, stunned silence.

Celcius lay in unconscious, stunned silence, on the ground.

There had been no conversation before the exceptional right hook.

There was no conversation now.

Cooper simply left the bridge and returned to Rise's side.

When neither the Chief Medic nor the Aides could persuade him back to bed, they bought him food and clothes. It took some doing, but the CM Gemini made him have a shower before he put on the clothes. He did so only after one of the Aides brought him his helmet. The CM had put it in a Med-Box.

He opened it, satisfied himself that all was in order and set it on the floor underneath his chair. Because the chair beside Rise was his chair now. He took the shower in the small bathroom off her room. It was barely two minutes. He left the door open.

There is a contact-port on modern stasis chambers that lets you rest your hand over the hand of the chamber's occupant. You're not touching but there are senses. You can feel something. And on waking, many occupants say they were aware of the contact and found it soothing.

Cooper was less concerned with this than he was with being instantly aware of any change in her condition.

But Chief Medic Gemini had seen many times, the excellent affect this could have on healing. This could be good for the girl. So, propped up with pillows and covered with a blanket, she was happy to leave him there.

Jackdaw had secured a guard loyal to him to take turns with him standing watch at the door. CM Gemini came and went. But for the most part, he was left alone with Rise in relative peace and silence.

He was beyond exhausted and his chair was comfortable. He stayed stubbornly awake for many hours. But eventually, with no immediate drama presenting itself, he closed his eyes.

Gemini looked up from her monitors. "She knows he's there," she observed quietly. "Her activities changed dramatically since he's been sitting there. Had they known each other before this I wonder?"

"I asked him that earlier when he was awake, and no, not at all. He'd never even seen her before," Mach replied tiredly, stifling a yawn.

"You should get some sleep yourself," the Chief Medic observed mildly. "I'm here now and he'll wake up if she's in danger you know." "I've seen this sleep before on types like him. It's like a system going into sleep mode until it needs to do something."

"I know," Mach replied. He made no move to get up though. Staying lost in his own thoughts for a time.

"Why now?" he said suddenly, breaking the silence. "Why Celcius? I know he's his son, but how can he not see through him? How could Cortex put him in charge of this ship? I don't get it Chief Medic. I just don't get it."

"Blood ties make us do funny things," CM Gemini replied. "But there's more to this than that. Cortex believes in the Foretold. That those who accompany the Siren to her destination are vital to it succeeding in their favor."

"But they're so vague," Mach said doubtfully. "I don't know how you'd ever tell who was who. And I certainly don't know how you'd get Celcius out of it."

"It's different from that though," Gemini said thoughtfully.

"That's more what it's watered down to be. But the purists see it more about who's there at the time, rather than deciding in advance who that should be." She shrugged. "Maybe Cortex hopes that by placing him here, it will be the catalyst for change within Celcius."

"I know he sees the best in everyone, but sometimes I think his faith in some people is misguided," Mach replied glumly. "He's not regained consciousness?" he asked Gemini kindly, suddenly mindful of the Rebel Leader's own status.

He knew they were close. Had a long history.

"No," Gemini replied with a small choke in her voice.

"I'm sorry," Mach said.

He gestured at Rise. "Do you think she'll wake anytime soon?"

"No," the CM replied. "And nor would I want her to with burns like those." She checked the readouts again. "He's having a mighty affect on her though. She's coming along in leaps and bounds."

Mach half heartedly stifled another yawn. "You know Celcius will try to have him thrown into a cell when he's brave enough."

"I'm rather surprised he hasn't already," The CM replied, with a tinge of worry. "It's strange we've heard nothing from him. I don't like it. I'd almost prefer one of his usual tantrums to this strange silence."

"Maybe he's too frightened of Cooper Pierce," Mach replied hopefully.

"Hmmm," CM Gemini replied doubtfully. "I rather think it's more likely that he's plotting something."

She was about to add something when the bulk of Doon, the trusted ship's guard, brought about a partial eclipse of all light coming through the door.

Mach stood. "Ok, that is my cue to get some sleep. I'll be back after some shut eye."

CM Gemini smiled at him. "Get a good sleep. We'll be fine here."

"Will do," Mach replied. No matter how tired he was he would not have left CM Gemini alone with Cooper asleep and no Doon at the door.

"Any sign of the oxygen thief?" Doon asked him as he left.

"None," Mach replied and Doon grunted.

Prior to joining Cortex's Rebels, Doon had lost everyone he cared about to Old Ones' atrocities. The winged beauty in the stasis

chamber in the room he was guarding was the key to the end of their reign.

And the man sleeping beside her had knocked the little oxygen thief unconscious with a single blow.

He, like most of the ship's crew, worshipped Cortex, and despised Celcius.

The Siren of the 5th was the hope of the Cosmos. But Cooper Pierce was their new local hero.

TWELVE

Cooper grunted. His body jerked in that half sleep, half waking state, and he woke.

The Med-Bay was quiet and dark. The only lights coming from the stasis chamber. It threw an eerie red glow on the gleaming equipment and walls around him.

His hand still rested in the contact-portal. And it was hot. Almost unbearably so, but not quite. He had a strange compunction to leave it there regardless.

The thought struck him that a stasis chamber like this one usually glowed yellow. But his hand continued to glow red with the rest of it. He could see the bones of his hand now underneath his hot, red, skin.

Rise's hand was raised, pressed up to meet his own, against the roof of the contact-portal.

Her hand glowed like his and her wings burned, even in the chamber.

The pain in his hand was suddenly excruciating. Desperately he tried to pull it free but a vice like grip held it trapped there.

He looked at Rise.

And the jolt ripped through him as her eyes opened.

Just like when he'd first picked her up. But times 1000.

She turned to look at him and from her lips came a whisper for his ears only.

Except the whisper was a crescendo and he thought his head would burst with it.

He screamed and pulled back. And suddenly he was awake. Both hands cold and safe. Pressed tightly to his ears.

The Stasis Chamber glowed yellow. Rise was still, the Med-Bay was lit and humming gently with quiet, efficient machines.

"Bad dream?" Della's voice made him jump. When he turned she was leaning against one of the gleaming medical cabinets. Had she been watching him?

He shook his head, trying to clear it and stood abruptly, putting a little distance between himself and the chamber.

Chief Medic Gemini swept into the room. She through Della a glance as if surprised to see her there. The Aide moved quickly and quietly to the far side of the room.

"You're awake," Gemini said to Cooper brightly.

He ran his hand through his hair. A habit. A nervous gesture. It came away soaked with sweat. "Yeah. How long have I been out?"

"Two shift changes," CM Gemini replied briskly, moving swiftly to her readouts. "I told you you should still be in bed and not sitting up like this." She looked thoughtfully at Rise's readings. "Although I must say you're still having a remarkable affect on her healing."

She walked over to the chamber and her eyebrows shot up in surprise at the state of Rise. "More than remarkable."

Cooper leaned forward and peered cautiously into the chamber. "Fark," He said quietly. He had just looked at her. And no matter his dazed state, he would have put good money on the fact that she did not look like this before.

Rise's cheeks were pink and glowing. The skin on her body almost healed. Her ruined wings were re-sprouting. Not only lush, sleek, black adult plumes, but here and there, soft violet baby feathers.

"She's sprouting baby wings," he said quietly.

The Chief Medic nodded. "Complete regeneration where the damage was too much. On its own that's enough. But the speed of this." She shook her head. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Trouble coming." Doon was suddenly in the room. He took up a protective position at the foot of the stasis chamber. The impressive looking blaster he wore constantly across his chest was now pointed at the door.

Jackdaw came through it. "I'm sorry," he said to Cooper. Anguish on his face. "I'm sorry."

Cooper moved swiftly, but the room was already aswarm with guards, guns drawn.

And these were new guards. Celcius's own. No-one had even been aware they'd been on the ship.

The specially sealed prison hold, CM Gemini thought grimly.

She placed a protective hand over the stasis chamber. "If any of you fire anything in here and hit this chamber we're all done for." She said sharply. "This thing will blow and take us all with it."

Not entirely true. But worth a shot that none of them knew any better.

"Move!" The voice was whiney, imperious. Celcius marched up to stand before Doon. "Get away from that chamber you big lug."

The only movement which emanated from Doon was the play of the nasty things he would like to do to Celcius from his steady eyes.

One of the guards placed his gun against CM Gemini's head. Another pointed her gun straight at Rise.

"Easy," Jackdaw spoke quietly but authoritatively. "Let's not anyone do anything silly here. Celcius, you don't want to do this. Think about your father. Think about the movement. The alliance."

"Fuck the alliance. Fuck the movement. Fuck my idiot father." Celcius rolled his eyes and threw back his head and gave a short bark of laughter.

"Gods I've been wanting to say that out loud for the longest time."

CM Gemini's voice shook with anger. "You are mad, Celcius. Out of your mind. Your father will never forgive you for this."

"My father is dying you stupid bitch. And his ridiculous movement with him."

He looked her up and down. "It's quite lucky for you that Lok still believes in this superstitious nonsense and wants you all alive. If I had my say in things, you'd be enjoying a slightly different fate."

"Take them to the Prison Hold," he commanded sharply.

Jackdaw motioned Goon to stand down. Goon did so but not without a deep throated growl. He knew the name. They all knew the name. Lok was Cortex's sworn enemy. Selling out his own father to the enemy. The little oxygen thief had outdone himself.

The guard nearest to him took his gun.

There was a guard with a gun at all their heads now. The one pointed at Rise had not faltered. Cooper glared at her and she stared back at him impassively.

"The prison hold," Celcius repeated contemptuously, then turned on his heel and exited the room.

While his guards supervised the move of his father's fools to the hold, Celcius made his way hurriedly to the bridge.

Too long he had been dragged along in this pathetic game of Cortex's. Too long been derided and dismissed by the sad sycophants who followed every word the man said.

Pathetic.

And all for some ridiculous superstition about some winged whore and a Veil Portal.

Celcius didn't like superstitions. He had no interest in the unseen. He liked things he could touch and use and spend.

Money. Celcius very much liked money. And all the delicious things that accompanied it.

The bridge was quiet when he entered it. There were more of his own guards here. The old crew kept their heads bowed.

Yes, you'll all show a little respect now, thought Celcius smugly to himself as he sat down at his console.

It had all gone so beautifully. The false vid feed showing an empty prison hold and sealing the locks with the over-ride code had worked superbly. A pity about the whore's wings when he'd jammed all the doors and feeds inadvertently.

He hoped it wouldn't decrease her price.

Oh well, getting to watch her burn like that, had been a reward in itself.

And it was hardly his fault they'd been too stupid to take an Echelon cloak off her when she first arrived here.

He keyed the sequence into the comms unit.

"It's done," he said as soon as Lok answered.

"Excellent. Well done Celcius. You are cleared to land on Vade9. Proceed to this address" - he sent it - "and wait for me there." Lok instructed calmly.

"Affirmative." Celcius's whiney voice sounded self important and pleased. He shut down the comms link and looked out at the magnificent expanse of space before him. He would set himself up nicely on Vade9 with the riches awaiting him. Godds but he couldn't wait to be done with this shit.

Lok turned slowly and cautiously to the Moethiican Echelon resting deceptively casually on the counter edge behind him. "It is done," he said.

"It most certainly is," replied the Echelon and gestured for him to lead the way out of the room.

When they put the gun to his head Lok was not surprised.

Just glad that he had had the sense to get his children and wife out the minute these bastards had contacted him.

Or so he thought. And it was a comforting thought to die on.

The reality of what actually befell them he was better off not knowing.

THIRTEEN

The prison hull was vast.

A grated, narrow metal corridor ran its length, twenty five feet up, suspended by heavy steel cable from the ceiling above.

It was the same level as the cells which were no longer cells. Now they were used for storage and cargo of smaller items.

In the main floor area, the larger cargo crates, some of them fifteen feet tall, were pushed back against the walls. Some of them had been dragged into position to section off areas of the main floor of the hold by its most recent occupants.

This was the old rec space. The bolted down tables and chairs had been ripped up. In their place, old steel camper beds had been moved in and secured for the use of Celcius's guards.

Who would no doubt enjoy the contrast of the vacated private quarters of those now down here.

Cooper secured his Echelon helmet back on top of his uniform in the Med-Case. At least he still had these. They could prove invaluable studies on Earth. Plus he still need to calibrate and completely shut down the helmet. Smart of the Chief Medic to put these items in a Med-Case. Even smarter to seal it for quarantine while he'd been out. There was more to CM Gemini than met the eye. Cooper was sure of it.

Their beds were in the middle of the area. There was a sizable communal bathroom, a small Med-Bay and a galley area all down one end of the space.

The door to the Med-Bay was too small to maneuver the stasis chamber through. And it was already jam packed with a bed, a single chair and med equipment of its own.

But there was a partial wall to form a waiting room just outside of it. It would do. It would do nicely. Gemini and Della positioned the chamber in the alcove, Doon and Jackdaw helping them. Mach was not amongst them and Gemini prayed for his safety.

When they moved back to the main area where the camper beds were, Rise was hidden from sight, only the yellow glow of the stasis chamber showing.

That and the green Exit lights were the brightest lights in the hold.

There were other lights, high up in the roof above, and the occasional remaining working one along the cell corridors. But apart from that the hull was a gloomy, hulking darkness.

Della inspected the bathroom and galley. Both were basic but stocked with at least a few days supplies.

She told the others as much.

"How long will she be in there?" Jackdaw gestured back to Rise.

"The move doesn't seem to have upset her too much. I would say at least another two days, but at the speed she's recovering she could come out of it at any time now to be honest," Gemini replied.

"She had better be out of it before we need to change ships," Cooper muttered matter-of-factly, engrossed in a small device he had procured from his Echelon uniform.

CM Gemini looked at him sharply. "All deep spacers have stasis chambers and Lok's is no different. Surely Celcius doesn't mean to have her change chambers? Surely they will just swap for an empty one from Lok's?"

Cooper said nothing, just shrugged, poker faced.

Jackdaw looked at him shrewdly. "Know something we don't know, Cooper Pierce?"

"Why would I?" He regarded him steadily, giving away nothing.

Jackdaw looked at him questioningly, but didn't push it further.

"Now, time for food I think," the Chief Medic said.

Cooper rose. "I'm going to scout this place and give it the once over," he said, already looking around him. "Then we eat. Get some shut eye."

He moved off in the direction of the far end of the hold.

"I'll come with you." Doon trotted off after him.

Jackdaw smiled and placed a hand on CM's arm. "It's alright Doc. I'll go with him, make sure he doesn't over exert himself."

"Thank you Jackdaw," CM said gratefully and turned to Della. "Now come on, let's see about fixing something eat-worthy."

"#Stereotyping," Della muttered. Staring off after the men. "Will we be expected to cook for her too when she wakes up?" She gestured, almost dismissively at Rise.

CM Gemini found both her tone and her question off and looked at her sharply. "No-one expects you to cook anything for anyone Della," she replied. "I thought it might help you take your mind off things. I'm quite capable of preparing anything I find in there by myself. As are any of the men here. Perhaps you'd best take a lie down."

The Aide tried to protest but CM Gemini waived her away. Della was new on the last few trips and still didn't sit quite right with the Doc. She would have much preferred that Mach be down here with them. And right now, she wanted some distance from her.

While CM Gemini put a modest meal together in the galley, and Della sulked on her bed, the men worked in companionable and efficient silence.

Before they re-joined the women, Doon posed a question to Cooper. "What do your Earth bosses think of this Foretold business?"

It was a smart question. If Cooper was in his position he would do the same. Try to find out just how expendable or valuable he was likely to be, when crunch time came.

It deserved an honest answer.

"Some believe it. Some think it's a crock. 50/50 split I would imagine. Still, if it keeps us all alive buddy, I'll sing its validity from the rooftops."

Doon grunted. And they joined the others to eat.

FOURTEEN

Cooper and Jackdaw met in the mines on Ghannia12. They were both there seeking the same thing. Cover, questions, answers, a way out. Jackdaw had ended up there on a rebel mission gone horribly wrong. He joked that Cooper had ended up there for the same.

Cooper had laughed but responded that Earth were no rebels, just wanting to get to know their neighbors a little better.

Jackdaw had given him that look. Raising one eyebrow at him, but letting the subject lie.

Jackdaw had saved his ass many a time in the mines. He was that shortish, nuggety build that proves the better of many bigger opponents. He was good in a fight and knew how to end them quickly.

He also knew how not to start them in the first place.

Cooper was still young, but already wise beyond his years. There were not many young men - on Earth anyway - who had undergone the training he'd undergone, and seen the things he'd seen, done the things he'd done.

But he was still young enough to get into fights he could just have easily avoided. And still young enough to enjoy some of them. Just a little.

But then again, Cooper was no slouch in a fight either.

Jackdaw watched him for a time, on instinct took him under his wing, and taught him to pick his fights carefully.

He also secured a better line of cloaking meds.

They were still black market and still disgusting. But less likely to be fatal. And that was 100% improvement.

"Barbaric fucking method," Jackdaw had muttered about the implant, the last time Cooper had collapsed from a particularly nasty batch.

Too weak to inject himself with the replacement Jackdaw had found, he let the other man do it for him.

Slowly he withdrew the small syringe and quickly gave Cooper a medi-swab to hold against the needle's entry site.

There were all sorts of airborne delights in the mines of Ghania¹². And any sort of open wound could fester quickly.

Cooper laughed weakly. "It might be barbaric to you but this is high tech for us. Beyond the realms of what's even considered possible."

Jackdaw had just shaken his head. He had questioned Cooper once, and once only, on the true intentions of the good people of Earth behind him.

Cooper was steadfastly loyal to his world, his commanders and his people. It was the only sore point between them, and to Jackdaw, not a fight worth picking.

Besides, Jackdaw's next port of call was supposed to have been Earth's outer webs. It would be impossible for him to get there now without assistance. His leader, Cortex, had long sought a meeting with those Earth leaders who stood outside of the game. To contact them from the outer webs was the first step towards it.

Jackdaw put it to him. If Cortex came, could Cooper get him audience?

If they could get him back to the transitioning station in Earth's outer webs, Cooper could get them audience, he was sure of it.

He knew they had the capability to land Off-World ships on Earth. He was just not privy to the finer details of it.

But that was history now. The right messenger had been found. Cortex had come. They had got him to the transitioning station. But no landing and no audience had been granted.

Still, they held no grudges to Cooper.

And if he found himself in a pinch or a tight spot it was still these men he called.

And these men who came to him.

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Jackdaw spun her through the air and she giggled in delight. "You have to let her fly. She's got wings," he said to her mother, holding the child high above his head and fixing her with his best Jackdaw smile.

Her mother was not 100% convinced on this subject.

"But she's so little," she said.

"She's adorable," Jackdaw said, throwing her up in the air so her wings unfurled while her mother suppressed the urge to snatch her away from him. Catching her quite securely, Jackdaw turned to her mother with that serious take to his eyes that she seemed quite partial to.

"She'll be full grown before you know it. And she's just going to try it by herself at some stage anyway. Better she learns properly now while she's small." He paused. "You don't even have to come along. I know it would kill you to watch her. I'll take her."

The child regarded them both, feeling like she was going to explode with anticipation if they took more than five seconds to work this out. Explode with disappointment if her mother said no. And explode with excitement if she said yes. When she ruefully shook

her devastatingly beautiful head and said yes, all the child actually did was remember to breathe again.

She remembered her young self being deliriously happy and content with all around her at this time. And then Jackdaw took her on her first flying run and her world got even better. It was a baby run with soft corners, wide spaces and lots of room for error, but in her eyes it was the centre of the Cosmos. It was magnificent.

Jackdaw had been a fighter pilot when he was younger. He got it. He never said a word. He didn't have to. Just held her small hand tight, all the way home.

She adored Jackdaw. He didn't live with them. But he was a constant fixture in her early years. Strong and nuggety, he had the kind of handsome, weathered face and farseeing eyes that told everyone everything would be alright. Jackdaw was here. He had everything under control. She guessed that was one of the reasons her mother liked having him around. Regularly.

She had stood in the doorway the night it happened. Witness. As these two people ripped her world apart.

But she was not a factor.

Merely witness. Audience.

Heartbroken.

Silent tears flowed down her chubby, rosy cheeks. Innocent cheeks. The cheeks of a child.

She saw one tear fall from Jackdaw's eye until he brushed it away.

Such pain in his face. She wanted to run to him. She wanted him to pick her up and make everything Ok again.

But it was not an option.

Silently, she watched him leave.

He never turned back. Never saw her.

She did her best to comfort her impossibly beautiful mother while she sobbed hysterical tears at their small kitchen table.

As she grew older, she came to realize that she would often be expected to comfort the hysterical tears of her impossibly beautiful mother.

She also came to realize that her mother was incapable of offering this or any other type of comfort in return.

There were reasons for it.

But there are always reasons, aren't there?

When she left, she had no-one to tell about it and nowhere to go. But she left anyway. Her impossibly beautiful mother's scathing remarks ringing in her ears. "He won't want anything to do with you, you little fool. You're the reason he left. You're the reason they all left. No-one wants a woman burdened down with such an ugly child. You've held me back all these years! I've given up everything for you!"

She had heard it all her life. Since she was very little. But for the first time now she heard it with a heartbreak edged with clarity rather than guilt. And she thought to herself, No. No, actually I have given up everything for you. Friends, my childhood, my self worth, my sanity.

"Well I will hold you back no more mother. Perhaps you will be able to find happiness without me." She left for good.

She regained her sanity.

The self worth came on board grudgingly.

The friend thing she just found too hard.

The childhood? Well adults should know better than to take someone else's to replace their own.

It just doesn't work that way.

She knew better.

But it didn't stop her setting out to search for it. She made it to Jackdaw.

Or rather he found her. Turning up front row in one of her first fights.

She had done well. She had done very well.

And Jackdaw had followed her career with interest. And then one day, when she was near the top of her game, he told her a secret.

Told her a secret about how parts of the cosmos really worked. About what many believed would go down in the next little while. And what some few were planning to do about it and were working towards.

He explained that her fighting career would, by its very nature, have a finite or limited lifespan. But that it would serve perfectly, both now and post it, if she wished to join them.

She did. And like the child she'd once been, she trotted trustingly along.

But after GhostSong5 she had lost a little of that trust.

It was only marginally late to pick her up as these things go. But still, it had meant an extra day and night in the desert. She had rationed her water to last. One does not survive long in the desert if one does not learn to ration their water for the worst possible scenario. But she had run out of food.

One of the packages she had been forced to buy hurriedly from an unknown street vendor had proved inedible. Sand for the most part.

She had committed his face to memory. One day, no doubt, she would return to this hell hole, and on that day he would learn to regret his decision. Deeply. Until then she had bigger fish to fry.

The GhostSong5 flyer was small and sleek, able to land easily, and take off quickly. Still, it did not land completely. That was only

asking for trouble in these parts. It hovered. And sent down a chain link. These ladders were incredibly strong and kind of stable. But with the down force from the flyer as it hovered, and the winds playing their havoc with both the underside of said flyer and the sorry state of her wings, the climb was unpleasant.

The Second Mate grabbed her by the underarm and helped haul her aboard through the small underside hatch. The feathers on her right wing caught for an instant and she grimaced as she felt them catch and pull. But then she was through and up and in.

The flyer was airborne. Instantly. Which was just in time. If the titanium shields had not been in place, Lilt and the Second Mate would have seen night-horsemen pounding over the hills towards the ship. One of the leaders shouldered a substantial and nasty looking rocket launcher. It fired and exploded silently and gracefully against the invisible shields activated in front of the titanium ones.

Lilt sat back in the co-pilot's chair and pulled a crooked and torn feather from her wing.

The Second Mate glanced at her as he flew them speedily away and back to GhostSong5. "Doesn't that hurt?"

"Yes," she replied matter-of-factly as she pulled out another. "But once their hex-chromed they'll never regain their shape. Toxic as hell too. Better to grow a new one."

She finished running her hands over her wings and satisfied leaned back with her feet up on the flight console. "Ok I'm ready. Take me to your leader," she said which made him smile.

She had been on many missions with this lot but not on this new ship yet. They landed cleanly within the flight deck and exited quickly.

"This way," the Second Mate pointed. They made their way to a large elevator in the middle of the long wall of the launch deck.

There was just one other flyer that Lilt could see. The two tiny ships looked even smaller in the vastness of the deck. They could take a sizable ship in here, Lilt noted. Plenty of room for even a couple of mid size craft.

The Second Mate leaned back against the elevator wall as it made its ascent and studied her. She was impressive. Even covered in desert and clearly in need of a good wash, she was impressive. Chiseled. Her arm muscles put his to shame. "I thought hex-chroming was outlawed," he said. "Even on Venus12," he added. Lest she think him a totally naive fool.

She looked at him properly for the first time, taking his measure out of clear, dark brown eyes. "I wasn't fighting on Venus12, I was fighting on Bella3," she smiled. "Your leader point blank refused to come and pick me up from Bella3."

He swallowed hard. "Bella3?" he said incredulously. "You were fighting on Bella3?"

"Yep. And I gotta tell you there ain't much that's outlawed on Bella3." She cocked her head to the side. "And even if it is, you do what you need to do to survive."

"Ah, um, yes. I can imagine," he stammered, still reeling from the fact that she had fought - not only fought but fought and and survived - on Bella3.

"No you can't," she smiled. "You can't even begin to imagine it. But that's OK."

They exited the lift and they took her immediately.

The Old Ones had taken the ship. They ripped out her wings before they even asked her a question.

They dumped her body in front of the only Rebel Base they'd got her to disclose. It was worthless information. Due for evacuation soon anyway.

She had lived, miraculously she had lived. A long time in surgery. And an even longer time in rehabilitation.

Lilt no more.

Della ate her meal in silence remembering the fighter she'd once been and the type of missions she'd run.

And now here she was. A Medic's Aide. Her past glory completely unknown or long forgotten.

But CM Gemini had been kind to her and she was ashamed of how she'd behaved earlier.

But no mind, she would make it up to her tomorrow.

## **FIFTEEN**

They turned in shortly after they ate. Cooper woke just a few hours later. The hold was in darkness. Save for the emergency lights and the glow from the stasis chamber.

The green of the emergency lights looked sickly against the violet of the chamber.

Since when had it glowed violet?

Cooper rose from his bed. Bare foot. Bare chested. His ink glistening in the strange lights.

He was there already. His hand on the contact-portal. How had he gotten here? He did not remember walking here. He did not remember.

He had a moment to realize that it was panic he was feeling. An emotion that had been trained out of him years ago.

And then the connection with her through the contact-portal jolted through him like a laser bolt.

And she was looking at him. With sapphire eyes. The chamber was a sea of violet.

So fast. She was so fast. It was just a blur of movement. The lid of the stasis chamber shattered.

Her hand was on his chest, dark nails pressed into his flesh. Godds it was ecstasy. The essence of her washed over him. Worlds swum in her eyes. She opened her mouth to say something and it was too much. Cooper pushed away from her and the worlds in her eyes were replaced with sorrow.

She fell back against the bed of the stasis chamber. And now she swam in darkness. Bathed in darkness, bathed in blackness, bathed in death.

He had killed her.

With a gasp, Cooper sat up in his bed. He was dripping with sweat.

Nightmare. Another one.

He looked around the room, getting his physical bearings, calming himself.

The hold was dark. Green emergency lights. Yellow stasis chamber.

Cooper let out a long breath. Everything was normal.

He was going to take a shower.

As he passed the stasis chamber, he forced himself to look. Rise slept a deep stasis sleep. But there was even more color in her cheeks now. Her lips were full. Her long dark hair glistened. She was framed in the inky blackness of her folded wings. Their depths contrasted with the violet feathers dotted amongst them.

Her eyes were closed.

Her breasts were barely covered by the sheet, the upper swell of them clearly visible. He had a sudden memory of them. Of all of her in the underground room of the Echelon. The reaction in him was immediate. Ok now he had to move away. Maybe he better make this shower cold.

He heard the sound just as he reached the door to the bathroom.

He whirled back in the direction of the stasis chamber. Something glistened in the darkness as it flew quickly away from it.

Flew?

Edging slowly back to the chamber, Cooper searched high and low but found nothing.

Doon snored loudly. All of the others were still sleeping soundly. Great, he thought. Now I'm seeing things while I'm awake too.

Cooper shook his head. Had to be the new meds. He would ask the CM when she woke up in the morning.

He pushed open the door to the bathroom. Took the closest stall and turned on the water. It was pleasantly and surprisingly warm.

All thoughts of a cold shower were quickly forgotten. The mirrors above the sinks misted over with steam. The pounding of the water echoed off the tiled walls.

Balia, Minx Fae, the creature he'd sighted by the stasis chamber, hesitated.

She was going to turn off the silly glowing machine. The pretty heifer in side of it was well and truly cooked. But hot delicious was naked in a shower. Surely that should take priority as worth investigating.

She sniffed the air, and flew on silent, glistening wings to the bathroom, eyeing the door with increasing disapproval.

No buttons. It was one of those handled things.

She flitted up to handle height and pulled on it. To no avail.

Too big and heavy. When you are one and a half feet tall, the big heavy doors of the heifers with handle mechanisms, can prove problematic.

But there was a smoked glass section in the top of the door. Rippled.

Perhaps she could still catch a glimpse of him.

"Get away from there!" CM Gemini made a lunge for her and missed. Della made a better lunge and got her.

Holding her expertly by the neck and straight out from her.

Minx Fae horns are nasty. It makes catching them and keeping them difficult.

"A cage. We need something to use as a cage," Della said. Doing her best to control the madly struggling Fae.

"I'll be right back." Doon took off at a run to the rear of Hold. He had seen something that would do nicely earlier.

"What is going on and what the hell is that?" Cooper had burst from the bathroom when he'd heard the shouts. He stared incredulously at the small, winged, horned creature still struggling wildly in Della's outstretched arm.

"Ooh, hot delicious." The creature stilled at the sight of him and eyes him approvingly from top to bottom. "Please feel free to drop the towel."

"You behave yourself!" Della gave her a little shake.

Cooper secured the towel more firmly around his waist as Gemini did the explaining.

"She was perched at that bathroom door window there trying to get a good look at you."

Cooper turned to look at the creature pointedly, and was met with an extremely unapologetic look of her own.

"You're not the least bit embarrassed by that?" he asked her.

The creature laughed. "Only dumb heifers get embarrassed by normal things."

"There's nothing normal about spying on people when they're taking a shower Missy!" CM Gemini told her sharply.

"I'm only spying on hot delicious because of the stupid door!" the creature exclaimed exasperatedly.

She looked at him with eyes that held all sort of bad promises. "If I could have gotten in the door, hot delicious would have known I was there for certain."

She smiled at him knowingly and Cooper had the grace to color a little.

And then she turned, quick and sharp as a whip, using her horns to slash open a gash on Della's forearm.

Della cursed, but did not release her. Blood from the cut dripped on the floor. The creature huffed sulkily and folded her arms over her chest.

"Doon?" Jackdaw called. "Any luck with that cage?"

"Yeah I got something." The mass of Doon reappeared at a trot, bird transit cage in hand. "I've even got something for her horns. He held up the tiny horn mittens in his other hand.

The Minx Fae could not see them, as Doon was behind her, but she howled loud and long at his words.

"Someone needs to hold her head still," Della advised.

"I will," Jackdaw replied, stepping in behind her. The Minx Fae hissed at him revealing a pair of long, sharp, pointed teeth like a cat's.

Jackdaw held her head in place. Della still had her firmly by the neck.

Doon got the mittens on her horns with only a few tiny scratches. At the same time he used some rope he'd found to bind her wings.

He stepped in front of Della with the cage and she threw her. The small creature hit the back of the cage hard. Doon closed and locked it.

The Minx Fae recovered from her hard knock at the back of the cage almost instantly and threw herself at the cage bars in a fury.

She gripped them hard and tried to rub the mittens off of her horns on the bars. "Off my horns!" she shouted angrily.

"But they look so pretty on you," Della said to her as CM Gemini deftly cleaned and bandaged her arm. "I think pink really is your color.

"The creature looked at her in horror, open mouthed. "Pink?"

Della tilted her head considering her. "So pink. In fact that's the pinkest pink I've ever seen."

"You cannot put pink things on my horns!" Simultaneous foot stamping and fist shaking came from the cage.

"Oh but you look so cute," Della replied.

"You do. I think it really is your color," CM Gemini added.

"Now, I am going to find a nice dark cloth to cover this cage with so you can go nigh nighs."

The Minx Fae hissed at her and sat down sulkily on the floor of her cage, arms crossed, glaring out at them.

Cooper was still staring incredulously at her, speechless at the entire scene which had unfolded before him.

"And you put some clothes on!" CM Gemini admonished him. "We'll never get the little monster settled with you running around like that."

"Ok, Ok." He held up a hand. "But could someone please tell me exactly what the little monster is?"

"It's a Minx Fae," CM Gemini replied. "I'm surprised you never encountered one on Moethiica. They're most commonly found amongst the Pann Lords."

"It's rare to see a Pann Lord on Moethiica now. And they hate the Echelon," Cooper replied absently. "And it's called a Minx you say?"

They all nodded in unison at him.

"It behaves like that and it's called a Minx. Gold Absolute gold." He began to laugh. He began to laugh and couldn't stop.

As he finished his interrupted shower and dried and dressed afterwards, he was still chortling.

He hadn't laughed quite like this since before Ghaniia12.

It felt good. It felt damned good.

And when he thought about the fact that a flying Minx with horns had brought about its manifestation, it made him laugh even harder.

## **SIXTEEN**

"That's quite a grip you've got on you," Cooper remarked to Della next morning as he poured himself a coffee.

Ah, coffee. He was extremely glad to find out it was a cosmic addiction. They might call it different things here and there, but it was still coffee.

He breathed in the aroma appreciatively. Nothing like it.

"Yeah I noticed that too," Doon commented. "Saw you catch her too. Impressive. You're quick. It's not easy to catch a Minx Fae."

Della shrugged. "I've had some experience with them before is all. There were a number of them about the place where I was... grew up." She got up quickly from where she'd been sitting contentedly at the Galley. "I better go see if CM Gemini needs me for anything."

"Short and sweet," Doon grunted.

"Yeah, she really didn't want to talk about that one," Cooper agreed. "Know much about her?"

Doon shook his head. "Not really. Been assisting the CM on the last couple of missions. Keeps to herself. She looks familiar though," he added. "I've thought that since the first time I saw her."

"Interesting," Cooper mused. "I was just thinking the same thing. Girl's got a mighty set of forearms on her, I'll give her that much."

The day was spent in relative calm. They moved the Minx Fae's cage to the far end of the hold. There were some war wounds on Doon and Jackdaw from supplying her with food and water.

Sans horns, it seemed her nails were more than capable of reaping some nasty damage.

Cooper smiled and shook his head, still fascinated by the small creature. He needed to calibrate but there was a problem with his helmet. He spent most of the day tinkering with it, trying to fix it.

“Gotcha,” he said in satisfaction. It was well after their evening meal and only he and CM Gemini were still awake.

“Will you calibrate it now?” she asked him concernedly. “You’ll need to do it sooner rather than later you know.”

“First thing tomorrow,” Cooper replied, yawning. “It’ll take a few hours and then I’m done with it.”

“It’s Ok. I feel good,” he reassured her at her disapproving glance. “First thing tomorrow is plenty of time.”

“It’s quite normal to not want to do it you know,” she replied, regarding him steadily. “It’s been part of you for a time now. This sort of bio-technology. It can feel like you’re shutting down a part of yourself. It can be hard to let go. But you must.”

Cooper opened his mouth to protest and then realized she was right. There was a part of him that didn’t want to let go of it. And was finding it very hard to do so. The Echelon were despicable. Monsters. But powerful monsters. There was a heady rush to their dark magic, no matter what he told himself.

“You’re right,” he conceded, “But not now. Not tonight. Tomorrow morning.”

“Good.” She laid a hand on his forearm. “I’m here if you need me. Right, I’m off to bed.”

“Chief Medic,” he said as she made to move off.

“Yes, Cooper.”

“Is there anything in those new cloaking meds you’ve given me that would cause nightmares? Like really crazy bad, real feeling nightmares?”

“No. I wouldn’t think so. What are your nightmares about?”

“Her.” He gestured in the direction of the stasis chamber. “Always her.”

“Ah,” CM Gemini said as if that explained everything. “So that’s why you’ve not been near her since we’ve been down here. A pity. She flourishes. Heals at twice the speed when she senses your presence.” She looked at him quizzically. “Are you absolutely sure you’ve never seen each other before? It’s quite a connection you have the pair of you.”

“No. Never.” Cooper shook his head and exhaled. “Thanks anyway. Must be this weird ‘connection’ thing doing it.”

CM Gemini smiled and bid him goodnight.

Cooper sat for a while longer in the galley lost in thought. Before he crashed for the night he steeled his nerve and paid a visit to the stasis chamber.

Tentatively he laid his hand on the contact-portal. He tensed, half waiting for the jolt of his dream, but the connection when it came was soft and gentle.

He relaxed and let out a breath. Godds she was beautiful.

And also an Asset. He reminded himself sharply. *The Asset*. The Mission. Siren5. Priority One. The only living Siren. The only one who could open the Veil Portal above Earth and let the Original Makers through.

It was this that the highest levels of authority on Earth, and much of the Cosmos, was counting on.

That she would let through other things the Old Ones and the Echelon were equally counting on, was just part of the bargain. The unfortunate part.

“She may or may not know who or what she is.” He had been briefed. “If they run true to form since the Siren of the 3<sup>rd</sup> she will not look like a typical Siren. But never forget, that she is a Siren. And as valuable as she is, so she is powerful and dangerous.”

“When she truly realizes her own identity, she will be powerful and dangerous beyond reason. Certainly beyond your ability to contain and command her.”

“Establish control and establish it quickly.”

“And remember also the Siren’s charms and the Siren’s power of seduction.”

“An Asset. Think of her always as the most powerful and dangerous Asset you have ever had to manage.”

Cooper remembered his briefings and trainings. He withdrew his hand from the contact-portal.

Yeah, so she was beautiful. He had dealt with beautiful before. Really, when it came down to it, on Earth, and across the Cosmos, beautiful looking females were a dime a dozen. There was no need to get hung up on the ones who were wholly inappropriate.

He turned abruptly away from the stasis chamber and took himself to bed.

Cooper slept soundly. No nightmares. Not even a dream he would remember.

They all slept deep and well.

And as they all slept, Balia, the Minx Fae, who had observed them all with interest since their arrival in the prison hold, plotted silently.

The first thing she plotted was her escape from the cage. A given really. Idiot heifers. She could have been out of there some time ago.

But there were further travel plans on her mind and as this particular lot of heifers didn't seem intent on trying to kill her - epic lolz if they did - they might just be worth hitching a ride with.

Which meant she might have to play it nice for a while.

Hmmm.

Decisions. Decisions. Decisions.

They *could* be useful.

And she had been on this ship for ever such a long time now.

Ever since that unfortunate incident with that ridiculously angry man.

It had been a grand night until then.

An all night hookah bar, a particularly potent batch of sprite beer. She had been having the most marvelous time. Dancing dreamily in the acrid fumes of the black market smoke machine.

At the end of the day it was the smoke machine's fault! One minute dancing. Next minute squishy. Well not her squishy. But what was suddenly on the end of her left horn rather than still firmly attached to its owner, definitely squishy.

Then it had all descended rather quickly into name calling and threats of vile retribution.

Anger management issues indeed.

Gods, he had another one didn't he.

And it was her that had to get his disgusting squishy human eyeball off the end of her horn.

Ewww. So gross. It sent a shiver through her now just thinking of it.

She had barely gotten away. And then of course Seth was nowhere to be found.

It was so extremely disappointing that she had to do all of this by herself. She folded her arms and huffed sulkily.

At least they had one pretty heifer with wings.

She preened her own wings smugly. They were well free of their bindings. And hers were Fae silk. Glimmering, fine, transparent, mesmerizing. Tough as steel, barbed and poisonous.

Poor heifers with their ancient feathery wings.

Mmmmm. Heifers. They were going to Blue Earth. Blue Earth had lovely heifers from all accounts. Even four legged ones with big brown eyes and hoofy ankles. And there was nothing like a bit of warm, bleeding, juicy heifer meat first thing in the morning.

And cats. Blue Earth had cats. And unbeknownst to it, their Queen. So all she had to do was get to Blue Earth with this motley crew and make contact with her.

She would smuggle herself in one of their packs. Or even better, in hot delicious's pocket. She only had two of the shrinking invisible vials left. But it was a potent batch and would last her a time.

She liked the head rush when she shrank invisible. It was like snorting Arcadian shroom dust. Now there was a worthy past time.

She didn't like coming out the other side though. No, that wasn't very nice at all. Made her very grumpy.

She settled back against the cage and closed her eyes. Happy with her plotting and content to sleep herself for a time.

She smelt it rather than heard it. She had a very sensitive nose. Balia cocked her head in the funny machine's direction and drew in a sharp breath.

She had no idea why they were cooking the pretty one. But they had best stop, because bitch was done!

She listened, but there was nothing. No noise, nothing to indicate that they knew what was going on outside of there.

Drawing the sharp pointed needle from where it hid in her wealth of hair, she used it expertly on the lock on the cage to free herself.

Carefully, she drew back the covers and peered out into the hold. Excellent. All was quiet. They were sleeping.

Carefully, carefully, carefully, she made her way on silent wings out of her cage and across the room.

When she got to the funny machine she sat atop it for a while considering its occupant.

There was something different about this one that she couldn't quite put her finger on.

Oh well. Whatever. She was most certainly done. Time to stop cooking pretty heifer!

Gracefully, she flew around the machine. Once more she drew the sharp, shiny, pointed needle from her hair, and stuck it in the small metal hole receptacle she had found the other day.

The stasis chamber exploded in a shower of golden sparks.

The sound was enormous.

## **SEVENTEEN**

Cooper emptied the first fire extinguisher on it and started on another.

Doon and Jackdaw lifted the now foam covered body away from the wreckage. For surely it was nothing more than a body now. It was sort of amazing that it was still even a body, and not just a collection of tiny pieces.

CM Gemini motioned them hurriedly into the Med-Bay. The door to it had been closed thank goodness. This being an ex prison hold, its walls and doors were built to withstand all kinds of violence, including blasts. The Med-Bay had escaped relatively unharmed.

Cooper put down the fire extinguisher. The fire in the stasis chamber was out. Ruined but no more threat to them.

Cooper hurried into the Med-Bay where Della was clearing the last of the foam from Rise.

CM Gemini was already at her chest working frantically to resuscitate her.

He had a deep, sinking feeling in his chest.

CM Gemini stood back.

Rise did not move.

Della looked crestfallen. CM Gemini looked determined. "Come on now Missy," she said. "I know you're in there. Enough of this."

She started again. This time with paddles. The lasers shot through Rise, jolting her whole body from the bed.

Again she lay still as CM Gemini stood back from her.

And then she coughed.

She coughed.

CM Gemini and Della went to work about her in a blur of motion. He wanted to stay, but CM Gemini shooed him from the room. "I'll let you know when she's stable and you can speak with her," she said and turned all her attention to her patient.

Jackdaw led him out and closed the door behind them.

Cooper ran his hand through his hair in frustration, but there was nothing to do but obey the Chief Medic's orders.

"She's conscious," Cooper informed Doon as they walked back to where he held the Fae.

"Thank the godds" he said and then shook her roughly. "No thanks to you."

"You did this?" Cooper tried to very, very carefully put a lid on his anger as he marched towards the Fae. "Why?" he demanded.

"She was cooked!" the Minx exclaimed at him, struggling furiously.

"What do you mean, cooked?"

"Done! Enough in the silly machine. Could you not smell her? Ready to come out! Cooked!" She gave up struggling and crossed her arms, pouting at him. "Hot but dumb," she muttered under her breath as Cooper crossed his own arms and stared at her hard.

She met his gaze, defiantly.

Jackdaw had retrieved her cage and was holding it ready.

"Cuff her first," Cooper said coldly. "Wrists and ankles. Wings tight. Horn Mittens. Secure this time. Link everything to her wing bindings." He added and she glared at him but said nothing.

Jackdaw did so while Doon and Cooper held her tight and unmoving between them.

Then Cooper swapped places with Jackdaw and searched her thoroughly. He found a multitude of arsenal on her, some of which he was quite pleased with. No doubt, it would all come in very handy. When he was sure he had everything he held the cage for them.

She hissed and flashed her dainty little cat fangs when Doon shoved her inside the cage, but apart from that she went in quietly enough.

They had found more rope. Good and thick and coarse. Cooper bound it tightly round the cage using a series of intricate knots. If she could pick them undone with her tiny hands good luck to her.

They settled the cage on a low crate and he pulled up the chair from the Med-Bay in front of it.

"Talk to me," he said to the Minx Fae. "Start with your name." He leaned back in the chair, folded his arms and stretched his legs out.

She narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously.

He yawned at her. He had all the time in the world for this.

"Balialia," she sniffed eventually. "My name is Balialia."

Doon came over to him and then and whispered something in his ear. Cooper nodded his agreement. "Do it," he said quietly and then turned his attention back to the Fae.

Her eyes followed Doon's movements suspiciously, but came back quickly enough to settle on Cooper when he said her name.

"So, Balialia, tell me exactly why you did it and what you meant by 'cooked.'"

The Fae was exquisite he realized, looking at her. Miniature, exotic, horned, fanged, perfection. And then shook his head in disbelief at his own thoughts. Oh how the years away from Earth had changed him.

“She cooked. Done,” Balia sighed. Exhausted now after all the excitement. “She longer in that machine and you ruin her. Like meat.” She added helpfully as if that would explain everything.

“What would be ruined if we left her in there?” Cooper pressed.

“Diamond,” Balia responded. “Pretty heifer has two inside. Means she cooks quickly.”

Cooper sat forward, his memory of the mind-diamond passing into Rise that night still fresh. In complete defiance of Arc's magic. He had never seen Arc's magic thwarted, ever.

The power of her voice had called it. But there are a lot of powerful beings who know the true power of the voice and how to wield it.

“What are the Diamonds and what does it mean that she carries two now?” he asked the Fae.

Balia looked at him like he was mad. “Same as your Diamond. Same as mine. Except she got two. And one a big one.” She peered at him closely. “Hmmm. Curiouser and curiouser. Same as you.”

“What do you mean, same as me?”

“You got two too, Hot Delicious.” She tilted her head at him. “Where you get your other big one from?”

He opened his mouth to ask her what she meant, but then closed it. This was ridiculous. She was a Fae and she was answering him in riddles. Jackdaw voiced his own doubts.

“Be careful, Cooper. These ones are experts at telling you what you want to hear. She'll lead you in circles all night with this nonsense.”

Balia hissed at Jackdaw and her eyes held real hatred.

Cooper sighted. Jackdaw was right. She could be telling him anything.

Doon appeared then, nice long syringe in hand and looked at him questioningly.

“Do it,” he said, standing suddenly and pushing back his chair.

Doon moved quickly to the cage and injected the Fae in the neck with the tranq. It was human strength, only slightly modified for her, and she sagged immediately.

Problem solved. They would keep her tranquilized all the way to their next landing and set her loose there.

Cooper sighed and rotated his shoulders. They were all exhausted. Could all do with some more light tranquilizing.

“I spoke to Celcius,” Jackdaw told him as they headed for their beds. “Convinced him that was just the way she came out of stasis.”

“Good. Thanks,” Cooper grunted.

The door to the Med-Bay opened and Della appeared.

“She’s conscious, stable and not to be disturbed by anyone for at least the next 24 hours,” she announced to them all.

“Fair enough,” Cooper grunted, relief flooding him. He could not wait for the green light to talk to her. But first things first, as soon as he woke up, and with a day now up his sleeve, he would calibrate that damn helmet.

## **EIGHTEEN**

Rise awoke in a small room, feeling rather wonderful. Like she had been asleep and rested for a very long time.

She stretched contentedly and felt two things. The first was the large mind-diamond. It fluttered and shimmered with warmth at her waking. Its movement sent golden waves of pleasure pulsing through her.

The second thing she felt was that her wings were unbound.

Punishable by death on Moethiica. And the raids could happen by day or night. The only time her wings were unbound was when she flew Junar Run.

Moethiica. She sat bolt upright. She was no longer on Moethiica. She remembered she had been in space, and then something had happened. How had she got on the ship again?

She searched her mind but could not remember it.

No mind, she had the mind-diamond. It moved lazily within her again, making her feel even more wonderful.

There was a woman in a chair beside her bed, soundly sleeping. She had red bobbed hair. Rise stared at it. It was the most beautiful color. The woman had a kind, mature face. Exhausted. Rise hoped she rested well.

Easing herself cautiously out of the bed she slipped past the woman without waking her. Holding her breath she tried the door and smiled delightedly when she found it open.

She slipped quietly out of the peaceful little room into a vast hulking blackness.

She looked around, hoping to get another glimpse of space, but there were no windows here. Oh but look, there was another door. Perhaps the windows were through that way.

There were more people in here, sleeping. She could not see them all, but she could sense them and hear their quiet breathing.

Moving on tiptoe, ever so quietly, she made her way over to it and pushed open the bathroom door.

No windows.

But room a plenty to stretch her wings. And showers. Rise snapped out her wings and twirled about in circles of happiness. It was the violet flashes in the bathroom mirrors above the sinks that caused her to stop.

She moved towards the sinks and studied her wings carefully. She did not remember having violet in her wings before. Not since she was a baby.

Oh well, no mind. She twirled again and headed for a shower.

It felt beyond wonderful.

The only thing that tempted her out of it was the thought of the drying machine. The sensation of it through her sleek ebony and violet wings was exquisite.

She felt so contented. Safe, warm, clean, free.

Naked.

Rise pursed her lips and looked about her for clothes. There were towels. She guessed one of them would have to do.

Ah, no someone had left a shirt behind.

She would need to cut some holes in the back of it for her wings. But she was well used to adjusting walker clothes to fit her wings. And she was sure the owner of the shirt wouldn't mind.

No scissors or knife though. Perhaps her nails would do. They seemed awfully long and strong now. She had no memory of ever seeing them like this. She held the shirt up and tested it with a nail.

It tore apart with ridiculous ease. Mmmm. Handy.

She tore two openings in the back of it large enough to fit her wings through. Lifting it close to her face, she breathed in the scent of the shirt. Delicious and masculine.

Expertly and with practiced hands she contracted and worked her wings through the newly fashioned openings. The shirt settled perfectly around the foot long joints at her back, and she let her wings fan out again, out the other side of them.

The shirt was big on her, like a little dress, covering her to mid thigh. Perfect. Now for food. She was suddenly ravenous. She hoped they had a well stocked kitchen.

Forgetting all about being quiet, Rise burst happily through the bathroom door into the main area.

The black visored Echelon head turned slowly towards her. He was barely ten feet away from where she now stood, frozen.

Rise forgot every sense of happiness and wonderful and screamed.

She whirled madly about her looking for an exit.

"What the fuck! I thought that was the Chief Medic in there." As the monster lunged for her she remembered her wings were free.

She dodged him expertly and launched herself.

There were metal beams some fifty feet up. She landed perfectly on the first one and perched there.

There were others below her now. They had come running from every where. The small room she had been in opened suddenly and the red haired woman came out of it.

“Oh my godds,” she muttered when she saw Rise perched above them, wings free and lashing in and out behind her somewhat menacingly.

“Rise.”

“Ah.” The red haired woman knew her name. Someone amongst them had ID’d her.

“Rise, it’s alright. My name is Chief Medic Gemini. You’re perfectly safe here. I’ve been looking after you.”

Rise heard her words but everything was not alright. She flexed her wings with a sharp snap, making them all jump. All except the Echelon. The reason everything was very much not alright.

She fixed him with her gaze and would not take her eyes off him.

“Rise, it’s alright,” CM Gemini called up to her. “He’s not an Echelon. He’s been undercover with them. This is Cooper. Agent Cooper Pierce. From Earth. He’s the one who rescued you.”

CM Gemini turned to Cooper and hissed at him. “Take your bloody helmet off for goodness sake! She’ll never come down with that on your head.”

“I can’t take it off, it’s calibrating,” he hissed back at her. “And what the hell is she doing awake and well and flying around?”

“I don’t know,” CM Gemini responded. “I honestly don’t know.”

She turned back to Rise. “Won’t you come down and talk to us Rise. Honestly, no-one here means you any harm.”

Rise cocked her head at Cooper, still not having taken her eyes off of him.

“Tell the Echelon creature to remove his helmet and prove he is who you say he is.”

“He can’t take it off right now Rise. It’s calibrating. Once he’s finished that, it will be off of him for good.”

"Echelon lies," Rise spat.

"Rise, these are no lies. This man rescued you from the Echelon. Please, Rise, I beg of you. Come down and talk to us."

Rise hesitated, considering.

Cooper put his hands up in a peace gesture. "She speaks the truth. I am not an Echelon. I was undercover with them. I did rescue you. And I mean you no harm. Once I can safely take this helmet off, I will do so."

"If you lie to me Echelon pretender, I will kill you." She was not too sure of the finer details of how she would do this. But her conviction was strong on it. She was quite sure she was capable of it and could work out the exact hows of it later.

"I will come down only if that thing is no longer present." She gestured at Cooper who had to count to ten to control his anger before he turned to CM Gemini.

"I am going to walk away now and I will stay away until I take this thing off and have finished calibrating. Bind her wings as soon as she's down. I don't care if you have to tranq her to do it. Bind her."

He spoke barely above a whisper but CM Gemini saw Rise narrow her eyes at him suspiciously and shooed him away impatiently.

"Its alright Rise. He's going now. He won't be back until he can take off his helmet."

The Echelon helmeted thing walked away to the far end of the hold, disappearing behind some large crates.

Rise considered. A real Echelon would not be shooed like that by the red haired woman. A real Echelon would not be shooed by anyone. Perhaps this one was just an Echelon pretender.

It made up her mind.

And she dropped instantly, vertically, impossibly, exquisitely to the ground, making them all gasp and frightening the hell out of them.

It took every ounce of courage CM Gemini had to put a smile on her face and walk towards her.

## **NINETEEN**

Back in the Med-Bay room CM Gemini eyed Rise carefully as she examined her. What a presence she had. And her eyes. It was like starlight shone through them.

She was perfectly healed. Perfectly healthy. Her wings were perfectly reformed.

“You’re in remarkable shape.” CM Gemini commented. Knowing the words to be inadequate but not knowing any other way to put it.

“My nails are very strong. Look.” She proffered one hand to the Doctor who quailed at the sight of them. The girl she had first taken into her care had short nails, cut square and blunt. She knew she had taken samples from just underneath them.

These nails were the same nails. But twice as thick. Long. Pointed. They glistened pink and white and beautiful. CM reached out and tested one tentatively. Hard and sharp.

“Is that what you cut the holes in the shirt with?” she asked, trying to keep her voice light and casual.

“Yes. It ripped very easily. I like this shirt. I like the scent of its former owner.”

CM Gemini was about to remark that she was quite sure that it was Cooper’s shirt she was wearing and then thought better of it.

When she turned around the star like eyes were regarding her intently. This was so not the same girl who Cooper had first board-

ed the ship with. But then she checked herself. How did she know this? How did anyone know this? Rise had been unconscious. They had no idea how aware she was of herself, or how much the Siren in her had awakened.

For looking at her now, Chief Medic Gemini agreed wholeheartedly with Cooper Pierce. This was no Potential. This was the real thing. This was the Veil Siren.

And none of them really knew her. He was right. She was an unknown quantity. Potentially more powerful and dangerous than any of them could imagine. She needed to be bound and restrained somewhat until they knew exactly what they were dealing with, and had established some relationship with her.

“Are we done?” Rise asked. “I am very hungry.”

Ah perfect. CM thought. I can put the sedatives in her food. “Yes. Of course. I will fix you something.”

“Thank you,” said Rise simply. Trustingly.

CM Gemini moved to the small cabinet and retrieved the sedative. She felt Rise’s eyes on her back and a sweat broke out on her forehead as she did so.

She schooled herself, turned brightly and smiled at her.

“Right you are then. I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

When she returned with the sedative laced porridge, Rise wolfed it down hungrily and asked for another.

Relieved, that her plan had worked, CM Gemini obligingly went to get it.

Jackdaw, Doon and Della were all in the galley this time.

“Smart,” said Jackdaw approvingly. “That will knock her out till nightfall.”

“Do you think?” It was Rise. She had moved silently into the galley behind them.

They all froze. CM Gemini was in the midst of pouring the sedative into the bowl before her. There was no disguising it.

“I trusted you,” Rise said to her. “You have deceived me. This shall not be forgotten.”

“Rise, I’m sorry. It’s for your own good. Please believe me.” CM Gemini, ashamed of herself and her actions all of a sudden.

“It is not for my own good. It is for your fear. You are all controlled by the Echelon. I will find him and kill him.”

She turned on her heel and launched herself.

“Fuck me. Get a tranq shot loaded now,” ordered Jackdaw and CM Gemini ran for it.

“Doon. Della. Find something strong enough to bind her wings with. I’m going to get Cooper.”

And he took off at a run down the other end of the hold.

But Cooper was not down the other end of the hold.

Unbeknownst to them all he had witnessed Rise’s equally quick, silent and ridiculously magnificent descent from the beam. He knew what it meant. He was fully briefed, when she came fully into her own, of just how dangerous she would be. There was a good reason for this procedure.

Once Rise was in the Med-Bay, he had worked his way up, unseen, to the first floor. He did not want any attention drawn by anyone to the fact he was up there.

He would have one shot at this if she flew again before they bound her.

He had calibrated some ten minutes back. Had heard the conversation in the galley. He crouched now on the metal beams running down the length of the hold and waited for her.

Rope in hand.

He felt the rush of air at the approach of her wings. He timed it perfectly. The rope caught and tightened over her chest, rendering her wings useless.

Rise screamed and desperately tried to free her wings. Cooper held tight to the vertical beam the rope was secured to and lowered her as gently as he could to the floor.

They all came running, and Jackdaw moved forward with the tranq shot.

"Stay back," Cooper called. "I got this." He still had control of the rope when he made it to the floor. Pulled tight, binding both her arms and wings to her.

"Give them to me. I'll do it." Cooper took the bindings from CM Gemini's outstretched hand and moved purposefully towards Rise.

With brutal efficiency he pushed her on to her stomach on the floor. He bound her wrists tight behind her with some more rope that Jackdaw proffered to him.

He bound her wings expertly and quickly. Tight and hard up against her back. She cried out in pain as he pulled on the final adjustment. He did not need to pull them that hard but he had a point to prove and a power dynamic to lay.

CM Gemini and Della both winced at his roughness. CM Gemini thought to point out that he may still have the energy of the helmet working through him.

And he looked at her as she thought it. Piercing eyes, hard, cold and frightening. And she knew then he most certainly did have the energy still coursing through him and that he had heard her.

Satisfied she was secure Cooper gave one final vicious tug on Rise's bindings and pulled her roughly up from the floor.

He propelled her forward to their bedding area, and sat her down forcefully on his bed. He tied the ropes holding her wrists and the rope holding her wing bindings to the metal base of the bed.

Cooper's discarded Echelon helmet sat on the bed beside her.

The others stood back in silence, not knowing what to say or do.

Cooper stood in front of her, safely out of kicking range, legs apart, arms folded.

"Now," Cooper said. "In a few minutes the sedative Chief Medic Gemini gave you is going to start working. And you and I are going to have a nice little chat and get to know each other."

"There will be no more talk of killing and no flying. Chief Medic Gemini is right when she says no-one here means you any harm. But if you mean any of us harm, then make no mistake, I will stop you. With whatever means I have to."

"Do you understand me?" he demanded.

Rise narrowed her eyes and glared at him.

"Do. You. Understand. Me?" he demanded again, emphasizing each word.

"I understand you perfectly," Rise responded.

There was just a hint of a threat in her tone when she said it.

And her starlit eyes shone.

## TWENTY

The small abandoned courtyard within the Echelon compound afforded a magnificent view of Junar.

It rose above the ancient statues of the giant Echelon. Perhaps that's what made this place peaceful for him.

Because it was odd, that when he first infiltrated them and bore witness and sometimes sickened participant to their atrocities, that this place is where he came to regroup.

The ancient statues stared down at him. And Junar stared down on them all.

Desert. Rock. Mystery.

Another atrocity. Another need to regroup.

But he would need to stop this practice. The Uppers were too aware of him now and too skilled at mind-cept for him to cloak completely against them. He could feel one of them grow suspicious of him already.

Ok. He steeled himself. This would be the last time then.

It was the cooler months now. The moons shone brightly, illuminating his path. It was windy.

And the wind hid other sounds.

Shadow. He was suddenly in shadow.

His heart lurched.

The beat of wings. Huge wings. Behind him. She was suddenly overhead.

Her energy hit him in waves. Undulating and breaking against his own. Which suddenly seemed small and insignificant. His heart

continued to skip beats. Sweat broke on his forehead as the warmth of her swept through him.

He had a longing to feel her wings enfold him and breathe close to her magnificent heart.

He felt the tingle at the base of his skull as she connected with him. And just that, slight, brushing touch rippled though his body. It felt like the promise of the most intense pleasure he had ever known.

He steadied himself on a statue of the Echelon, and the cold rock brought him somewhat back to the version of himself that had existed before her presence.

She descended to perch above him on the high rock wall of the courtyard.

They knew that he came here. They had been watching him.

She was terrifying. Exquisite. Divine. Her wings spanned 20 feet or more. Black wings. Tiny golden horns protruding from a wealth of long, dark hair. Her face and body were the most exquisite face and body he had been fortunate enough to gaze upon.

And he had gazed upon a few. More than usual of late. Hardly in the most desirable of circumstances, but still his body betrayed him. Ah, Moethiica, he thought to himself, what have you done to me.

Her dark golden eyes stared into his. A silent challenge in them.

Her voice when she spoke, was like a star song of ecstasy, encased - barely - in the necessity of words he would understand. The scent of honeysuckle filled the night air.

Incongruous in the cold.

But he could no longer feel the cold.

He felt those ripples of ecstasy break over him again and he clutched the statue tighter, gripping fiercely to an anchor that was not her.

"She will come to you." She looked at Junar and then back at him. "Here."

His voice when it came was hoarse. "When?"

Her voice was amused then. "When she comes."

Again, she looked at the mountain, and then back to him. She inclined her head to him. And then took off as suddenly as she had come.

When her two companions took off with her, his heart skipped more beats. He had not even been aware of their presence.

Cooper Pierce waited. He waited a long time. Beyond the expiration of his cloaking implant. Well beyond what his Earth Commanders expected from him.

Not that he had contact with them. Too risky. But they could see him. Disguised as a tiny space probe in their tracking systems.

And then one day, against all the odds, and like nothing he had expected, she had come.

Cooper Pierce left Rise tied to his bed and took a shower. She didn't look like them, but she felt to him very much like the Sirens who had descended on to that courtyard wall.

She felt magnificent. And no good could come from it. He had been briefed to shield against this power they wielded.

This shower was cold.

## **TWENTY ONE**

"One hand. And one hand only," Cooper said firmly.

CM Gemini opened her mouth to push for more, but saw the look in his eyes and knew that was all she was getting. Her shoulders dropped and she nodded, "Thank you."

Cooper beckoned to Doon as he strode towards Rise. "Hold her while I free one of her hands."

Doon obliged and Rise's left hand was freed. Her right hand and bound wings were still tied firmly to the bolted metal bed.

Cooper moved around in front of her and drew up the chair.

At his earlier instruction Doon stayed behind her.

Did she know who and what she was? Well, if she didn't know now, she would know by the time this little chat was over. Cooper was well briefed in the perceived mistakes of the handling of the first four Veil Sirens. He was not about to repeat them.

He sat back in the chair and folded his arms. He started with the basics. "What is your name?"

"What is yours?" She retorted.

"Cooper Pierce R9. What is your name?"

"You know my name. You have already ID'd me," she replied pointedly.

"I know what you've ID'd as but what do you call yourself?"

"The same as the ID."

"And nothing else?"

"Nothing else."

"Rise, where were you born?"

"Moethica."

"How long have you lived there?"

"All my life."

"Where else have you lived?"

"Nowhere."

"How do you know Soar?"

The mention of Soar brought it all flooding back. Her face clouded, her beautiful violet eyes shone with tears, and a deep sorrow cloaked her.

She used her free hand to angrily dash away the tears.

"Soar was a legend amongst the winged. A rebel. We thought..." She took a steadying breath. "We thought she had escaped them."

"Had you ever met her?"

"No." She dashed another tear away. "Yes." She remembered. "Once. When I was young. Only briefly. Before she escaped to the desert."

"Who crossed to the desert after her?"

"No-one. No-one crossed after her." She glared at him icily. "You were there. You saw her. You saw what they did to her. You saw me."

She pulled violently on her restraints, so obviously distressed that both Della and Gemini moved towards her.

Cooper held up one hand, halting them. He had not even turned to look at them, but he had sensed them move.

"Did you try to cross, Rise?"

She blinked rapidly at him, remembering. Not just the pain of falling short and hitting the shields. But the punishment afterwards. How ironic, that being female, underage and promised to the Eche-lon had saved her from harsher treatment.

"What happened?" he persisted.

"I failed."

"Are there Sirens amongst the rebels in the desert, Rise?"

"I would not know. I failed."

"Was the Veil Siren amongst the rebels in the desert, Rise?"

She hesitated. Soar and her supporters had been so sure of themselves.

"I do not know. I failed," she repeated eventually.

"Was Soar the Siren of the 5<sup>th</sup>, Rise? Was she the Veil Siren?"

"She believed that," Rise replied cautiously.

"But you are not so sure," he said quietly.

She was quiet for a long time before she replied. "No. I am not so sure."

"Did you know the Echelon had the Nephliim Blade before you were brought there?"

Rise looked at him like he was mad. How on earth would she know such a thing?

"The Nephliim Blade, Rise," he said again. "Did you know it was there?"

"No. I did not know," she replied. The memory of her reaction to the Blade, and its to her rose to the surface. Not breaking yet, but hovering tantalizingly close underneath.

"And did you know Soar was there?"

"No." She had already answered that. He was trying to trick her.

Desperately she sought the memory of the Blade. She was less sure of herself now and wished she could remember.

"What did you take from Soar?"

The mind-diamond rolled within her at this, making her dizzy. She pressed her free hand to her head to still it. "I did not take it. I stopped the Echelon Mage, Arc, from taking it."

"How, Rise? Are you also a Mage?"

"No."

"Then how? How did you do this?"

She honestly had no idea. And for some reason that annoyed her. Like she was stuck somewhere with some essential knowledge being denied to her.

She glared at him. "I don't know."

"What is it Rise? What is it that you took?"

"I don't know," she said again.

Cooper sat back and sighed, heavily, feigning disappointment.

"It's very disappointing, Rise. You know after all the hype, you don't know much about anything do you?"

The anger flared in her and her eyes shone. "How dare you!" She spat at him.

He smirked at her. "What are you so offended about Rise? You're just some Moethiican winged, come of age, female, the Echelon picked up to have a bit of fun with. I didn't really expect you to know anything."

He heard some gasps from the ones behind him at that.

Rise's gaze was locked on him. She stared at him in silence for some time before she replied.

"I am not," she said eventually.

"Not what?" Cooper sounded almost disinterested.

"I am not just some come of age female from Moethiica," She replied icily.

"Really?" Cooper sounded doubtful. "Then what are you?"

"More than you will ever know. What are *you*?" She retorted.

"I am Agent Cooper Pierce R9. I work for the US Military of Earth. Black Ops. Undercover," he added and then paused.

"What are you Rise?" he asked again.

She stared at him in deep confusion. This was ridiculous. Why should this question confuse her? She knew what she was.

But suddenly she didn't.

And then the ground fell away from her as the mind-diamond she had seized away from the Echelon righted itself on its point and began to spin.

It was egg sized when she had taken it. It seemed bigger now. Like it was growing inside her.

And it was shaped like a round, cut diamond. The point lodged deep in her pineal. The top surface of it opened up to everywhere.

The mind-diamond began to spin more slowly, happy with her awareness. The ground righted itself.

And some lost knowledge within her, clicked into place.

"Where are you taking me, Cooper Pierce?" she asked. And the confidence in her voice was back again.

"To Earth. I am taking you to Earth, Rise."

"To the Veil Portal," she stated.

"Yes," Cooper nodded. "To the Veil Portal."

"You believe that I can open it for you."

"Yes."

"You believe I am the Veil Siren."

"Yes."

"You are not an Echelon," she said suddenly. Like she had just made up her mind about this.

"No. I am not."

She relaxed just a little then. And as she relaxed, the memory of the Nephliim Blade came back to her. And as the memory settled in her, she wondered how ever she could have forgotten it.

A memory of Cooper shot before her. Not of that night amongst the Nephliim, but another time. But it was gone again. As quickly as it had come.

She looked him in the eyes. "I am something, Cooper Pierce. But whether I am the one you think I am, I do not know."

He nodded. It was enough. He sat forward and addressed her intently.

"Rise, I believe you to be the Siren of the 5<sup>th</sup> and by the power vested in me by The Confederation, I have taken you into military custody of the United States of America, Earth, to be transported to Earth, to open the Veil Portal."

"The Confederation are opposed to the Old Ones," Rise said. It was not a question. It was like she said it out loud to reassure herself.

"Yes, we are," Cooper replied quietly and matter-of-factly. "I'm here to escort you safely Rise, and we are already in transit. We can do that with you bound, kicking and screaming, or we can cooperate and do it together. I would prefer to do it together."

She regarded him steadily for a time and then nodded her agreement.

"Good." Cooper gave her a small, tight smile and rose from his chair. He nodded at Doon.

"Leave her wings bound as they are. Untie the rest of her." He folded his arms and regarded Rise coolly again. "One fraction of an inch out of line and you'll be completely restrained again. Are we clear on that?"

"Yes," she said. Her tone giving away nothing.

She looked up at Cooper as Doon untied her.

"You have seen Sirens," she said to him suddenly.

He hesitated, then nodded, "Yes, I have."

"Where did you see them?" she demanded and her gaze was hungry.

"On Moethiica," he replied. "At the Echelon compound. In the very courtyard you ran to."

She stared at him open mouthed. "Where you took me."

"Yes," he replied.

"What did they say to you?" she gasped.

"That you would come to me there. It's why I waited so long amongst them." He walked away from her then, the memory of the feeling of the Sirens too much with the feeling of her right in front of him.

He felt the weight of the eyes of the others upon him as he walked past them. Rise was not the only one he'd surprised.

## **TWENTY TWO**

"See. He's not so bad. And you did threaten to kill him." CM Gemini finished readjusting the bindings on Rise's wings. Cooper would kill her if he found out. But he had put them on cruelly before. They were still firm. They would do. She had put some salve on her wrists where the ropes had cut into her too.

"I thought he was an Echelon," Rise said. Even knowing that he wasn't, he was still unsettling. And he had seen her....she pushed the thought from her mind. She did not want to think about that.

"Do you still think that?" CM Gemini was asking. "Even a little bit?"

"No," Rise replied, hoping they could change the subject soon. "But there is something about him."

"He had just come out of that helmet when you first encountered each other. It takes a while for all the energy of them to begone."

"Have you ever seen them?" Rise asked her. "The Echelon. Up close and personal?"

"No." CM Gemini looked far away then. "But the stories of them are well known. Let's just say, I have been unfortunate enough to have encountered similar." The Chief Medic shuddered and Rise looked at her curiously.

"A long time ago now," she said just a little too brightly. She looked pointedly at Rise. "That man out there rescued you. Against all odds, he rescued you from them. Be thankful for that."

She turned back to packing away her medical supplies and she had a cheeky smile on her face now.

"And of all the worlds and rulers and governments who have been looking for you to make sure they are the ones to bring you before the Veil, I can think of worse ones to have ended up with."

Even Della smiled at that. "He is hot. Even when he's angry."

"Too hot for you, dumb heifer," came the snigger from the cage.

They all turned in unison. The Minx Fae. In all the excitement, they had forgotten her. But they had moved her covered cage into the Med-Bay while she slept off the tranq.

It appears she had slept it off rather quickly.

Rise, looked around the room, wondering where the voice had come from.

"And he got two Diamonds," continued the voice from the cage. "Like her. Easy to tell not Echelon. Echelon don't have any Diamond. Except he got one missing. Maybe they keep it. Bah." Balia was a little groggy still and rambling.

Rise looked pointedly now in the direction of the covered cage. "What is that?"

"Oh my godds, Balia. I'd forgotten all about her," Gemini exclaimed.

"Queen Balia to you, dumb heifer."

Gemini rolled her eyes and strode to the cage, whipping back the cover. "I see your little sleep has done no improvements to your temperament.

"Rise, this is Balia. Balia this is Rise."

She turned to Rise apologetically. "Balia is the one responsible for your rather early exit from the stasis chamber."

"No early. She cooked!" Balia exclaimed excitedly. She looked at Rise appraisingly. "See I told you she was done and ready!"

"What does she mean I was cooked?" Rise demanded, peering in the cage at her. "And what is she?"

"I'm right here!." Balia shook her fist at her feebly in her restraints. "Don't speak like I'm not, pretty heifer!"

"She's a Minx Fae," Della replied drily. "And not to be listened to or trusted."

"A Minx Fae," Rise mused and then rounded on them. "The Pann. Minx Fae are the companions of the Pann. Why is she restrained like that?" She demanded. "Who did this to her? What is wrong with you people?"

"Yeeessssss. Go pretty heifer!" Balia egged Rise on delightedly from her cage. "They have been mean to me. So mean to me."

"Oh no." Della rubbed her forehead wearily.

CM Gemini bit her lip but turned her back on the Fae, addressing Rise earnestly. "We've been nothing of the sort. She's been treated more than fairly. Especially considering the fact she almost killed you," she said pointedly.

"Don't speak like I'm not here!" Balia yelled at Gemini, stomping her foot in frustration and baring her fangs at her.

"And opened up Della's arm with her horns," CM Gemini added, and Della raised her still heavily bandaged arm as proof. "They're not exactly harmless little creatures." She shot Balia a disapproving stare.

"What horns?" Rise asked. "All I can see on her head is funny pink things."

"Mittens," Della told her. "We had to put horn mittens on her."

"They're horrible." Rise screwed up her nose.

"Yes horrible!" Balia was jumping up and down in her cage. "Pink things on my horns. Horrible! Horrible! Horrible" She was working herself into quite a state.

"Rise, now don't you be taken in by her."

"Rise, she's not to be trusted."

They each laid a hand on her arm, both of their voices rising in a cacophony of protests.

“Release her!” Rise commanded, shaking off their hands and stepping towards the cage.

Balia stopped her tantrum to regard her shrewdly.

“Release her now!” Rise yelled.

“Oh we can’t do that.”

“No, best we keep her in the cage.”

“You don’t know what she’s like.”

The cacophony of voices and protests again.

Rise strode to the cage. Ripped the ropes. Wrenched on the lock. Shattered it.

She tore the restraints from Balia. Tore the bindings on her wings like they made of paper. Discarded the mittens with a small noise of disgust.

She looked at Balia and Balia looked back at her, wide eyed and silent.

Then Balia reached out and lifted Rise's chin in her tiny hand.

“Ah,” the Minx Fae said. “Pretty heifer. You the Siren.”

And then she span around and around in mid air circles of delight, whooping and smiling fit to burst.

Rise pulled back, narrowly missing being gouged by one of her newly mitten emancipated horns.

“Are you right there?” Della asked Balia drily when she eventually came to settle on top of a pile of not-to-be-settled-on Med supplies.

“Oh I am more than right,” Balia purred. My Master is going to be so pleased with me.”

“Why?” Rise asked.

"Because my Master is Seth, King of all Pann Lords," Balia replied smugly "And he been looking for you everywhere."

"What the hell is going on in here?" The door burst open to reveal angry Cooper back in play.

"Ooooh, Hot Delicious," Balia crooned. "See." She flew to Rise and laid a hand on her forehead. "Two Diamonds here." She flew to Cooper and laid her hand in the same spot on him. "Two Diamonds here." She looked up at Cooper. "But one missing. Maybe it down lower." She said mischievously as her small hand headed south.

"Ow!" She squealed as he grabbed her hand roughly and held her away from him.

"Don't you hurt her you big bully." Rise rounded on him.

He ignored her. "Tranq her. Then bindings back on her and back in her cage," he ordered Della and CM Gemini. Holding the small Fae ready for them.

"Noooooooooooo!" Moaned Balia and struggled furiously.

"You are a monster," Rise yelled at him.

"Yeeeesss monster!" Balia wailed. "Pretty Siren heifer help me!"

Rise took a step towards him but stopped short at the look in his eye. "Enough!" Cooper yelled. "Enough out of both of you."

"Tranq now," he ordered CM Gemini. The Chief Medic had it ready and obliged.

Balia sagged instantly and Cooper looked at Rise pointedly. "And don't think I won't do the same to you."

"You will do no such thing!" Rise stamped her foot at him angrily and stormed out of the room.

Cooper shoved the unconscious Fae at Della to re-cage her, and took off at a furious pace after Rise.

She was all the way to their sleeping area before he caught her by the arm. "Nice adjustment to your wing bindings. Come here." He held her easily when she tried to struggle away from him.

He pushed her up against his bed so her knees were locked with his body weight against them. With deft hands he pulled the bindings tight. Not as tight as he'd pulled them before but enough.

Done. He moved abruptly away from her, stalking back to the Med-Bay and Galley to have stern words with all of them about loosening the bindings on her wings.

"I hate you!" She turned and yelled at him, shaking with impotent rage. "I would rather be back on freaking Moethiica than here with you!"

It was silly. He had saved her ass. But the way they'd treated the Fae had upset her. And she was so angry it was the best she could do.

He turned back to her and his eyes and tone were icy. "I can assure you the feeling is most definitely mutual," he said. "On both counts."

"I liked you better when you were unconscious," he added, folding his arms and staring at her threateningly.

"You would. You Echelon poisoned bastard," she yelled furiously at him.

"Children please!" Jackdaw tried to calm things down by making light of them.

Rise looked around wildly for something to throw. Throwing something always felt so good when you were angry. The only throwable object in sight was his disgusting Echelon helmet. How appropriate. She lunged for it, quick as lightning and hurled it at him.

It missed him. Just. And only because he moved very, very quickly.

Jackdaw held his breath, expecting the worst. But Cooper simply turned on his heel and walked away from her, leaving Jackdaw to retrieve his helmet and pacify a still furious Rise.

## **TWENTY THREE**

The rest of them walked around on tiptoes after that. The tension between Rise and Cooper was so thick you could carve it with a knife.

They both had tempers.

The rest kept quiet and tried their best not to set either of them off.

When an hour or so had passed with nothing but the uneasy silence, CM Gemini and Doon gathered in the galley and let out sighs of relief.

Perhaps the worst of it had passed.

Those thoughts were immediately rewarded with the vision of Rise marching purposefully to the Med-Bay and retrieving Balia's cage.

"Oh godds, where is he?" Doon hissed.

"I don't know. I'm too old for this," CM Gemini said wearily, preparing to rise. But Doon put his hand on her arm halting her.

Rise had merely set Balia's cage down on a small metal ledge protruding out of the wall on the side of the hold.

She peeked underneath the cover and one hand was concealed underneath it for a time. And then she dropped the cover back in place looking well pleased with herself.

"She's unlocked that cage door, I'll put money on it," CM Gemini whispered under her breath.

Doon sighed. "I'll almost be glad to land on Vade5 at this rate."

"How far off do you think we are?" Gemini asked.

"Another 48 hours at least."

"Ok, folks, slight change of plans." Cooper's voice boomed across the hold as he strode towards them. The small device they'd seen constantly in his hand, was glowing intently.

The rest of his words were lost in the wrenching sound of great sheets of impossibly strong metal tearing, and a sudden ten foot shower of sparks arcing into the hold.

Della screamed. Jackdaw, Doon and CM Gemini swore. Rise said nothing but looked a little wild eyed at the scene before her.

There was a split second when breathing lost its optional status, and they were all reminded quickly and completely of how precious that option was.

Then the flare of sparks subsided and something large and circular clicked into place.

The banging on the other side of the elevator entrance was loud and furious. They could hear the frustrated shouts of Celcius's men. They could not get through.

"Been busy?" Doon grunted at Cooper.

"I'm a light sleeper," Cooper replied with a small smile.

"Move to the nice big new hole in the ship, people," Cooper directed them. "We're jumping now."

"A ship jump. Are you serious?" Della asked him disbelievingly, but he had already moved away to where Rise was standing.

Rise was staring doubtfully into the nice big new hole he had ordered everyone to. Whatever was clicked into place was moving slightly. It looked neither safe nor stable.

She turned back to where Balia's cage rocked precariously on the ledge close by and hoped she had done enough to free her.

Cooper grabbed her and pressed her close and tight against his chest.

He didn't even hesitate.

He jumped.

And they were spiraling. Spiraling down a moving, rocking shaft. Their feet dangling in nothingness. Her wings tried to open instinctively, but the bindings held them safely closed.

There was so space for wings in the tight space. They would have torn to shreds along the sides of this thing if she'd opened them.

Regardless of the bindings, which she was suddenly grateful for, Cooper had them held closed and tight against her perfectly.

It was so quick. And the pressure on her body was so strong she felt she would burst.

And then something caught them. And the stillness was as bad as the movement, and it took all Rise's effort to hold down the bile in her throat.

She heard Cooper swear and felt him struggle with something.

Wisely, she determined that the best course of action at this point in time was to shut her eyes and keep them firmly closed.

And then whatever they were caught on released and they shot down again. Thank the gods it angled sharply at the bottom shortly after that and ended.

She felt Cooper ease her into other pairs of hands.

"Take her. I'll help the others," he said. And then two of them had her gently by each arm and she felt them moving up a gently sloping ramp.

When they arrived at their destination just a few minutes later, Rise still had her eyes tightly closed.

"You can open your eyes now," one of them said to her. It was a male voice. A nice voice. She did not recognize the accent, but the voice sounded like it was smiling.

Still, the opening of eyes seemed premature and foolish.

"I think I just need to sit for a little while," she said quietly.

"Ok." There was a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "You sit. We'll be right here close by if you need anything."

Rise nodded and sank back into the chair, gripping the armrests tightly and pressing her feet as solidly as she could into the floor.

It was only a matter of minutes when she heard some familiar voices, as the others were brought to where they'd stationed her.

By the sounds of the cursing and swearing, the trip had not been popular with any of them.

"Are you Ok?" Chief Medic Gemini asked her, concern in her voice. She turned to shoot daggers at Cooper with her eyes as he strode past them both unawares, deep in conversation with another man Rise didn't recognize.

"I think so," Rise nodded, cautiously opening her eyes. "I didn't really like that," she added somberly. "Do you do that often in space travel?"

"No!" CM Gemini snorted. "And no-one likes it. Well maybe some." She looked pointedly in the direction of Cooper, but he was still lost in conversation with the other man. He did look kind of glowy and exhilarated though.

CM Gemini shook her head and turned her attention back to Rise.

"I'm going to check on the others," Gemini told her. "You going to be Ok here for a while?"

Rise nodded, all of a sudden touched by the woman's concern. She had never had that. Most winged on Moethiica are throwbacks. And abandoned or orphaned young. Rise had been abandoned. Had looked after herself. Other people showing concern was very new to her. CM Gemini patted her arm and moved off.

And the full view of the ship's panorama opened before her.

They were at the rear of the bridge. It was huge. A massive flight control desk dominated the centre of the room. From the midpoint of the room and back, system arrays lined the walls.

The front half of the room, or at least the top half of it, was all window.

And the view out of it was magnificent.

The colors of the cosmos swirled outside the ship. Nebuli, Nebula, stars, moons.

In the sheer beauty of it, the fright from the ship jump was forgotten.

Rise felt a pulling, like a gentle tug on something within her. Something was about to happen. Something was calling to her.

She looked around to see if anyone was looking for her, but the ship was a blur of activity.

The others were still slumped, recovering from the Jump.

Cooper seemed to have forgotten she existed. He had his back half turned to her, and was pouring over a large image screen with two other men.

No, no-one was taking any notice of her for the moment. Rise made her way quietly and surreptitiously to the front of the ship and stood before the massive windows.

And The Star rose.

It swum up from underneath the ship and then it was everything. All she could see before her was The Star. Like a huge blue jewel suspended right in front of her.

Rise stumbled as the force of it hit her physically.

The Star's massive awareness pushed into her, vast and majestic. She felt very small in comparison to it.

It drove suddenly deeper and more forcefully into her then, and Rise gasped in pain. The pressure in her head was brutal. And she could not breath.

She doubled over in pain and fell to her knees. She looked up at The Star to beg for mercy, but there were strange shapes swirling in its depths, and she felt its anger.

Rise felt the chill creep over her. They were wrong. She was not who they believed her to be. The Star did not recognize her.

And then Cooper was suddenly there beside her. His hand gripped her upper arm. He lifted her to her feet. He stood her up in front of the angry Star and steadied her.

The Star went out completely.

And the entire cosmos plunged into blackness. Blackness and silence. And all but those on the Forgetting Worlds saw it and felt it.

Breath caught in Rise's throat and she gasped on it, suddenly alive, suddenly breathing again.

Cooper's strong hand was still on her arm. He stood before the blackness with her and held her upright.

And she heard the song.

And it was an old song. One she'd realized she'd known and not known for as long as she could remember.

And The Star was singing it.

Rise began to hum it softly under her breath, in time with The Star. And even at that pitch, her voice was magnificent. Full of promises and power and the birth of new beginnings.

And The Star appeared once more before them.

And it whispered something to Rise, underneath its song, just before it sent the Cosmos back in motion again.

And then there was suddenly searing, burning pain behind her eyes, and ever so slightly they changed color.

And the blue of The Star now intermingled with her startling violet.

The Star moved then. Suddenly passing beneath the underside of the ship. Rise could feel it underneath them and she turned, with Cooper still steadying her, to follow its journey.

But the sight before her stopped her in her tracks.

Every occupant of the ship stood gathered on the bridge looking at her. And as she looked at them, as one they dropped to their knees, hands on their heart, and bowed their heads to her.

## **TWENTY FOUR**

Rise stood staring, not sure what to do.

The crew remained, heads down, kneeling.

A flash of light in the windows caught her eye. She turned back to them as Cooper pushed her quickly to the ground.

An armada of ships hung in the space vacated by The Star.

The first gun fired and the shot flared against their shields, breaking in a booming wave against them. The entire ship vibrated with it.

"Battle shields down." The order was given. Rise was forgotten. The crew were back in their positions, a flurry of activity behind screens and controls.

Cooper waited until the titanium shields were in place and then lifted her by the arm, propelling her quickly to the rear of the ship.

"It's underneath us now." A ship's officer suddenly stepped into space beside him. "It's almost like it's covering it for us. As soon as it moves again it will be open. We can hover you over it in one of the deep flyers and drop you straight into it."

"You'll cover us?" Cooper questioned.

"We'll cover you," the officer affirmed.

"How much more of this can you take?" Cooper queried, still undecided as another blast shook the ship.

"More than you'd think," the man smiled. "We'll drop a disperser in over you. Nothing will follow you through. Well, nothing you can't handle," he added, still smiling. "Some of their smaller craft may slip the opening before the disperser takes full hold."

Cooper whistled. "Some ship you got here."

"Some ship," the other man agreed, still smiling.

Cooper thought about it only half a second longer. "Ok, let's do it."

He had never taken his hand from Rise's upper arm and he propelled her forward again. They moved quickly down a rear corridor and down another level.

Through another short passageway they came to a set of airtight doors.

They stopped and the men shook hands, quickly and efficiently.

"Is she stocked?" Cooper asked, adjusting something on his wrist. It was something new. Rise had never seen it on him before.

"Everything you need," he affirmed. "Gods speed friend."

"And you." Cooper clasped the man's shoulder.

The Ship's Officer punched in the code. The airtight doors hissed open.

The passage beyond looked dark and uninviting. But as Cooper stepped forward, some isolated panels on the walls lit slowly. The Ship's Officer pressed a small charm into Rise's hand. "From all of us. For luck," he said, closing her hand over it. "I promised all of them I would give it to you."

He stepped back. The airtight doors slid shut, and Rise was alone with Cooper in the small, dimly lit passageway.

Beyond it there appeared to be nothing. Just a big black emptiness.

It was quiet in here too. And cold.

"Where are the others and where are we going?" Rise asked, suspicion and the first faint glimmerings of alarm beginning to grow in her.

"We need to board a smaller craft," Cooper advised, placing her firmly in front of him and moving her swiftly forward.

"There's a hatch opening at the end of this passageway. I'm going to drop you through into it. You need to grab hold of the ladder. Dropping you through in 3, 2 ..."

He dropped her, and she forgot all about the ladder. Rise landed hard on the ship's floor and grimaced at the pain that flared in her right ankle.

Cooper was down quickly behind her. Of course, there was no hard landing for him as he used the ladder.

She glared at him, ruefully rubbing her ankle, steadying herself on a strange looking transparent cylinder poking out from one wall as she did so.

"Get in," he indicated the co-pilot's seat.

It was the only adjustment they'd made to it that Cooper could tell off the bat. This was a one man vessel with slight configurations.

Not seeing a great many alternative options available to her, Rise sat. Cooper buckled her in tight and jumped enthusiastically into the pilot's seat.

Rise watched him flipping switches, punching in commands, taking the manual controls and looking way too excited about things.

"Ready?" He asked her.

Rise sighed resignedly and nodded unhappily, gripped the arms of the chair and prepared for the worst.

Correctly she had figured out they were in the bulking hull of the ship where they must launch smaller craft from.

Wrongly, she had surmised that they were only going a short distance because of the size of the craft.

“Are the others in ones like this?” She asked, peering out into the darkness but not seeing anyone.

The others, Cooper thought. It's funny how some people you can know for the shortest amount of time and bond with. Whereas others you can know for ever and you still wouldn't piss on them if they were on fire.

“Not exactly,” he replied noncommittally as the hull opened beneath them and the light of The Star flooded everything around them blue.

He was aware of Rise gasping, and then The Star moved, revealing the drop, opened and waiting beneath it.

Cooper let out a “Fuck, yeah!” under his breath and drove the flyer deep into the drop. Their Confederation mothership, Savana9, immediately launched a disperser over their passage, as promised.

Two of the armada made it through before it took full hold of the opening. Closing both the way into the jump and any way back out of it.

## **TWENTY FIVE**

The fighters that had followed them in, lost no time in their attack. They were fast too. Maneuvering themselves quickly past Cooper and Rise, and turning round to face them head on.

Rise tensed, thinking they were done for, but Cooper took out the first one instantly and sent the other one spinning quickly away from them.

Rise got a brief glimpse of its occupants before they spun away. One human, one hybrid. Their eyes locked on hers, their expressions intense.

Cooper accelerated suddenly, diving at breathtaking speed after the spinning ship and taking them out completely in one singular, spectacular explosion.

"The firepower in this baby," he murmured appreciatively. And then it was all just one, big sickening blur.

Rise was forever grateful when whatever they were in spat them out into the relative calm of normal space. A passing asteroid shower which Cooper managed to rather skillfully maneuver around seemed relatively peaceful in comparison.

As Cooper made various adjustments and studied all manner of systems and read outs, Rise thought about how much she had always wanted to space travel.

Who knew how much it truly sucked.

She prayed they would be landing soon. A big ship like the one they'd just been on would suffice. A large solid planet would be preferable.

"You Ok?" Cooper asked her, looking unreasonably happy with himself and their situation, unbuckling his restraints and reaching over to do the same with hers.

She shook her head and slapped at his hand. "No! And I would like to leave the restraints on please."

"Um, you can't," he looked at her carefully, trying to gauge her level of hysteria.

She seemed alright. So he continued with the facts as they stood.

"We need to get out of these seats and into the Stasis Chamber."

"Stasis chamber? What do you mean stasis chamber?"

Her voice was getting that dangerous rise in volume. Maybe he had not gauged her as well as he'd thought.

"Not like the one they had you in when you were injured," he reassured her hastily. "A deep space one. There are two jumps to Earth from here. We need to be in stasis for both of them. It's to protect us," he added. And then wished he hadn't when he saw the look on her face.

"What do you mean jumps to Earth!" Rise looked around her wildly. "In this thing! You must be joking!"

"This *'thing'* is worth a freaking fortune." Cooper shook his head. "This is state of the art." He took a deep breath, calming himself with some effort. "We're quite safe." He looked at the control panel. "But we need to get in the stasis chamber *Now*."

He reached over and unbuckled her restraints and guided her gently but firmly up and out of the co-pilot's seat.

"But who's flying?" Rise stubbornly gripped the seat with one arm, refusing to move.

"Auto-flight." Cooper said it, and looked at her as he said it, like she was incredibly stupid.

Rise felt herself start to hyperventilate.

"You can't put this thing on auto-flight!" She cried. "You have to fly it! I want you to fly it! I can't believe this thing even has auto-flight! Oh my godds I hate this."

"That's it. Enough," he muttered angrily to himself. Prying her fingers with ease off the chair, he picked her up around the waist like she was a child and moved her swiftly into the strange transparent cylinder thing she'd noticed earlier.

He moved in quickly after her. It was a tight fit. The side she was pressed against was padded. His body pressed against hers as he keyed commands into a controller above her head. Like on the mother ship, the front window was suddenly encased in steel. A dizzying amount of readouts before it.

The fact that she could no longer see just how close she was to deep space reassured Rise somewhat. That and the calmer pumping through the activated stasis chamber was making her feel a little better about their state of affairs.

Cooper placed his palms and forearms on either side of her and shifted his weight somewhat. But it was impossible for their bodies not to touch at least a little, the space was so small.

"Where is Balia?" Rise asked Cooper suddenly, her words starting to sound a little slurry and sleepy as the stasis chamber began to fully activate.

Cooper shook his head. "Don't know. Shoosh now," he said. "Let the stasis take you."

Rise nodded and closed her eyes, close to stasis sleep already, sinking into the padded cushioning behind her.

Cooper deftly fastened her in place and then secured himself. The stasis gas would keep them upright on this short jump, and there was barely room to move at all with both of them in there but better to be safe than sorry.

As the stasis gas began to fill the chamber in earnest, he looked down at the now completely still form of Rise.

Some people were lucky like that. The stasis took them out instantly.

He was not so lucky when it came to stasis. He never had been.

It was strange. He got to experience the transition. Feeling his finely honed, finely trained mind having to slowly relinquish control. Give himself over to the stasis.

The oddest of thoughts came to him at this time. The strangest of feelings.

And this time was no different.

But the thought that came was not a thought he liked. Or one he was even allowed to be thinking.

She was his.

He breathed deep, trying to shake the thought loose with his breath. It was the Echelon energy still pumping through him.

He was very much aware that even now, this long out of the helmet, this long away from them, his thoughts still oscillated between theirs and his own.

He was the first to go undercover on Moethiica. The first to infiltrate the Echelon that he knew of. Jackdaw had warned him. Said that CM Gemini had experience with others like the Echelon. Like them but not even close.

No-one really knew how long it would be until he was completely free of them. He had to be careful. He had to be oh, so very careful around her.

But godds. That Siren energy of her broke against him every time he got near her. But that's what he had to remember. That she was a Siren. And this was some of the power they possessed. To drive a man crazy with it.

Was she doing this on purpose to him? Did she even know how? Did she even feel it?

She had felt the Star when it had marked her, he knew that much. He had felt it with her.

Which was another hangover from the Echelon and another very bad sign he had gotten too close.

He would need to keep his distance. Watch her carefully.

He stared at her exquisite face until the stasis took him, fighting thoughts that he told himself over and over again were not his own.

## **TWENTY SIX**

On GhostSong5, the Echelon Mage, Arc, was bored.

And angry.

He had been deceived. The Siren of the 5<sup>th</sup> had been right in front of him. Naked. Helpless. Bound.

Only a few more precious seconds and he could have wielded the Nephliim Blade properly on her. Who she was would have been revealed to him.

But a traitor in their midsts had ruined everything. Shot him. Killed many Echelon. Saved her.

Saved her, and the little Siren bitch had taken the Diamond with her.

Arc seethed, fresh waves of anger emanating from him. A black glass goblet on the large desk cracked with it and shattered.

He picked up one of the large sharp, black shards thoughtfully.

The liquid from the goblet oozed over the desk, wetting the sleek blonde hair of the Cybriid spread open before him.

Perfect hair. Perfect body. Perfect pussy.

But manufactured to be so.

The most advanced CyTech form in existence.

He knew that there were nerve endings in her perfect Cybriid flesh that triggered receptors in her brain.

He knew her pain was real enough when she felt it.

And she would not die. There was that. He could do things to her over and over again that no organic flesh and blood being could survive.

But they just could never perfect the fear on these things. The memories. For that was where the real satisfaction lay. To keep them barely alive and thrumming with fear. Let them heal a little. Let them hope a little.

Then bring them back. And do worse, much, much worse than before.

Stop as they began to beg for death. Keep their ruined bodies and ruined souls hanging by a thread. Send them away. Bring them back again. Repeat the cycle again, and again and again.

That is how the fear became palpable and exquisite. He licked his lips and felt himself grow hard again.

He remembered how long he had kept the winged bitch Soar alive. Well, not winged for the last few times at the end. The wings were long gone. Already encased in the new entertainment area. He took her under them so she could see them hanging above her head.

And the mind-diamonds. The Cybriids had no mind-diamonds. And that was the most exquisite part of all, capturing those. The power, oh the power. And the waves. You had to free it in the peak of their waves. And the sensations of the waves stayed with the power, thrumming you with it constantly.

Arc groaned and slammed his fist into the desk in frustration.

There were no other females on this ship. And he grew so bored after a time with the Cybriids.

He sighed, running the large, black shard of jagged glass almost absently down her cheek. Blood welled beneath it. Cybriid blood, but still red and satisfying. He cut deeper and harder, making her cry out. That pleased him. He opened his zipper, freeing himself and rubbed the tip of himself between her legs.

The Cybriid's eyes widened as she realized the size of him. It was another Echelon side benefit. An enhancement gifted to the Up-

pers. "All the better to pleasure you with my dear," he smiled at her. It was almost wasted on the Cybriid. Some of the smaller, tighter organic ones couldn't fit an Echelon in them at all. At first. There were ways to fix that.

The comms unit on the desk beside her hip sounded. Incoming. He pressed the screen to take it.

"Yes?" His voice was slightly hoarse.

There was a slight pause. "Clumsy miss. I hope you have plans to rectify it."

The Echelon grimaced and drove himself deep inside the Cybriid.

"There are more jumps to Earth," he grunted.

"Yes, but none as quick as those," the voice replied. "They will be there before you," it added pointedly.

Arc grunted. He was holding the jagged glass to her Cybriid jugular while he pounded into her. The blood was spectacular. Pouring down over her large, quivering breasts. He bent over her and lapped at the blood covering her nipples. He was almost there now. Almost there.

He raised his head, his mouth and chin now covered in blood. "It will not matter. I will make up the time lost when I land."

"Yes. You will," the voice replied sardonically.

There was silence for a time and then the voice asked. "Who is he? And who is he to her? Do we know this yet?"

"Him?" the Echelon scoffed. "Some pathetic human Earth spy. He is nothing. And nothing to her."

"Not so pathetic," the voice mused. "To have done what he has done so far."

"Luck." Arc grunted. "Luck he will pay dearly for. I will enjoy killing him. And I will make him watch what I do to her first."

"You know you cannot kill her until she opens the Veil, Arc," the voice commanded him sternly.

"Yes." he growled reluctantly. "But I can still have some fun with her before...."

"No!" the voice cut him off. "After she opens the Veil you may do what you wish to the Siren whore. Prior to that Veil Opening she is off limits. Well, off limits to your more exotic tastes anyway."

The voice paused.

"We must be in control of her when that Veil opens. It must be our own who come through first."

"Of course we will control her. We have the Blade," Arc replied, as if that settled everything.

"Do not dismiss the might of the Original Makers or the Nephlim amassing behind that Veil. Even those Siren bitches in their full glory. All of them wait to come through and wipe us from the cosmos," the voice chided him.

"You are young, Arc. You have not encountered our true foes before. They are worthy enemies I can assure you."

"But we will have our own come through the Veil first." Arc closed his eyes as he thought of it. Old Ones, even stronger than the ones who ruled the cosmos now. All that power. They would pour through, join with those of them already here and crush the Confederation and the rebels. They would crush everyone. All who stood against them. The thought almost took him over the edge.

"Yes," the voice mused. "It will be a magnificent and bloody final war. And we will prevail, young Arc, have no doubt of that. But do not grow complacent!" He snapped. "And leave the Siren whole until I say so."

"You are right as always," Arc gasped, coming hard as he thought of Rise splayed and bleeding before him, instead of the Cybriid.

"What are you fucking while you speak to me, Arc?" The voice did not sound disapproving, just curious.

"Just a Cybriid," Arc replied. "There are no other females available to me on this ship," he spat angrily.

"There was one," the voice said. "Oh, Arc."

"I was angry," Arc replied. "And she was more fragile than I am used to."

He withdrew from the Cybriid and turned to the ship's guard who stood behind him, leaning back against the wall.

"Bring me another." He bent down and ran his tongue between the Cybriid's legs. "A different flavor. Godds why can they never get the taste right on these high tech bitches."

"Yes, but they make them look so delightful," the voice on the other end of the comms unit said.

Arc grunted and sat back in the chair not bothering to zip himself. Perhaps he would make the guard blow him before he did the next Cybriid.

It would certainly keep the ship's crew in line, and deliciously scared, if they knew they were to be part of his entertainments.

His mind swam with the possibilities. Perhaps this long, tedious trip to Earth would not be so bad after all.

And then, there was all that delicious Earth pussy to look forward to. Fragile and fearful. He was very much looking forward to it.

"Do you have another one coming?" The voice on the comms unit said.

"Yes," Arc replied absently.

"Excellent," the voice replied. "Turn on the image link and turn the one you've just had around properly so I can see her. Spread her just a little wider. There, perfect. I will watch you take the next one, but this one will do nicely as the pre-main event entertainment."

"And Arc?"

"Yes?"

"It's been way too long since I've seen you properly. Stroke yourself nice and hard over her for me until the guard gets back to you."

Arc did so.

## **TWENTY SEVEN**

The first time the recruiters came to visit, his dad shut the door in their faces.

Cooper Pierce heard him angrily tell them to get lost. Their front door was heavy and white. Cooper knew all too well how heavy. It had broken his fingers when it slammed on them when he was little.

Or, more accurately, when his dad had slammed it. An accident. A drunken accident. Cooper had learned the hard way. He was more careful around him now.

It had been his left hand and one of the fingers had never quite got perfectly straight again. As the house shook with the door banging shut, he jumped with fright, and cracked the knuckle.

Nerves. He did it every time that door slammed.

Still, it didn't stop him from going to the window and drawing back the heavy curtains.

They were walking away. In their highly polished shoes. Cooper always noticed their shoes. When they came to the school and watched him, he would see their shoes. Polished and shining. Seemingly impervious to the dirt and dust around them.

Even their car was polished. And very cool. Black, old school Jeep. They could keep the shoes, but Cooper thought he would very much like the car.

One of them paused now to look back at him before he got in to it. Straight back and up like he knew exactly where his bedroom was.

He smiled at Cooper and raised his hand in salute and Cooper responded in turn.

“Get away from there! What the fuck are you doing! Get away from there!”

The stench of stale alcohol hit him as his dad pulled him roughly away from the window.

He hated that smell. He screwed up his nose at it, and pulled away from his father just as roughly.

He was just coming into the first hint of his strength. His dad tottered and Cooper looked away from him in disgust.

The hurt lanced through his father. At what had become of him. And the look in his son’s eyes.

He had so much to tell him. So much to warn him about. They did this to him. They did this. But he was not allowed to say anything about any of it to anyone.

Well fuck them. They could not have his son.

“You’re not going with them!” He yelled at Cooper. “You’re never fucking going with them! You hear me?”

He lunged for him, but Cooper evaded him easily. Well practiced. His poor, tired mother was suddenly there. Gently, expertly, also well practiced, she led his father away.

Later that night, when he got up to use the bathroom, he heard his father crying in the spare bedroom. Not crying like his mom cried. These were silent tears. Still, he heard him.

If it was his mom crying Cooper would hug her until she stopped. He had tried to do the same for his dad once and got a beating he would not soon forget.

He passed by the room and did not try to enter.

The next day, his dad swore off the drink again and started going back to his AA meetings. The recruiters came again a few weeks later.

When they were gone his dad stormed out of the house.

He came back with a bottle but didn't open it. Outstared it from the opposite end of the dining room table.

Cooper loved that table. Red wood colonial. Happy memories of homework and model planes, helping his not so tired mom prepare dinner. Afternoon treats. Stories. Milk and cookies.

They rarely used it now. His mom worked two jobs, sometimes three. There was no more time to prepare dinner.

The recruiters watched him at school still. He began to see their polished, gleaming shoes often.

The next time they came to the house, their timing was perfect.

A freak work accident. The machine had come down cruelly on her right hand, crushing bone and tendon. She was home alone. And a world away from the beautiful girl who had married the handsome soldier.

Broke, worn out, worn down, physically and emotionally exhausted.

It was a special program they said. For boys Cooper's age, conducted at a new state of the art facility at a base in California.

It would be a fully paid scholarship. Secondary and post. Cooper would come out of it with a college degree. He would enter the military as an Officer.

No, they only required her signature.

And that was the last of AA and the end of a marriage.

Cooper didn't see the worst of it. He was gone not long after the ink dried on his scholarship.

They collected him in the black Jeep.

They drove through desert.

Before they passed through the checkpoint to their highest level of their security clearance designations, they showed him the special centre where parents could come to visit with their children.

His father came once. Outside of the designated time. Drunk and threatening lawyers.

His mother came separately. She was no longer in their family home and had moved back in with her mother.

She flirted with the guards who had forcibly removed his father. And embarrassed Cooper equally.

His father emailed him constantly. But it was edited almost to the point of being illegible.

His mother. Well, that was the last of it. He never heard from her.

Cooper threw himself into the rigorous schedule of the academy. From 5am to 10pm, six days a week, every hour was decided for him.

There were only thirty odd other boys and girls with him there at the start.

Each of them underwent the same surgery.

The surgery was a necessity for the military operations for which they were being groomed.

These were the third generation of Earth's Off-World Black Operations. Off-World-Black-Ops. OBO.

And it was hoped that with this generation, they had the surgery perfected.

Like the ones before them, all of these boys and girls had been chosen for a specific brain pattern configuration. Less than .05% of the human Earth population were likely to have it.

The military knew. They scanned for it regularly.

And of that .05% who scanned true, still only a percentage of them were detected young enough, and with the physical attributes and potential necessary to become Off-World Agents. Running solo missions on the numerous worlds the good people of Earth had no knowledge of.

Over time, the best of the best of these young recruits would be briefed on another mission. SIREN5. No matter where they were and what they were doing, SIREN5 immediately became Priority One, should it come into play.

Cooper was the best. Without question.

“Well done son.”

Cooper saluted smartly. “Thank you Sir.”

The Commanding Officer before him meant the world to him. Had become like a father to him. He would follow this man into war. Go to battle. Would do anything for him.

The Commander looked as if he was about to say more.

It was a subtle eye movement from his own Superior, but enough. And he moved on without speaking, to the next specially chosen soldier.

It was a damn shame. He felt incredibly close to this young man. This star cadet. He was going to make an outstanding Agent.

Like his father. Before everything had gone to hell, and taken him with it.

One day, hopefully his boy here would get to know just what his father had done before that happened.

And he hoped the worlds young Cooper was going to see, and the adventures he was going to go on, were compensation enough for a long life lived well, and unknowing, here on Earth.

But what choice did they have?

Yes, the surgery was a ticking time bomb. But their own unique brain maps alone ensured that none of these young men or women would ever sit on a porch with their grandchildren.

But the worlds they would see. And the greater cause they would be part of. These young soldiers would bring back the keys to release Earth from its Old Ones prison. The Old Ones who left Earth stuck in an endless Forgetting Game. Their chains and their webs wrapped tightly around us while they terrorized the cosmos and prepared for the day they would win the final war and rule it completely.

These recruits would be the ones who stopped that happening. They would be the ones who brought back the weapons to free our allies behind the Veil. Those who had the power to fight the Old Ones. Break the game. Free Earth. Save the cosmos.

They would ensure the grandchildren of other men sat on porches truly real, truly free. Not on the porches they sat on now, which were illusion.

Moethiica. All the signs were pointing to Moethiica. So far it had been an impossible destination. An impossible mission. But Cooper would get there. He was sure of it.

## **TWENTY EIGHT**

While Rise showered in the tiny flyer bathroom, Cooper plotted their course to Earth.

They were not far away now. The Star and the jumps it had opened after the first drop would serve them well. If the disperser the mothership had laid over the initial drop held, there was no way anyone could catch them.

There were other ways to Earth. Other jumps. But they had a decent twenty four hours on any of those options now. It was enough. It would have to be. He would take it.

The next jump was longer. They would be in stasis for the equivalent of just over three days. Horizontal this time. The chamber had already rotated itself in readiness for it.

It lay parallel to the floor, the padded cushioned side now the base on which they would lie. The domed cover was pushed back and would automatically close over them.

There was a longer process to going in. A calmer and diagnostics the chamber would run. The gas would contain everything they needed to survive in terms of nutrients. The diagnostics the chamber took for an hour or so prior to them going under would tailor the cocktail for them to perfection.

And shortly after that they would be at the outer webs.

OBO had a transitioning station there. He needed to explain that to her before they got there.

Earth.

Cooper steepled his hands and gazed out into deep space. Not really seeing any of it.

It felt like an age since he'd been there.

He'd seen some things, felt some things, done some things.

His mind drifted to the last woman he'd been with on Moethiica. Well the last woman he'd been with by choice anyway. He pushed the images of the women he'd been with as an Echelon far from his mind. Off-World there was no-one coming to lift you out of your Cover if things got too heavy. You rolled with it. Or died. That simple.

He wondered where he was going next. And then chided himself for getting ahead of himself. Was he really so keen to leave it again?

Rise emerged in one of the black flight suits the Confederation mothership, Savana9, had supplied them with. Almost identical to his own. They were light but tough. And this one she couldn't rip open with her fingernail. Unlike his completely ruined shirt.

Well it was not like it had been his to start with anyway. Part of the bundle of clean clothes CM Gemini had secured for him. He was half sorry to see her out of it. She wore it rather well.

She had used a small knife from one of the supply kits to cut two expert holes in the flight suit. He had hesitated only an instant before handing her the small knife and remained ready for anything while it was in her possession.

As he'd watched her carefully he'd wondered how many times she'd had to do that as a winged female growing up on Moethiica. It was forbidden to sell clothing especially made to accommodate them. Another subtle way to keep them downtrodden.

He had tensed again when it came time for her to hand back the knife. She had met his eyes, sensing his discomfort and instantly

realizing the cause of it. "Relax, Cooper Pierce. I need you to fly the ship."

And she had turned on her heel and gone to take her shower.

She was holding her wings against her now, unbound. It always marveled him how they could fold in like that so compactly. The tips of them rose up high above her shoulders. But aside from those, her wings were invisible.

"I found these," he handed her the self adjusting wing bindings he had found amongst their supplies. Most craft carried at least two of them. She could loosen them and take them off and on as she pleased. Rise looked at them and at him in astonishment.

"I've heard of these but never seen them." There were no wealthy or free winged on Moethiica who she would ever have seen sporting them. She examined them carefully and then fitted them over herself, struggling a little with the exact mechanics of their workings.

Cooper rose to help her. Tying them just underneath her breasts and showing them how to work them. An image of her from the Echelon room rose in his mind and he stepped carefully back and away from her.

Rise was delighted with the new bindings and surprised he had given her some which she could control herself. She looked at him with the beginnings of trust in her eyes.

"I wanted to thank you," she said, almost shyly.

"For what?" he asked, surprised and a little dumbfounded.

"For standing with me. For standing me up in front of the Star. Thank you." She reached out to touch his arm.

But he pulled sharply back from her and turned away to the control panel

"Rise, there are things I need to tell you about Earth before we get there." He changed the subject abruptly. "And we do not have a great deal of time before we need to be in stasis for the next jump."

"Will the others meet us there?" she asked him. Hurt by his reaction but determined not to show it.

"Perhaps," he said noncommittally. "Probably not until after you open the Veil Portal."

"Oh," she responded and re-took her seat in the co-pilot's chair, looking at him a little sadly.

Cooper remained standing. He was not looking forward to this. Not one little bit at all.

"Rise, when we get to Earth's outer webs we're going to land at a Transitioning Station. You've heard of these?"

Rise nodded. She knew that you couldn't just land on some worlds and jump off your ship like you could on others. You had to go through a transitioning process so you could be there, exist there. She didn't understand all the science behind it but she got the basics.

"We'll both need to transition there and go through that process. Earth is a Forgetting Game world. There's no way around it. We won't forget though," he added hastily. "We'll remember everything."

Cooper ran his hand through his hair nervously, looking decidedly uncomfortable.

"Cooper Pierce," Rise said, eyeing him suspiciously. "What aren't you telling me?"

He sighed heavily.

"On a Forgetting Game world, people don't remember anything. Who they truly are. All that's truly possible. Hell, they don't even remember there are other worlds out there. It's a very limited concept of reality. And whatever it doesn't include, can't actually exist

there. So the transitioning has to put us both in a form that the majority of Earth believes is actually possible.”

He took a deep breath and then plunged on with it.

“Rise, there's no delicate way to put this. You won't have your wings there.”

She just stared at him open mouthed, convinced she must have misheard him.

He said nothing further.

"What do you mean?" she asked, gripping the chair arms, wide eyed and horror stricken.

"No-one on earth has wings, Rise. So, if we put you on Earth without transitioning you, your wings wouldn't survive. Most likely, you wouldn't survive. At all.”

“It's not as bad as it sounds," he reassured her earnestly. “Your wings are kept safe this way, out of Earth's atmosphere. And you walk Earth as one of us. As a human.”

This was not going well. He could tell by the look in her eyes. But he didn't know what else to say. He'd explained it as well as he'd been trained to do so. Maybe she was just taking a little while to warm up to it.

"Well I'm not going. You can just take me back to Moethiica right now and I'll take my chances there. Because I'm not going!" Rise screamed the last at him and rose from her chair.

Or maybe not.

She seemed to be getting a little hysterical.

"Rise, Rise! Listen to me." He grabbed both her hands and held them tight. "Look at me. We've got this covered. It's what the Transitioner does. Your wings will be safe. Held in the station. In a sort of virtual stasis almost. You'll get them back Rise. You just won't have them on the ground."

"When will I get them back?" she demanded suspiciously.

"When you leave." Fark. Just the thought of her leaving evoked something in him. And he could feel her anger through her hands. It rolled over him. Not entirely unpleasant. He wanted to take that anger and roll it into something else entirely.

Almost like she sensed where his thoughts had taken him, she wrenched her hands away from him.

"Oh, so someone will just fly me back up to this transitioning station to get my wings reattached after I open the Veil portal, and send my on my way!"

She glared at him fiercely

"And what would you have me do then? Fly home?"

Cooper felt his own anger rise then. His brain to mouth filter deserted him. He said the first thing that came into his head.

"Rise, now you're just being silly."

She gasped at him, not believing the words that had just come out of his mouth.

She was so angry she wanted to kill him. But she really did need him to fly the ship. So she yelled at him instead.

"No, Cooper. Do you know what silly is? Silly is expecting the winged person you believe to be a winged Siren no less, to be able to open a Veil Portal for you after you've taken her freaking wings away and turned her into an earthbound human! That's silly!"

She turned to storm off to the bathroom, but he swung her round, grabbing both her wrists and dragging her into him. Forcing her to look up at him.

"Listen to me. No listen to me!" He tightened his grip on her wrists until she stopped her furious struggling. "When that Veil Portal is ready for you, you're going to transition into whatever form

you need to be in. And once the Forgetting Game is over you can take whatever form you goddam well please.”

He released her wrists and pushed her away from him.

“And don’t worry about getting home to your precious Moethica. If you’re so keen to get back there so a dozen Echelon can do you every which way and back again, it will be my pleasure to fly you straight back there personally, once you’re done.”

Where had those words even come from? He would have given anything to be able to take them back again.

"Rise, I'm sorry." He stepped forward and reached out to her.

She stepped in close, closing the rest of the distance and slapped him hard across the face. Then burst into tears and made a beeline for the bathroom door.

As the door slid shut behind her, Cooper heard the sounds of things thrown and breaking.

With a smarting cheek, he settled himself back at the controls and busied himself with the task of flying again.

He was so not looking forward to being on Earth with this woman when she discovered the slam-ability of its doors.

## **TWENTY NINE**

It was sometime later when Rise exited the bathroom.

He hoped she had cooled off.

He had. He knew he probably could have handled the whole thing better. But, fark, it's not like he'd had much practice at telling Sirens coming to earth they were about to disconnect with their wings. Albeit temporarily.

"You Ok?" He didn't look at her, he needed to concentrate on his flying at this particular junction, but he asked the question. As gently as he could, he asked it.

She sat down beside him but said nothing, arms folded over her chest, and stared straight ahead.

He spared a quick glance at her face.

Her face was calmer. But sulky. He knew that face. He had seen it on women cosmos wide. It didn't matter what he would say now, it would be interpreted wrongly and go down badly.

He was learning.

He said nothing.

Wisely.

Instead, as soon as he was able to, he took one hand off the controls of the ship and put his arm around her shoulders, giving her a gentle squeeze and rubbing her upper arm in a soothing up and down motion.

It took her by surprise. She looked up at his face, but he said nothing and did not turn to her, just kept it calm and focused forward.

Which was fortunately necessary, as it was taking all of his concentration to maneuver the ship one handed.

She sighed and huffed, but the initial tension was broken and Cooper smiled to himself. Say nothing. Show no fear. Calm with touch. Give physical comfort.

The man who had unveiled that mystery of the cosmos to him should be knighted. Of course, it wasn't a man, but a sort of friendlier looking version of the creature from the old Alien films.

Apparently this approach worked not only across worlds but across species.

There were a few clumsy moments in maneuvering the ship, and he had a wry thought that if they impaled themselves on a piece of space junk because he was too reluctant to remove his arm from her shoulders it was going to look very bad on his report.

Eventually it got to the stage where he had it. They were at the second jump. They needed to get into that stasis chamber.

“Rise, we’re at the second jump. I need you to move into the stasis chamber now.”

She nodded and got up slowly, seemingly only noticing it was horizontal rather than vertical for the first time.

“It’s a much longer one this time round.” He turned his head to look at her and then quickly back to the control panel. “Just go back there and lie down in it.”

“Ok.” What else was she going to do? Rise sighed heavily and settled herself into the chamber, lying back against the side closest to the wall.

Cooper activated the sequence for the chamber from the deck and moved back to join her.

He pierced her finger with the tiny diagnostics needle and then did the same with a second one in his own.

"How long do we need to keep these in," Rise asked frowning.

"Not long. Another minute," Cooper replied. "They they go in there." He indicted a small pod on the side of the chamber.

They waited in silence until the pod sounded. Carefully he removed the needle from her finger and ripped a whole lot less carefully at his own, making Rise wince at the motion.

Turning to her he surveyed their lack of space and considered how much more restricted they would be when the dome closed over. The least space would be at Rise's back now where it curved. Which wouldn't do for her wings.

"Move forward," he said. "Let me get in behind you."

"But my wings," she protested. She had wanted to keep them out of the way of him.

"There won't be any room for your wings where you are when that dome closes." He said pragmatically. Which was true.

She shifted forward and he moved into the space behind her.

They were still bound of course, but loose enough that they could be parted. There is an art to it with bound wings. Parting them just so.

Cooper did it expertly, slipping an arm around her stomach and drawing her close back against him. Her wings spread perfectly for the comfort of both of them.

He had slept with a winged before. The realization struck her.

She swallowed hard, wondering why it meant so much to her. He had been off his own world on many different worlds. No doubt he had slept with many a different woman.

But a winged. And one had he had slept with carefully. Gently. Somehow it changed everything.

The dome began to close over them, the first gases of the chamber activating.

Rise relaxed. For the first time enough that Cooper's energy hit her. Waves of it. Warm, male, thundering.

Cautiously she opened herself up to him a little further.

Heat, throbbing, rippling, seeking purchase, pushed into her. She felt the tingle at the base of her skull as they connected.

Possession. She knew it instantly. Whatever ebbed from him, engulfing her in its waves, sought not only purchase in her but possession.

She struggled just a little against it.

And just that slight struggle was enough to send the man who would possess her over the edge.

Cooper groaned. Drawing her even closer to him with the arm wrapped tight and hard around her waist.

It was like the Sirens in the Echelon courtyard all over again. Ripples of pure pleasure washed over him. She was the promise of the most exquisite ecstasy he had ever known. And there was no cold statue here to reach out a hand to and steady himself on.

There was just her. And she was his. And the struggle was exquisite. Because he wanted her to struggle just a little bit, didn't he.

Yes he did. He wanted that. He wanted all manner of things. Some of them unspeakable. Some of them undoable here in this flyer. But he would start with her writhing underneath him, enfolded in her wings.

He knew wings. Knew the sensations that ran through them. And he traced the parting on them now, his hand moving up to come to close around her neck. Rise moaned and he drew her underneath him with an easy, well practiced movement.

He kissed her. Hard and probing and deep.

And the kiss changed everything.

The Veil over Earth shimmered visibly and the Star began to sing.

And Rise felt her own song begin in response to it.

And it was the song of the cosmos, the song of worlds, and stars and rebirth. It was the song of creation as only a Siren knows how to sing it.

Cooper heard but a note of it. But that note was his note. And in that one note he realized why the Sirens had been given this power.

And he realized that the way through her was the way to himself, and something much bigger than himself. Much bigger than her. Much bigger than everything.

He saw then how worlds were made. How portals and bridges and gateways were shut and open.

And as he saw it, Rise saw it, and she saw how and what she must do. And she came to know herself.

Rise's eyes flew open, a deep awareness on the edge of her vision.

Cooper, knew at last what had always nagged at him, ever since he was a child, and for the first time felt at peace with it.

He raised his lips from hers, their eyes locked, and they knew each other, really knew each other.

And they knew there was another secret which would be unlocked once he was inside of her.

But in the world of the ship, the stasis sequence kicked in to its final shut down, the domed roof closing gently over them, the thick white gas encasing them.

And in the dreamless world of stasis, they felt nothing, knew nothing, saw nothing.

And in three days time, when the stasis lifted, and the roof of the stasis chamber opened slowly over them, they remembered nothing of this.

They returned to the former versions of themselves. The whole experience, forgotten.

## **THIRTY**

The creature looked like a man. But it had glittery eyes.

Not shining with health glittery, but glittery like they had sharp edges. Like a cut diamond.

The creature reading these thoughts from the General's mind smiled to himself. It had cost him a lot of energy concealing his eyes. He was glad to have no further need of it.

He stood. His suit had cost forty eight thousand dollars. The product of Behemoths, goats and white gold. It was impeccably tailored and required no smoothing. He smoothed it anyway.

The man behind the desk did not rise. His suit had not cost forty eight thousand dollars. But it did contain gold. Four stars worth of gold. Each and every one of them earned. He was not going to stand for one of these bastards.

The creature looked at the General. Disguising nothing. Letting the full glint on the outer retina shine. He leaned over the desk and let his full power wash over him. The General was a proud man but not too proud to admit it chilled him to the bone.

And they had done it to him too many times of late. His heart began to tap irregularly as the shaking started. He felt the sweat trickle down his back. But he held his eyes. Goddamn it! He was a General of the US Army and he would hold this bastard's eyes.

"The Veil Portal has become visible," the creature, the Old One, Rend, it called itself, said.

The General shook his head in confusion. The creature was back in his chair, like he'd never risen. His heart slowed but the dread rose.

"We've had no reports of any sightings." His voice disgusted him after they'd worked him over with their energy. And that was just the two of them. There were only two of them here now. Only two of them that could land. This one and the other one. He hated to think what power they would wield when there was more of them.

The creature ignored him. "Who is he General? Who exactly is the Cooper Pierce who is having such an affect on her?"

The General stared at him coldly. He had still been Lt General when Cooper Pierce left on this mission. The star cadet, the star recruit. He had been like a son to him. "He is an Agent. An OBO Agent. One of many. That's all I can tell you."

The creature sighed. "Don't play me for the fool General. He is more to you than that." He studied the General intently like he was scanning him. "No matter. We will know exactly what he is, as soon as he lands. If I find that you have with-held anything of significance at that point General... Well let's just say, things will be unpleasant for you."

He was at the door, another one of those sudden movements. The General tensed but continued to stare at him coldly as if it had not affected him.

The creature looked around the room as if taking it in for the last time. And he smiled.

The door clicked shut behind him.

And then his real power washed over the General. The shaking took a long time to subside. He clutched at his heart as the pain shot through it. The bleeds again. He could feel it come from his ears and nose.

A lifetime of memories flashed through his mind. All the way back. Back to when he'd first joined the army. Young, proud, patriotic. A family man and a country man and proud of it.

He would fight on the side of righteousness. Fight and change the world. Make it a better place. Leave it a better place than he'd found it.

These were the thoughts and memories of a dying man. He knew it. Had known it for a while now. And known the creature that had just walked out the door had done it to him.

Him and the other. God, how long had they been here. Working them over. Unbeknownst to all of them.

Cooper Pierce. He would see the boy safely back to Earth and away from these bastards. He could last that long. It was the least he could do for him.

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