

BOOK 1 – TREASURED BLOOD

The SaM Series
By Janalyn Robnett

*I have a vision for this world, and Brother-Friendship
(or Bromance, or Mateship, if you will) plays a HUGE part in that vision.*

-JR-

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Disclaimer:

I take full responsibility for any sentence structure, misspelled words, or grammatical mistakes. I tried my utmost to get it cleaned up as best I could. (Seriously, around twenty read-throughs and I was STILL finding mistakes!!! Grrrrrrrrr!)

Anyway...

☺

Thank you.

-JR-

*The love of man to woman is a thing common and of course,
and at first partakes more of instinct and passion than of choice;
but true friendship between man and man is infinite and immortal.*
-Plato-

*Friendship at first sight, like love at first sight,
is said to be the only truth.*
-Herman Melville-

Glossary

Alronian ore = Used to build Society military vessels.

Aps Weed = Hallucinogen that can only be activated by liquor.

Bloody Bones = A form of excessive swearing. In Ashquin's time it was said, though not proven, that he would eat the bone marrow and drink the blood of those he sacrificed for his own spells. Many believe this rumor to be false, but the expletive is still used.

Cenvaren = Century or Centuries (can be singular or plural)

Cereasian = A metal more valuable than that of platinum or gold mixed together.

Chuggers = In Society legend, men and women who fought in the Mage Wars and deserted their commission during battles of certain defeat and death. They went into the mountains and hills, but with no water or food, they fed on the dead in the fields after a battle, drinking the blood. Madness soon turned them into animalistic cannibals, whereby they turned on each other. To be called a 'chugger' is to receive the worst insult ever construed, as it implies being the worst possible coward.

Day and Night are the same as Old Terran language

Decaren = Decade or Decades (can be singular or plural)

Ekha'ren = Nevonian term of friendship as in the old Terran words: buddy, or mate.

Mikken(s) = Kilometer or Kilometers

Moren = Month or Months (can be singular or plural)

Muck-chuck = Shit/Shit-storm

Muck-wad = Shit-head/asshole

Shiasa Rat = A form of rodent that only comes out at night, highly agitated in daylight.

Sochseen spider = Five feet in diameter when the legs are stretched out, they are one of the largest spider species in the fifty-seven systems, located on the planet Sochseen and very lethal.

Solaren = Year or Years (can be singular or plural)

Tearn(s) = Feet or Foot (measurement)

Terek(s) = Yard or Yards (measurement)

Ternium = A special metal that keeps sinister magick energy at bay, but it is incredibly rare and expensive, thus difficult to obtain.

Tickar(s) = Minute or Minutes.

Tick(s) = Second or Seconds

Weon(s) = Week or Weeks

Zinite = A silver gem that is jagged and not easily cut.

CHALLENGE ACCEPTED...

Blake left them to it, going over to Kylan and leaning against the edge of the examining table. Sedated and unaware, Kylan slept through it all. Blake leaned closer. "Whoever or whatever you are in there, we've found you. And we are going to pull you out of my friend. You've messed with the wrong people."

Kylan's lips turned up into a smirking grin.

Blake pulled back, his heart racing. Though Kylan was heavily sedated, the damn thing inside had heard him... and reacted. "Bloody bones," he whispered. But Kylan's lips relaxed once again, and he did not awaken. Blake was unnerved to realize he almost wanted him to—just to get a glimpse of his younger friend's eyes.

PART I

"...THE NIGHT, THE DREAM, THE THINGS UNSEEN..."

"THE HEART"

-HIBITON-

Chapter 1

"So let me get this straight. You want us to retrieve a religious statue from Overlord Engus' estate, one that he stole from you? Why don't you just go retrieve the thing yourself?" Smuggler and mercenary Blake Haden was confused and impatient with the businessman sitting behind a black oak desk in the highly spit-shine polished study. He stood in front of the desk one hand on his gun-belt, as the other rubbed his whiskered chin. The grime and dust caked there from their recent job was uncomfortable. His shoulder-length dark blond hair, tied back with a leather thong, smelled of stale sweat and Nevonian plasma residue. Getting gritty was part of his chosen profession, but he was tired, his crew was tired, and he was not up for having someone waste his time; especially when he could be back on his ship sleeping after soaking in a hot tub.

"You've got the manpower, Lassar, plus the layout of his palace. You go in, you grab the thing, and you get out—sweet and nice. Anyone on your security detail could do it."

"Of course, they can. But I can't have the retrieval even remotely traced back to me." Cotel Lassar was calm, almost lackadaisical as he explained. He leaned back in his cushy black leather chair and made a show of smoothing down his nicely coiffed shock of graying black hair. He pressed his fingers together in front of his distinguished face, recently shaved. Blake could tell from the stench of the aftershave. The scent of musk and cinnamon reeked from the man. Did he bathe in it or what?

"Not to mention the form of security Engus has placed around the icon," Lassar finished.

"What form of security?"

The question came from behind Blake. Lance was Blake's best friend and second-in-command. He stood by the study's double-oak doors, up to this point quietly observing the exchange. He hadn't bothered to take off his black cowboy hat. He would have had to hold it as there was no thong to let it drape over his back. And keeping his hands free to grab the Nevonian charge-pistols at his hips at any tick was pivotal when dealing with notorious chuggers like Lassar.

Lance was always content to be backup, standing ready to skin his pistols at the slightest sign of trouble. For the moment he was busily chewing away on a piece of mint-stem he'd plucked from the shrubs planted outside the mansion on their way up the gray-marble steps. It was his way of keeping calm during meetings with prospectively dangerous clients. Lance used to bite his nails at the beginning of their smuggling and mercenary operations, but found those precious few ticks to drop his hands for his guns meant the difference between who got off the first shot. Besides which, the constant sound of nibs being gnawed had driven Blake crazy. Edible greenery was an acceptable alternative.

"Well, I'm not able to divulge too much detail," Lassar addressed Lance's question, "except to say that from the information my spies managed to obtain, it appears some type of magical barrier has been placed around where the icon is stored."

Lassar had practically whispered the words as though such information was a closely guarded secret.

Lance grinned and Blake chuckled. "And? What is this, Lassar, some practical joke a rival smuggler put together to get us out of the way for a larger haul?"

"I assure you, this is a legitimate concern, Mr. Haden. As you well know, magick within businesses is frowned upon within Society ranks."

"Bilge!" Blake chuckled again. "You know as well as I do that Overlords and those of be'vacha nature within the Society hire High Mages and elders as advisors. It's the worst kept secret in the Nevonian galaxy. Oh, officially those of non-magick in high places would never let on about their so-called illegal connections, but they do have them. So you really don't need us for this little task. We were five solar days away from you. I know for a fact a few of my colleagues are in the Ty'nesea quadrant, only two solar days away. You sought us out in particular. Why?"

Lassar flashed a smile, cold and calculating.

Blake kept his hands on his hips within reach of the two Nevonian hand-rifles ensconced in their holsters. The safety switches were off, and the charges set at quarter strength should this meeting go down bad. Lassar's job sounded legit, but he had the reputation of pulling stupid stunts such as double-crosses. Blake was half-tempted to pass on this job, bid the man behind it a fond and insincere 'fare-thee-well', and head back to his ship, marking the time and fuel to get here a loss. However, this meeting spurred many questions. Blake needed clarification as to why Lassar sought them out rather than the other smugglers in the area, and how in

the hells the man obtained their real identities as opposed to their undercover personas. That curiosity alone was enough to turn the heads of all on board the *Spiflicated*. Lance shifted his feet and by the increased mint-stem mastication, Blake knew his friend was more than a little nervous.

"It's simple, really." Lassar examined his nails, digging at them as he spoke, in a fake show of confidence. Blake was not impressed.

"As I said, the security around the icon is made of magick. Contrary to your speculation of be'vacha businessmen such as myself using mages in our employ, I do not. Therefore I have no means to bypass the form of security Overlord Engus has utilized. I was told you keep company with certain mages, and given your expertise, I'd hoped you might enlist their aid in this retrieval mission."

I was told you keep company with certain mages? Well that piece of information just made this little get-together even more interesting. Were they being set-up by those seeking revenge on past dealings gone sour? Blake ground his back teeth enough so his jaw almost locked. He shot a warning look over his shoulder at Lance who slightly straightened, his fingers crawling closer to the butts of his Nevs.

Lance's younger brother Kylan and their cousin Jericha were the only mages they dealt with personally. Kylan had only recently graduated from his Second School levels a few days ago. He was eagerly waiting for Blake and Lance to pick him up for their annual jaunt across the stars to celebrate his completion of schooling. He was no threat to the Society. He kept his Darkling energy under tight rein, never drawing attention to himself. So it wouldn't be Kylan that Lassar referenced in such a conspiratorial manner. It had to be the other member of Lance's family.

Jericha was also of Darkling energy and very, very volatile in the world of Society politics. Rumors of the mage community, both Darkling and Luminary, being targeted for annihilation by the Society had been spreading from propaganda for the last six or seven solaren. And though they were just rumors with no actual attacks manifesting, Jericha took them seriously. She'd managed to gather up quite a few mages from both ends of the power spectrum who felt as she did. They were out there right now making some hefty rebellious waves—waves that were turning into political tsunamis. As a result Blake and those he associated with, including Arawan, Lance's sometime-lover, and captain of her own smuggling ship, chose to break off ties with Jericha and her lot of rebel mages. None of them had seen or heard from her in over a solaren.

For Lassar to reveal this knowledge about Blake and Lance meant someone had betrayed their connection to Jericha and Kylan. They needed to know who that someone was, and for that they needed Lassar alive, at least for now. Still, Blake wasn't opposed to sending a clear message to the man, and he looked for an opening to do just that.

He winked at Lance who took the signal and unobtrusively eased the tension in his body. It was a move so slight that anyone other than Blake would not have noticed.

Blake threw up his hands as he paced the nicely polished wooden floor of the study, making sure to leave gritty black marks with his dusty brown boots as he did so. "Mages, witches, wizards, I meet a lot of them in my line of work. Fellow smugglers have a large pool of magical beings from which they seek assistance, that's no big secret either, Lassar. I could probably find someone with magical ability to assist us on this job." He shrugged. "But I can't help wondering if this offer isn't a setup, simply because you sought us out specifically—by name."

An uneasy smile crossed Lassar's thin lips.

Blake hated phony attempts to appease. They made him edgy.

"I was told you were the best."

"Who told you?" Lance asked.

"I'd rather not get into that. They wanted to remain anonymous."

"All right. That's it. Lance, let's get the hells out of here." Blake turned on his heels and stomped off, Lance already reaching for the door latch.

"Wait!" Lassar quickly stood and reached out to them in a panic.

They stopped and turned incredulous looks his way, saying nothing.

"I was told you were an upfront and honest man, Haden. I needed to be sure you had scruples, as it were. Please do not reject my offer. I'll even add an additional one hundred thousand in gold to the proposed fee if you'll reconsider."

"You're that desperate for us to retrieve this statue for you?"

Lassar merely looked at him, wringing his hands in nervous apprehension of what Blake would do.

Blake and Lance exchanged slight shrugs. "Fine. We'll hear you out, Lassar, but not until you reveal who recommended us. It unnerves us when our real identities are bandied about within Society operations. You can understand. The fact you knew who we were outside our smuggling personas was enough to bring us down here, if anything to find out how you obtained that knowledge. Then you throw a three hundred... make that four hundred thousand job, at our feet and that made us even more curious. You know an awful lot about us. Our *mage connections* notwithstanding." He emphasized the words to let Lassar know that little piece of information had not gone unnoticed. "So spill it. Who threw our names at you?"

Lassar remained standing, but took a stylus from his desk and began to fiddle with it, agitation sprouting up along with a few beads of sweat on his brow. The man was nervous about something. Blake was tempted to remain and get every detail as to why.

"Actually, it was more from third party associates overheard in wayward conversations."

"So no one specific," Lance piped in to clarify.

"That is correct. Forgive my misdirection. I had to be certain it was a smuggler and mercenary named Haden who had associations within the mage community. And it is a smuggler who can work with a mage or mages that I need. Someone, as I said, who cannot be traced back to me. For you see, and at the risk of revealing myself and becoming vulnerable to future blackmail from those of your station..." Lassar tossed the stylus back onto his desk and headed for the far wall to his left. He hit five separate spots, which were obviously part of a combination. The wall slid open, revealing a type of shrine in a small closet. Tapestries hung on the walls covered in mage symbols familiar to Blake and Lance from Kylan's practice. One, draped over a square table, was strewn with melted candles of various colors and burned incense cones and sticks. The scent was even stronger here; musk and cinnamon. So, not aftershave after all. And in the middle of the table was the imprint of where a statue had once stood, the dust and ash of the incense revealing the size of its base, about ten intreas in diameter.

Blake gestured to the empty space. "Your icon?"

"Yes. As you can see, I am one of many be'vacha who dabble in old style Witchcraft. The study and practice has brought very lucrative aspects to my business dealings. Though I have not allowed myself to be gauged, I have found that my energy level is low enough to avoid detection by the Overlords, while at the same time high enough to obtain some benefit."

"If Engus had it stolen from this hidden shrine, then he already knows you dabble in magick," Lance said.

"No. I was fortuitous in that I had already removed it from its shrine to meditate on when Engus arrived. I merely hid it amongst my other statues in my art collection. So he never discovered the shrine. No one knows about that except myself, and now you."

He shut the wall and returned to his desk where he pulled an electronic pad from the side and slid it over to Blake who snatched it up to examine.

It was a pictograph of what they might or might not be retrieving—a lady with long flowing hair, her clothing sculpted in gold, platinum, and silver. Blake showed the image to Lance who nodded. "I've seen her around a time or two. Some Goddess, I forget her name."

"She is Isilia," Lassar informed. "The Callatolan Goddess of Prosperity and Success. Since she has been stolen from me, my business dealings have gone into a downward spiral. I'm losing money day after day in my export and trade dealings. You can see why I would like to have her back."

Blake smirked. He was a stiff agnostic in all things mystical and with the mention of his knowing 'certain mages', he was seriously considering passing on this job, if for no other reason than sheer principle. He decided not to for two reasons. One: Four hundred thousand credits would ease up a lot of financial burdens for the ship and crew. He couldn't very well slap away an opportunity like this. And two: He wanted to see if Lassar would let any further information slip.

"How soon do you need this icon back?"

"If you accept the assignment I'll give you ten solar days to bring her back to me. I'll expect status reports every morning and every night. You get a quarter of the fee now and the rest upon completion."

"Half of the fee up front or no deal." Blake wanted to see how desperate Lassar was to retrieve his statue. He flashed a no-nonsense smile and perched himself on the edge of the desk, handing the pad back to him. "My ship is in need of repairs in order to perform to your satisfaction within the time frame you've allotted. You understand I'm sure."

It wasn't a question and Blake knew Lance was reaching for the trigger of his Nev. If Lassar chose to call his guards in, both smugglers would be walking out of here with no money, no job, but their lives would be intact.

Lassar smiled and reached out for a triangular digital contract pad lying on the corner of his desk.

Out of the corner of his eye, Blake saw Lance ease his hold, but still kept his fingers on the butt of his gun. He probably wouldn't start breathing easy until they were out of Lassar's quadrant of space.

Blake took the offered tablet and paced again as he read over the terms. A few moments later he finally smiled at Lance. "My friend, should we find out more before we accept this job?"

Lance shrugged. "I was thinking we should just blow this chugger away here and now and be done with it, but it's up to you."

Lassar paled, his gaze falling to the weapons in Blake's holsters. "What are you talking about?"

Blake casually continued to read the contract as he walked around the desk and leaned against it in order to face Lassar. He tossed the pad onto the desk and pulled one of his Nevs, making a show of checking the settings, then aiming it at Lassar's head. Lance took the three steps necessary to reach the front of the desk, also aiming his Nev.

The man reacted as anyone would with the threat of having their head blown off by two pissed-off smugglers. He trembled and breathed uncontrollably, sweat quickly beading on his suddenly pale forehead and cheeks. "Wh-what are you doing?"

"I just hate it when people mess with me," Blake sighed. "I end up shooting them." He waved the twelve intreas long, gleaming black, two-barreled weapon in front of Lassar with a smile. "These babies make nasty wounds, as you probably already know judging by your reaction to having them aimed at you. The people I shoot get messy, I get messy. It's just a... well, it's a big mess. I'm not exaggerating there, am I, Lance?"

Lance gave him a lopsided grin. "Nope. Not even a little."

"But I'm not double-crossing you. I swear. The job is legit! I'm prepared to transfer the money to any account you choose. No tricks!" Lassar blubbered like a man about to die.

"It's not the job," Blake said and pressed the muzzle of his gun to Lassar's forehead. "It's these so-called 'mages' you say I associate with."

Lassar just stared at him, eyes wide with fear.

Blake leaned forward. "I'm very, very loyal to my friends. If you know things about me that you really shouldn't know, then I'd advise you to take into careful consideration how you plan to deal with that knowledge. If I ever hear of my friends being hunted down, harassed, or even threatened, you're the one I'll be gunning for." He pressed the muzzle deeper into Lassar's skin. "You ever use my friends against me, exploit them for your benefit, I won't bother to explain myself next time. I'll just bust into wherever you are and simply blow your head clean off your shoulders. Well, maybe not so clean, but you get my point."

He leaned down to where he was within an intrea of Lassar's sweating face and smiled, wild and cheerful. "We do understand each other now, right?"

Lassar swallowed. "Indeed we do," he almost croaked, but cleared his throat, never blinking away from Blake's eye-contact.

"Good." Blake straightened and pulled back his Nev, but did not holster it. "We'll get your icon back for you. I'm an easy man to get along with, Lassar." He leaned back against the desk and glanced down at the contract pad again. "Put in half up front instead of a quarter. Do it now," he commanded in a soft, but very determined voice. He did not want the man to misinterpret the fact that it wasn't a request.

Lassar quickly entered the correction on the pad and held it up for Blake to read. He still trembled furiously so Blake had to use his other hand to hold the pad steady. "I believe everything's in order." He winked at Lance and pressed his thumb to the pad. Lassar started to place it back into his desk drawer when Blake aimed the Nev at his head again. Lance aimed his at the study doors, letting Lassar know if any guards tried to come through they'd be dead before they took one step into the room.

"Sign it," Blake ordered, again in a calm, but forceful, manner. "And once the two-hundred grand is in our ship's account databanks, we'll be on our way. If you don't sign it, you die for even daring to think of flipping on us."

Lassar stared at him and a knowing smile formed. "Of course, but just to offer a friendly word of warning, as you so graciously did for me, if something does happen to me, you will never get back to your shuttle." An arrogant sneer twisted his lips. "My men will take you out before you even get down the steps to the lawn."

This was the regaining control tactic Blake had been expecting. He chuckled and lifted his other wrist to his mouth. "G-man, did you get that?"

"Loud and clear, boss," a cheerful voice rang out from the wrist com-link. "Plasma cannons set on live targets, clear and precise—no chance of missing. Just give the word." Gaelin Dravon was their weapons control expert, and he just loved to make the other guys squirm when faced with a possible worst-case situation.

"Stand by." Blake lowered his wrist and shrugged at Lassar. "You see we've been burned a few times by arrogant piss-plugs such as yourself, Lassar. Now, if this was a test of our fortitude then no harm done, but if you think we're not going to get out of here with our lives, you don't know us very well. My team is very good at their jobs. They have plasma-beam cannons aimed directly at you and your men, due to the fact your security shields have been disengaged. My friend and I have beacons in our bodies. My crew can easily keep us out of the line of fire, so we're in no danger from them. We could possibly get hit by falling debris from the destruction the cannons will cause this building, but that won't be their fault. We'll take our chances. A place as sturdy as this should hold up against a few bolts, at least long enough for us to get to our shuttle and lift off. However, you and your men will be dead in ticks. So how do you want to play this, Lassar? Smart or stupid?"

Lance snorted and Blake grinned. He was in his element when playing the nice guy mixed in with the reputation of being a hard-as-stone killer, even though he wasn't. Blake was possibly the most honorable smuggler amongst the conglomeration of pirates, smugglers, and mercenaries. Still, no one outside of the *Spiflicated* needed to know that. And... he never bluffed. If someone died, it was because they chose to get stupid.

Lassar leaned back and smiled, pulling out the triangular pad again. He went for smart.

Blake eased his muscles, but only slightly. They weren't out of this quadrant of space, yet. Only then would they all be able to relax.

"I can see your reputation, Mr. Haden, is not exaggerated," Lassar said. "And you are correct. It was a test of your fortitude. You passed. Please, put the guns away. Tell your crew to stand down."

"Not until you sign the contract and send the first half of our fee and the schematics of Engus' palace to our coded accounts. Once you okay the transfer, I'll put in the encrypted code and the transfer will take place. And according to your stipulations we'll keep you abreast of our status every morning and evening. However, as stated, our ship needs repairs, so we're going to need some extra time." Blake looked over his shoulder. "What do you say, Lance? Three extra days?"

Lance shrugged. "More or less."

Blake smiled at Lassar. "Three extra days bringing the grand total to thirteen. We need to make certain our ship can get out of Engus' air-space with our skin and your icon intact."

Lassar smirked. "I need that icon back by the twenty-fifth."

"Oh? What's so important about the twenty-fifth?"

"It's an annual ceremony."

"The Accrual Fest," Lance informed. "The time when many people throughout the systems honor their Gods and Goddesses of Prosperity. From what I understand, those business folk involved with the Society also take part, but do so secretly for fear of being discovered. If they fail to lace the ritual, for lack of a better phrase, giving the Orders of Luminary their percentage of profits, they end up dead."

Blake whistled. "Whew, harsh punishment. But given the reputation of Society business, I can understand how the Mage Elders would want to make examples."

"Actually the legends say the Gods make the examples, but semantics if you ask me," Lance further explained. "It's a bit too mystical for my taste, but I can see why the stories would elicit such paranoid reactions as to keep the vows from being broken."

Blake smirked. "So, Lassar, you honestly believe this Isilia is going to protect you from the Orders, or rather, their Gods?"

Lassar swallowed heavily; sweat once again beading on his brow. "Let's just say, I don't wish to take chances."

Blake shook his head with a chuckle and holstered his Nev, tossing the pad to Lassar who had to use both hands, and it still almost slipped from his shaky fingers. Blake's smile broadened. "We'll get your icon back to you, Lassar. My reputation as a man of my word guarantees it. But you best remember what I said about my loyalty."

"You're an arrogant son-of-a-kueenas," Lassar snarled under his breath. Nevertheless he transferred the money as well as Engus' palace schematics over to the coded data retrieval on board Blake's ship.

Blake then put in the encrypted codes, leaving the electronic paper trail free of any flags for hackers to tap in and find out where and how the money was deposited. He then slid the contract pad back to Lassar and threw out his hands, as carefree as the sun was shining that day. "My arrogance, what can I say, Lassar? It's part of my charm. Oh, and don't bother to come after us. I'm not going to tell my crew to stand down until we're free and clear of this quadrant. We have a hover cannon device set up in your orbit, with enough Nevonian energy charges to obliterate this entire estate up to a three mikken radius. Anything happens to us on our way back to our ship and then on our way out of this quadrant," he inclined his head and winked, "let's just say we've programmed the device to retaliate accordingly." He spoke into his wrist-com again; "Did you get that, G-man?"

"Coordinates set and locked, boss. One wrong move on their part and it's bye-bye in a blink of an eye."

Blake smiled at Lance as he waved him out of Lassar's office. "Home, Lance. We have a job to do."

As they headed out of the palace, walking slowly but confidently to their shuttle, they kept an eye out for any of the surrounding guards getting trigger happy. The guards watched them carefully, but did not move to fire. Hands to the devices in their ears and nods of assent showed that Lassar had given the stand-down order.

Blake smiled and waved to them. "Have a great day, gentlemen. Thank you for your hospitality."

Lance merely shook his head. "Ass," he muttered, which earned him a chuckle.

"Come on, Lance, my boy, we may be smugglers but we have manners. Smile. Wave. They're probably itching to shoot us and are being good little soldiers, holding their places as ordered. Let them know we appreciate it."

"You let them know. I'm not so socially graceful."

Blake hit the remote on his belt and the shuttle doors opened, automatically lowering the steps for them to climb on board. He gave a final wave to the guards and followed Lance inside.

Only when the shuttle's doors closed did Blake turn to Lance and the carefree attitude was replaced by grim uncertainty. "An Overlord using magick to protect a magical icon? I mean, public shows of solidarity I can understand, anything to keep the citizens pacified, but to actually use magick for something as trivial as an icon? Can you say 'hypocrite'?" Sarcasm. Everyone complained that Blake used it too much, but in this one instance he felt it was justified.

"And what in the Ten Hells was that bilge he knew of us associating with Jericha?" Lance quipped. "Not said, no, but implied! Why didn't we just blast his ass and walk away, Blake? Kylan could be a damn target right now for all we know! And the fact that Lassar is that familiar with Engus? Second-in-command and brother to Sovereign Overlord Turgis?"

"I get your reaction, Lance, but calm down."

Blake headed for the co-pilot's seat of the shuttle. "Trust me, my friend, I wanted to blow his head off for a few ticks there, myself, but we need to know who tipped him off to our connection to Jericha and Kylan. He's the only one who can tell us. So, we get the icon, and when we return, we use it as a hostage over him until he tells us exactly who those people are."

"So you're not buying his third party explanation muck-chuck, either?"

"Oh, hells no," Blake buckled himself in.

"Well Jericha is explainable. She's basically making her own damn bed with the Society. It's Kylan I'm worried about."

"Exactly why we're going to keep an eye on him," Blake said, his tone hopeful, but concern for Lance's brother seeped in, cracking the attempt at confidence. The political turmoil might be rumor, but there was enough of it heating up to keep Kylan under protective scrutiny.

Lance climbed into the pilot's seat and started inputting the protocols for lift-off.

Blake entered his codes for security override on the engines. Soon the shuttle was taking off into the air heading for the thermosphere of the planet. It would take ten tickars for them to meet up with the *Spiflicated*.

Lance glanced at Blake, his brow furrowed in dismay as it suddenly dawned on him what Blake intimated. "Wait. Keep an eye on him? You're not thinking what I'm thinking you're thinking are you?"

"Of course I am." Blake shot him a sideways grin, his brows bobbing up and down.

"Oh no! No way, Blake. He's by no means ready to handle something like this! Especially with Lassar's insinuation he knows who and what Kylan is!"

Blake shook his head. He knew Lance would not go for the idea, but he'd already planned out his response. "Of course he's ready. You know he's been begging to join our team for as long as he's known what we do. And Lassar is the perfect reason for us to keep Kylan close."

Lance worked his jaw. "I don't like it."

"We need him, ekha'ren," Blake said firmly, but his smile eased the seriousness of his statement. "For this job we need him and you know it. I swear I love that kid as much as you do. I'm not going to let anything happen to him. This can be his trial run. Besides, he's finished with school. We were going to go pick him up for our traditional vacation run anyway when this job fell in our laps. We'll just tell him we'll be taking a detour on the way to our favorite vacation zone."

"That is if nothing happens to delay the mission. You know the Spif is not up to John's code."

Blake threw up his hands. "What could happen to the Spif? We'll have a mage on board." He playfully slapped Lance's shoulder, but though his friend showed signs of weakening, he was not thoroughly convinced.

"Okay," Lance reluctantly capitulated. "I suppose this would give us opportunity to watch his back without him bristling about it, while at the same time give him a chance to taste the life of a smuggler, but we're going to have to set him down and lay out the ground rules. One wrong move on Kylan's part," he shook his head. "Gods, Blake, we'll be infiltrating Engus' estate. If they catch us, if they find out Kylan's an official adult Darkling mage who's not been registered to attend an Order—"

"They won't catch us. They won't find out about Kylan. We'll both keep him in hand. By Turgis' balls, you're his older brother! He'll do what you say because he admires and loves you. He's not about to do anything that will get us to second-guess taking him along."

Lance sighed as they cleared the orbit of the planet and sought out the *Spiflicated* waiting for them just out of reach of Lassar's cannon fire. "All right, but our plan better be solid, and I mean not even a crack in the foundation."

Blake patted his shoulder and smiled. "Already working on one, but first we need to bring Kylan into the fold." He flipped a switch to turn on ship-to-ship communications with his engineer and pilot. "John, this is Blake."

"Yeah, boss?" a deep voice responded.

"How's the Spif for a dry run in the stream?"

"She could stand a few refits, but if it's a short distance, she should hold up."

"Not exactly a short distance, but closer than our next destination. Use the lowest stream setting and make for Lance's home planet. We need extra help for this mission."

"Setting a course for Dragorn, boss."

Blake flipped off the com device and winked at Lance who shook his head, still unwilling to accept Kylan coming along for fear of the safety margin. Even though Kylan was a powerful mage, he was young and as yet untested. Still, Blake and Lance had been inexperienced once, too. Blake leaned toward his friend and grinned. "Time for Kylan to earn his Nev, my friend."

Lance let out a resigned breath. "I just hope he won't have to use it."

Chapter 2

Aboard her ship *Scourge*, Jericha of the house of Tri'el sat in her chambers with the lights dimmed to a dull evening level. Her linquin familiar, Absynthe, had taken to exploring the ship at her bequest. She was expecting a call and for the moment peace and quiet appealed to her. Though Absynthe was loyal and protective, the animal did have a tendency to hiss and growl at any slight sound that interrupted his naps. For now, Jericha simply required a calm mind. It had been a long few morens, and moments such as these were a rare luxury anymore.

She crossed her booted feet at the ankles on the corner of her dining table, which had a square communications screen to her left. Her hands were folded in front of her, and she closed her eyes, breathing in deeply and releasing it slowly. It had taken time to plan this thing. Now all she could do was wait for the results, if any, to be relayed.

A hailing whistle from her communications expert on the bridge interrupted her solitude. She flipped a switch. "What is it, Maksa?" she said, rubbing her tired eyes. The green of her irises was slowly being eaten away by the Darkling energy that filled her body and warped her vision. It reached full intensity a solaren ago. If she had been a student at an Order for Luminary she would have been certified Adept and forced to wear that damnable tattoo on the neck; a symbol of training to the Society to prove she could control her magick. But she'd refused such a direction for her life, insisting she could teach herself how to control the Darkling waves, and to the hells with the Overlords and their power games. But, Gods, the effort it took to control the magick, to keep it at a tolerable level. It fought her at times, like now. She closed her eyes and pushed her memory to happier times with her parents and Lance and his family, anything to keep from releasing a ball of Darkling energy at the floor, or the ceiling ... or her communications screen.

Her hailer had not responded. "Get on with it, girl, I don't intend to sit here and read your mind."

"I'm sorry, Captain, but an encoded signal is hailing you from an unknown source."

Jericha checked the chronometer on her console station. "Don't worry. I've been expecting it. Closed channels, Maksa, and if I find out you listened in I'll have your head, and you know I mean that literally."

"Understood, Captain. Sending the code to your console now. It'll be decoded on your end and encryption utilized."

"Carry on, Maksa. Tell Samuel to hold the *Scourge* steady here for the time being. Orders throughout the ship: Relax and wait. That is all."

"As you say, Captain."

When communications with the bridge ceased, the blinking light on the console told her that *he* was standing by. Did she really want to hear what *he* had to say? Deciding there was no going back from this, she hit the button. "Here," she said.

As suspected his voice came over the speaker disguised. Hers would also be disguised on his receiver.

"It's been put into play," he said.

She leaned her head on her chair's headrest and knitted her fingers over her abdomen. "Any problems?"

"None so far. Are you certain about this? I could lose some men."

"You will lose some men, my darling. Collateral damage, you know."

"True, but..."

"Don't tell me you're having second thoughts. You need this as well as I do and you know it." She loved the man, as much as she could love, but sometimes his indecisiveness raked against her nerves.

"No, no second thoughts, just wondering what you plan to do if you find out it's true."

"I plan to act accordingly. Intended agenda and all that."

"This could become a very dangerous situation."

She smirked. Dangerous didn't begin to describe how bad this could get. "As usual, dear heart, you underestimate the players in the game."

"You haven't told me why you think this is going to prove anything conclusive. All you have is a suspicion."

She stood from her chair and moved to a side table by her chamber door. Lifting a crystal decanter she poured some Seronian brandy into a snifter and breathed in the vapor before taking a sip. "You know the legend of the Badlands, particularly the Phantom Lane?"

"Of course. Also known as the Boneyard. It's rumored that mages can't tolerate the negative energy in that area. Stories tell of ghosts haunting the place. Muck-chuck if you ask me."

"Not so, my love." She eased into her chair again, leaning her elbows on the edge of the table and swirling the snifter between her gloved hands. "I've been there. I can attest firsthand that the legends have some basis in truth. Maybe not ghosts, but something malevolent resides there. I've seen the Boneyard, as have many of my mage friends. Reports indicate that if a ship draws too close to a specific field that resides there, engines and power shut down.

"Smuggler friends of mine have gone in to investigate only to return with reports of energy they can't explain acting like a type of gravitational pull. A ship goes in and that's it. They simply cannot break free. I liken that stretch of area to the spider webs of Sochseen, trapping prey with no more than a lure and an unbreakable seal. Many scavenger crews outside that field try to tractor out a few ships to see if anything of value can be salvaged. In the end they give up; the stress on their ship's engines sometimes cripples them. Every once in a while a salvage crew will get lucky, if pieces of the ships are close enough to the outer boundary of the Boneyard, but that's few and far between. Though the myths surrounding that area are widespread and padded with superstition, there are witnesses who speak truth regarding the Boneyard's tragic tales. Those of us who seek to hide there from the Society military pay heed and respect to its many dead, by giving it a wide berth."

"I've heard the stories," the man replied. "I've often wondered why it's called 'Boneyard' instead of 'Graveyard'."

"Simple. The crews of those trapped ships die slowly from failing life-support. Witnesses say that rather than die from suffocating, the victims implement their self-destruct option. The explosions are enough to send pieces of ships close enough to the outer boundary of the field where they remain until a salvage crew can manage to pull them out. Many times fragments of bodies are embedded into those pieces. Blood, tissue, bones, sometimes even limbs are found. Sometimes heads, or parts of heads. Rather gory, yes, but necessary to my point. I took a chance in going to the Boneyard last solaren, in search of such pieces."

"For what reason?" The man almost shouted, appalled.

"Oh, I had a very good reason. An experiment, you might say. You see, the legend about that place and how it affects mages is not without merit. We are highly sensitive to death throe energy. It crawls over us like prickles of electricity. Be'vacha are unable to sense it, but many mages become too sick as a result, and have to leave the area. They literally cannot stomach it. I had no idea if I would be able to stay there long enough to find anything, but I was determined to search amongst its ruins, maintaining a safe distance, of course. Taking with me a be'vacha scavenger I'd hired, we managed to find a drifting piece of hull. Using a tractor beam we pulled it into the shuttle. When I got close to it, the piece made me violently ill. Bad magick we call it. The violent death echoes cling to such pieces like space sealant. The be'vacha quickly placed the piece, complete with remnants of human bone, into a ternium-lined box.

"Upon returning to the *Scourge* I had the be'vacha break off a very small piece of the hull with traces of bone lodged within. It was no bigger than my little finger. Unprotected, it made me dizzy and ill even then. So small a piece, yet it almost incapacitated me. And I'm powerful in the Mage Arts. On my own power, I could do nothing to alleviate the effects. The be'vacha placed it in a small locket, also lined with ternium, to block the energy. I wore the locket to my uncle's funeral. When discussing with my cousin how I would like to take him on as part of my crew, I inconspicuously unclipped it. Upon my first mate's suggestion, I had taken some medication before arriving at my cousin's home, to bear me up under the energy's influence as much as medically possible. My stomach rebelled so badly, I wondered if I could keep from retching. My cousin showed no reaction whatsoever."

There was a pause as the man took in this information. Then; "He felt absolutely nothing?"

"That's right. That's when I became more than suspicious of his talents."

"Perhaps you only got ill as a result of suggestion. He had no idea you were carrying the piece and so did not react as those under suggestive stimuli."

"As a matter of fact, I anticipated your argument, so I tested it on my mage crew. All of them became very ill, thinking they'd been infected with a virus. It was only afterwards that I told them where I had gone and what I had retrieved, or that the locket was anything other than a locket."

"So no power of suggestion. This stuff really affects mages in such a way?"

"Yes, and before you think that such an energy in itself is a weapon, may I remind you that be'vachas also end up dying in the Badlands in their miserable attempts to see if the legend is true? I was heading in there, dear heart, not certain I would ever come out. It's by sheer luck and determined planning that I did at all."

"It is that dangerous?"

"I put my affairs in order before going in there. And all I wanted was a piece of hull, not the entire Boneyard. So, be aware, only small pieces can be found if at all, hardly enough with which to build a weapon. It took me almost three weons to locate just the piece we recovered."

"So the situation as it currently stands would be the most conducive and timely to the end game."

She mock-saluted him with a raise of her snifter and took another sip. "Indeed."

"And if he isn't what you think?"

"Then we do things your way."

"Well, I am intrigued," the man said. "I'll keep you posted on my findings."

"I'm sure you will." She hit the button to end the communication, and leaned back taking another savoring sip of the brandy as she put her thoughts together. She touched the locket, an oblong pinkish-gray metal ornament, curiously carved by Callatolan artisans. The inward layer was made of ternium. Used to help mages shield themselves from enemy magick, ternium was as rare as it was powerful. The be'vacha who had acquired it for her had demanded much in payment. Jericha paid him by blasting his head off when the mission had been accomplished, simply for being too greedy. The locket still contained bone fragments from either a mage or a be'vacha, either Human or other species. Why she wore the thing was beyond her, but she never took it off.

She hit the button on her console again. "Maksa, patch me through to Turlos, the LeLon colony. I have to check in with someone."

"The relays will connect us in approximately two tickars, Captain."

"When you have the magistrate of LeLon, tell them you want to speak to Chaporro. Once you have him, patch him through to me. Also encrypted."

"As you say, Captain."

Moments later Maksa hailed her. "Chaporro for you, Captain."

"Good." In a few ticks an old man's face appeared on her screen, whiskered and haggard with straggly hair draping over his face. "Hello, Chap. Did I wake you?"

"What the hells do ya' want, girl? I was having a very pleasant dream before ya' buzzed me." He rubbed his face and shook himself awake.

"Just wanted to see if you were still alive, old man. I may have a job for you if your hands and eyes are up to it."

"What sorta job?"

"Something in line with your expertise. You up to having some fun?"

"Depends. How much ya' willin' to pay me?"

She grinned. "Never mind that now. I'll have your fee. Just wanted to see if you were willing."

He yawned, releasing a howling high-pitched sound at the end. "All right. Long as it's legal."

She smirked. "Since when do you care about your work being legal?"

"Since the Society began to crack down on people like us."

"You're not a mage, Chaporro. Not anymore."

"Maybe not, but smugglers'll be next on their agenda. Watch'n see."

"You're no longer in that business, either."

"Doesn't mean they don't have a file on me as long as your ship with charges that carry no expiration date."

She chuckled. "You'll be safe, old man. I give you my word."

"According to Lance your word is full of muck-chuck."

She frowned. "Yes, well, Lance has his own concerns to worry about. I'll not go into him with you."

"Is that it then? Can I get back to sleep?"

"Of course, Chap. Oh, by the way..."

"What?" he asked gruffly.

"Have you heard from Arawan lately?" She grinned, knowing that would stir his anger.

He quickly slammed off his side of the conversation and she broke out into a fit of laughter. "Poor, poor old man. Sorry about that, truly." She leaned back and downed the rest of her brandy. Deep inside, though, she really wasn't sorry at all.

†††

On the planet Dragorn in the northwest province of the main continent was the section of territory given to Humans for colonization. For over five cenvaren, many planets within the fifty-seven systems throughout the galaxy allowed Humans to become entrenched neighbors with the indigenous species. They were accepted, but only under strict adherence to boundaries. They could transform the lands given to them on any planet that could sustain them. Even some moons had been terraformed to accommodate the increasing populations.

In order to maintain some connection to their own historical ties, areas called 'Terran era colonies' had been manufactured. These colonies specialized in such eras as the 1800's, the 1700's, or if truly needing a taste of living off the land, Medieval to Renaissance eras were offered.

The historical era atmospheres served mostly as vacation and tourists stops for Humans to pursue a desire to live in what they considered simpler times. They had everything from wooden spoons and plates, to fine glossy stoneware dishes. Electric, solar, or lunar powered niceties, with their wires and chips, were never completely eradicated from the seemingly bereft and primitive-looking hut villages, or the cities of mortar and horse-drawn buggies. Even the castles on distant mountains, complete with deeply dug privies, algae-infested moats, and mud-soaked roads, as well as the meals eaten by hand, were never fully without space transportation ports, food dispensers, and waste disposal units. The modern marvels were well-disguised within either walls or artificial trees.

On Dragorn's Human province, they had chosen the old Edwardian era of the early 1900's; clothing, housing, even the horse and buggy modes of transportation. Ships off the Falcon Bay harbor on the Acrean Ocean had been built to capture the ambiance of luxury cruise liners from that era.

When one stepped off their space ships onto the era colonies, one felt like they had stepped back in time.

Blake and Lance landed their shuttle on the hill about forty tereks in front of the large Edwardian style two-story house situated on a cliff overlooking the Acrean Ocean, but not before they caught sight of their reason for coming here. Kylan's long dark hair flowed out behind him as he ran from the edge of the cliff towards the house, waving with exuberance. He was always overjoyed to see them return, mostly out of relief that they were still alive, but also because at this time of solaren after each school session ended, he would go with them to spend time catching up on their recent excursions, and to visit other planets for recreation. One planet in particular had been added to the itinerary for this trip. After all, Kylan was legitimately a man, now. It was time to initiate him into the vices such an age incurred.

Blake always marveled at how charged up the kid became, even though during the last vacation his enthusiasm had waned a bit. *Growing up*, he thought. *The kid is growing into a man. Even if he still looks frail and pretty.*

Kylan was always kidded about his looks. He hadn't quite filled out yet, and wouldn't, not for a few more solaren. His angular features, long and shiny dark hair, his lean and lanky frame, and long and slender fingers full of magick when directing energy, all these things made him appear androgynous, thus susceptible to teasing from those who didn't know him very well. Though both Blake and Lance had witnessed a time or two, when Kylan was pushed into a corner. He always managed to unleash his magick on the unsuspecting.

Blake's connection to Kylan was like that of an older brother. Blake and Lance had shared a stint in the Optelarin army about eight solaren ago when they were Kylan's age. After Blake had saved Lance's life during a not-so-routine training mission, the House of Sleenine, a magical family of some prominence on this planet and particularly on this continent, had taken him into their home, unofficially adopting him. Being raised in an orphanage and never having a family himself, the Sleenine family had become Blake's.

He would have included Jericha in that group, being they had once been lovers, but she was far outside his sensor sweep now, possibly for forever.

Kylan was practically jumping up and down with impatience as Blake hit the engine cut-off switch and Lance opened the shuttle doors. He was the first out and swept his younger brother up in strong arms, flinging him around with shouts of joy and laughter. "About time you mutts showed up!" Kylan's excited grin melted Blake's sometimes icy heart. He'd been knocked down a few degrees on the feelings scale over the solaren. The deaths and ceaseless violence associated with his profession had made him jaded, but this kid ... well, if Kylan could still find a reason to laugh, even after the deaths of his parents, then so could Blake.

Lance finally released his brother allowing him to run at Blake. He used to jump into Blake's arms, he had been that small once, but now he was gaining on Blake's height, and with a few more intreas would soon surpass him. "Hey, Spryte!" Blake chuckled and slapped Kylan's back in joyous greeting.

Kylan didn't care about the nickname. Blake had been calling him 'Spryte' since the first weon of their meeting, and all because of the kid's looks and magical ability. "If anyone but you called me that," Kylan laughed.

"No one but me can call you that. It's strictly ours. Not even Lance uses it."

Lance smiled. "Are you kidding? Not after what he did to Jaren when he tried to use it."

Jaren, the second-in-command to their smuggler colleague, Arawan, had learned a very painful lesson after using the nickname in a snide way to address Kylan. He'd added that the name fit because Kylan looked too frail to actually be able to fight hand-to-hand. Kylan immediately called up his magick and threw the arrogant upstart into a bulkhead on Arawan's ship; hard enough to knock the wind out of him, and leave a slight dent in the bulkhead plating. Realizing his mistake, Jaren owned up and apologized. He never underestimated Kylan's masculinity again. They'd become friends afterwards. Jaren liked how Kylan had stuck up for himself without calling his older brothers to fight his battle for him.

Kylan playfully slapped his brother in the gut. "That's wise, especially since my magick's gotten a bit more powerful this last solaren."

"Ah, that just means it's maturing, like you are." Blake clapped him on the shoulder. "But I'm with Lance. I sure as hells would not want to see you at full strength when you're pressed. I think Jaren is still nursing those bruises you gave him."

Kylan said no more on the subject of his magick and took a long look at the shuttle with its pitted hull, scorch marks, and various color plating. He whistled, "Turgis' shrunken balls! If you didn't want to call attention to yourselves, this would do the trick."

"I told you he'd make some insulting comment," Lance smirked.

Blake shrugged, undaunted. He reached up and stroked the hull. "Kylan, meet the *Zeckon*."

"*Zeckon*?" Kylan laughed. "That's 'sprite' in the old mage language!"

"Well, you always wanted to come along on our adventures."

"So you named this piece of junk after me?" Kylan laughed, not offended by the joke.

"Lance's idea," Blake pushed off the blame.

Lance went on the defensive. "Now hold on. Whose idea?"

Blake put his arm around Kylan's shoulders as they continued the jovial bantering. "Well it's small, it's magical—"

"Wait. Magical?" Kylan perused the shuttle's outer appearance once again. "How is this thing magical?"

"It keeps flying in spite of the odds, and I honestly don't know how. I'd say that's a dose of heady magick, wouldn't you?"

Kylan grinned. "Yeah. I guess it would be."

Blake laughed, truly glad to see his younger brother in spirit. Kylan looked good. Stronger, healthier than last solaren. Then again, after losing his father, it had been surprising the kid could even stand under the suppressing grief during the funeral. Compared to those critical days, the change in Kylan now was a relief to see. "So... you've finished second schooling, I hear! Graduated with honors?"

Kylan couldn't contain his smile. "Yes. And I'm of age now. You know what that means?"

The smile never left Lance's face. "Your first brothel."

"Already?" Blake feigned surprise.

"We did promise him, Blake." Lance shrugged, playing along. "If he graduated with honors we'd get him to his first brothel when he was of age."

Blake sighed, "Yeah, we did, but then with the new laws the Jinx has had to bow down to—"

"What do you mean new laws?" Kylan was incensed, his deep voice raising an octave.

"Yeah, Blake, I forgot about that new age restriction going into effect." Lance rubbed his chin and hissed through his teeth. "That's gonna make it a kuenas to get Kylan in."

Blake whistled, "I don't know, Spryte. Jinx has set up new parameters. Their licensing and all," he shrugged, giving Lance a wink.

Kylan had enough and jabbed Blake in the side. "Brothel," he growled. "Jinx. You promised."

Blake shot Lance a questioning look as he rubbed his side and pretended the jab had been worse than it appeared.

Leaning against the shuttle Lance's smile widened. "Maybe Cheshire will turn the other way, Blake. I mean, we are her best customers."

"True. But Spryte better watch out with her. She takes one look at him, she might just hire him on. Ow! Hey!" This time the smack doubled in strength mixed with a scathing glare. "Keep that up, kid, and I'm gonna assign you polish duty if you've got that much strength in your arm." Blake patted the shuttle to illustrate his meaning.

"Stop kidding around. You two promised if I passed with honors you'd take me to Jinx. You welching?"

"Okay, okay. You caught us." Blake gently squeezed Kylan's chin. "But who can resist teasing someone with a face like this?" His brows shot up in surprise when Kylan grabbed his arm and twisted it behind his back.

Lance quickly straightened, surprised as well.

"Stop joking about my looks! I mean it!"

The pressure on Blake's shoulder was impressive. "Damn, kid, you've sure become assertive."

Kylan let him go and crossed his arms over his chest. "I learned some things this last sequence of schooling."

Blake rolled his shoulder to work out the kink. "I should say so." He winked at Lance. "It's always the slight ones you gotta worry about, ain't it?"

"No magick?" Lance asked Kylan.

Kylan looked down, kicked a loose rock. "The political faction on the mage front is heating up. I thought it best to learn some defense outside of using magick, just in case, you know, the rumors prove true."

"Smart." Blake stuck his hands in his back pockets, not at all happy that such necessity had hit so close to Lance and Kylan's home. But in light of what they were going to ask of Kylan, a bit of self-defense training would be encouraged anyway.

"So," Kylan wagged his eyebrows. "Brothel?"

"Brothel. But first—lunch! Lance and I are hungry. And," Blake took Kylan's shoulder. "We have a favor to ask."

"What favor?"

"We'll talk about it over lunch." Blake pulled Kylan close as they headed for the house. "I hope your bags are packed and ready!"

"Of course they are. Have they ever not been?" Kylan slapped him in the gut again.

Blake put Kylan in a playful head lock and winked at Lance over his shoulder.

Lance smiled, content to stay back. He'd already decided to remain clear of the subject of why they were here and let Blake handle the talking. Being too close to the situation, he still harbored reticence over bringing Kylan into the job, even though he had reluctantly admitted that they couldn't succeed without Kylan's help.

Blake took it all in stride as they entered the house and the smell of cooked beef and buttered noodles filled the air. "Gods, Spryte, you never cease to amaze me!"

"I cheated some. I used magick," Kylan admitted, a little abashed as he took their leather dusters and hats and hung them on the hooks just inside the entry way. "Out in the city and villages I keep it to myself, but here? I'm free to practice as much as I want. Come on, all I have to do is serve it up. The table is set and waiting."

Blake rubbed his hands. "Lance, my friend, I swear if Kylan was a woman—"

"Shut up!" Kylan shouted as he disappeared into the kitchen.

Lance laughed, a hint of joy at being home in his eyes, but there was also that underlying cloud of concern.

Blake squeezed his shoulder. "Don't worry, if he doesn't want to do this we won't force him. I can find someone else."

"Naw," Lance sighed, resigned. "He's graduated. He's old enough to make his own decisions."

Kylan popped his head out from behind the kitchen door. "You two going to eat or stand there all day jabbering?"

Blake threw up his hands. "Just like a woman, I'm telling ya'."

"Try saying that with Arawan or Jericha around!" Kylan shouted back.

That stopped both Lance and Blake cold. Their last encounter with Jericha occurred over a solaren ago, at the memorial service for Lance and Kylan's father. It had not been a good one.

Jericha had come to the house under the guise of family solidity in mourning. But her real agenda was soon revealed within a hovarn of her arrival. She had not come to mourn, but to use the moment as an excuse to coerce Kylan to join her cause against the Society....

†††

Blake watched his young friend put up a strong front with Jeshen's friends who had come to honor his memory. Lance and Kylan's father had died in his sleep only a few days before. The grief over his wife's passing a solaren ago had culminated in ill-health, which brought on an untimely death.

Their mother had returned home from a job off-world. Six morens of separation, and she had called earlier that weon to inform that her assignment had been completed, and she would be home the next day. Only Jeshen was also off-world and would not be home in time to pick her up from the space-port.

As a result she had rented a hyper-thrust vehicle during one of the most intense winter storms of the season, with rain, thunder, and lightning slamming down onto the capital city of Cavosa, forty mikkens away from their ranch home. She could have waited another day until the weather cleared, but was eager to get home to see Kylan. She had signed a waiver, releasing the rental company of responsibility for injury or death during such storm-ridden conditions.

Unconcerned, she climbed into the vehicle and programmed the route home into the computer's consol, as well as the shielding needed for travel through lightning storms. She'd been about twenty mikkens out of the city when the console erupted in sparks due to what would later be determined as a short in the signal relay system. Thus the ship being unprotected, acted as a lure bringing a blast of lightning which hit the hyper-thrust, causing it to lose control. The charge had caused damage to the relay in the steering component, resulting in her crashing into an intensely forested area. The incident happened too quickly for her to use the manual override to regain control, and she died on impact.

The investigation concluded that, despite the malfunction, which resulted from a freak dislodging of components during the rough ride, no one was at fault. Majeen had died from an unfortunate accident. The case was closed.

Jeshen had never forgiven himself for not being home to pick her up from the port.

As a result, his depression had eaten away at his spirit, slowly leeching the life out of him, until there was nothing left.

Lance had hated leaving Kylan in that situation, but he needed to do what he could to bring income into the house, and that was with Blake and their smuggling operations. Kylan said he would take care of their father, go to school, and do what he needed to do for the House of Sleeine. He'd shown his strength of spirit even then. But now, Blake and Lance could see the act was slipping. Kylan was about to lose it. All the well-wishers, the condolences, the hugs and tears, both real and feigned, had worn down Kylan's soul.

With both parents lost in less than one solaren, he'd be the caretaker of the estate now. Lance had been tempted to resign from Blake's crew in order to stay with Kylan at least until he finished his second schooling, but Kylan refused. The money Lance brought in from the missions they undertook was invested in business ventures, enough to keep the bills paid and Kylan's tuition covered. He would be fine. He'd assured Lance that what he needed was time alone, anyway. Still uncertain, Lance would not push the issue, not if it was what his brother wanted.

Blake, Lance, and his lover Arawan, their arms around each other, exchanged worried glances as they watched Kylan play host to the mourners. "He's close to tears." Lance shook his head. "He's so calm and peaceful on the outside, but his eyes tell a different story."

"We need to get him isolated, help him release the grief," Blake sighed. He hated it when his family was in pain, and Kylan had no means to shore up his heart and mind against the hard knocks of life. He'd grown up as any regular kid, with a family, a house to come home to each day, school, homework, and chores. Normal. His mother's death had been sudden and tragic and it had started things crumbling out from beneath him. Now with his father's passing, it was too much, too soon for Kylan to process.

Lance clenched his jaw, on the verge of losing it in an entirely different way. The mint-stem he'd been chewing was in sore need of being replaced. "All these people hovering around, it'll make it difficult to pull him away."

"Is now a good time, though?" Arawan asked. She and Lance had an on-again, off-again romance since they met over two solaren before. She'd been there for Majeen's memorial and she was here now. She was good for Lance, always sharpening his focus on things, but the way her care-free spirit affected him, Blake had no idea why Lance kept her around when all she wanted him for was friendly sex. Still he never complained when she took off for parts unknown and for moren at a time. Perhaps they were just casual lovers with no hints for anything permanent. She was with Lance now, though, that was all that mattered to Blake.

She hadn't bothered to dress for this occasion, wearing her leather pants and bodice as well as the holsters on her hips for her bolt-pistols and small throwing knives. No one here minded the 'mercenaries'. It was sometimes necessary work to keep the peace in the surrounding areas of the Dragorn system. The friends of Jeshen knew what his oldest son did for a living, but only to a point. To them they were mercenaries, not smugglers, and in many respects that was correct. Lance and Blake had gone into battle for those willing to pay as long as it was a cause they believed in. But the battles had grown few and far between over the last solaren. Some sprouted up but not enough to pay the bills, so they had taken to smuggling. It kept Jeshen out of debt and also kept the Spificated in working condition.

Arawan had floated them some missions a time or two. Blake counted her amongst his friends of which were also few and far between. Lance loved her as much as the relationship allowed love, and so Blake welcomed her into their small tight-knit circle. Not to mention she had also developed a sisterly affection for Kylan. Blake had formed a kinship for the woman when she'd taken Kylan into a corner and held him as he wept for his mother at her memorial. She comforted him when a woman's touch had been necessary. With Jericha not around to fill that need, going off on some paranoid-driven crusade again, Arawan had stepped in. Ever since then Kylan always asked about her. How she was, what she was doing, when she and Lance were going to announce a wedding.

If Kylan liked her she had to be okay, but Arawan was not as close as a blood-tie. He could observe her without blinders. It was with Jericha that Kylan lost his focus, possibly because she was family.

Lance's voice pulled Blake away from his musings. "We best take him in hand, now. The house is full of people. They won't miss him for a while."

And as they made their move to pull Kylan aside, preparing to make apologies for their absence to the guests, the sound of a shuttle landing on the hill in front of the house stopped them.

They turned to look out the family room window only to see Jericha come down the ramp of her opened shuttle. "Bloody bones!" Lance quipped through gritted teeth. "What is she doing here?"

"She is family, Lance," Arawan suggested. "Maybe she wants to make peace?"

He scoffed, "Jericha? She probably wants to see if Father left her anything of value in his will that she can use to finance her agenda."

"Fack that!" Blake shook his head. "I for one don't want to get anywhere near her. You play host, and I'll go hide the valuables."

Lance smirked at the attempt at levity, but Blake was half-serious. For Jericha's movement she needed money, lots of it. It would not be uncharacteristic of her to steal from another branch of the family tree, but right now Blake and the others knew the main reason she came here; to take advantage of Kylan's vulnerable state and try to convince him to join her cause.

"No chance," Lance said. "I need you sticking to me and Kylan like space sealant." He clapped Blake on the arm and went to the front door. "United front."

"And me?" Arawan asked. "Jericha and I used to be good friends, you know."

"Could you pull your pistol on a used-to-be-good-friend?"

"I could pull it on you, lover, if you ever crossed me."

Lance arched a brow. "Good enough for me. Let's go."

Kylan, seeing what was going on, caught up with them, and followed them outside. "Jericha?" It sounded like he was surprised, but happy to see her.

Jericha approached, a smile on her angular face, arms opened wide. She wore her standard black breeches and boots, and a white blouse of lace and silk, with ruffles of lace at her throat and wrists. Blake quickly noticed the locket around her neck. From the looks of the symbols etched into the ternium casing, it was Callatolan. She never wore any sort of jewelry before as it wasn't her style—not even a post in her lobes. The locket had to mean something sentimental to her. A new lover perhaps? The thought left as soon as it came. If any guy could deal with her and her craziness, more power to him.

Her blue coat hung just below her waist, with the butts of her Nevs barely hidden in holsters on each hip like they were a part of her body; which, to Blake, was not far from the truth. Ever since he'd met her, even during their relationship, she had never been far from her weapons. She felt practically naked without anything on her person that could punch a hole in someone's body.

He should have known by just that quirk something was wrong, but he'd been so engrossed in becoming part of Lance and Kylan's family that to latch onto Jericha had been the natural next step in the process. Being in a relationship with her for over a solaren, they eventually went on smuggling operations together. Then one day, against Blake's explicit orders, Jericha blasted a munitions supply building simply because it had been used by the Society in their attempts to regulate criminal mage activity in that quadrant.

That had been the start. Their relationship just deteriorated from there until Blake ultimately kicked her off his ship. She had gotten so bad in her politics that even Lance didn't bother to defend her to anyone. Instead, he'd helped Blake pack her things and had actually been the one to throw the satchel off ship at the nearest planet. She'd been given her share of the spoils, told to find her own way, and left there to fend for herself, which she'd immediately done. Using her money she managed to obtain a spaceship and a crew of mages and sympathetic supporters within one moren.

Blake had been so furious at Jericha's insane ideals that Lance worried he would blow holes in the Spif's main hull as he went to the gym for shooting practice, the second hull fail-safes notwithstanding. Luckily he never lost his sense and would always perform the practice with the Nevonian bolts set to quarter charge. It got to the point that every time her name was mentioned Blake would go to his practice and blow off steam. For him to see Jericha now, well, he swallowed the bitter taste that formed in his mouth.

Kylan however, being somewhat sheltered from her antics, had no such impressions of his cousin. He ran out to greet her with an enthusiastic hug. "I'm glad you're here!"

Jericha caught Blake and Lance's stone looks, even Arawan's cautious gaze and hugged Kylan back, rubbing his shoulders. "That makes one of you," she replied. She studied Arawan standing beside Lance and squared her shoulders. "Ar. It's good to see you, although I'm surprised. You once told me memorial services are nothing but a waste of time and energy."

"They are, but I'm not here for anyone other than Lance, Kylan, and Blake."

"What about me? Uncle Jeshen was my family, too."

"Wasn't expecting you, Jer." Arawan wrapped her arm around Lance's waist.

Jericha gave her a cold smile. "I see. Didn't take you two long to find each other's bed, did it?"

"What do you want, Jericha?" Lance asked, already beyond agitated. "Why are you here?"

"To pay my honest respects, obviously, unlike all the hypocrites here are doing."

"Jericha, don't," Kylan muttered softly, embarrassed by her blatant disrespect. "They're Father's friends and colleagues."

"Hush, Ky. I meant no ill-will. Blake, you're awful quiet."

"Biting my tongue, Jer."

"Don't hurt yourself." She flashed him a cold smile, too. Amazing how dead her eyes seemed anymore. It actually gave Blake a chill.

He stuck his hands in his back pockets and grinned. "Over you, sweetheart? Not worth it."

"Okay, that's enough." Kylan stepped between them, anger simmering within his normally peaceful blue eyes. "She's making an effort. Can't we meet her halfway?"

Lance shrugged. "Sure. She can come in as long as she behaves herself."

Jericha puckered her lips and blew a fake kiss his way. "Love you, too, cousin." She glanced at Blake, ignored him, and turned her attention back to Kylan, taking his hands in her own gloved ones. "How are you holding up, Ky?"

He sighed. "You know how it is. Some days are better than others."

"Yeah." She looked genuinely sad, but Blake knew better. He shot a curious look to Lance who shook his head. He didn't believe her act either. Arawan said nothing, her expression never breaking. Jericha had firmly made her bed with them. The only person she hadn't shown her true colors to was Kylan. And with Jeshen's death, he now had no parental guidance, meaning Jericha could come here at any time and try to sway him to fight at her side. Blake, Lance, and Arawan all had problems with the Society, but they knew how to pick and choose their battles.

Jericha's idea of picking and choosing her battles was outright extremism, making her extremely dangerous. She hadn't taken a life yet, not that they knew of anyway, but it was only a matter of time. Kylan was still young and untried in the areas of political warfare tactics. And with his grief over losing his father so recent, he would be more vulnerable to Jericha's manipulation.

Blake would continue biting his tongue for Kylan's sake as the kid really did love his cousin, but he, Lance, and Arawan would also play the older brothers and sister—watchful and protective. Kylan's heart was, to his credit, fair and unconditionally loving, but when dealing with the likes of Jericha, such honorable qualities could prove a detriment.

"Well, you still have family, Ky," Jericha said and clutched his hands to her chest. "Always."

Kylan smiled. "Thanks, Jer. I knew you'd come." He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek.

"Of course I came. I loved your parents, too."

Blake wanted to vomit.

Lance, however, stepped up. "Really?" he asked. "Then why didn't you come for our mother's memorial?"

"I had a contract, Lance. I explained that to you."

"Oh, right. Business before family. That's you, Jericha."

Blake grinned, but he made sure it stayed in the area of his lips, hoping his gaze was as cold as her heart. For now, though, tolerance was the rule of thumb. No reason to make a scene, on this day of all days.

The look Jericha gave Blake could have sliced him open from gut to chest. He merely chuckled, knowing such a reaction would pull some power from her. She had always hated it when he chuckled at her, thinking he was making fun of her instead of realizing he had truly been amused at the way her mind worked. He had been in awe of how she thought, the way she looked at the universe. Some of the ideas she'd come up with were good ideas, good goals, just not thought out in a realistic or constructive manner. Then she became more and more violent in her thinking and from then on it was no longer chuckling from amusement, or awe, but chuckling from disbelief and fear of the mad monster she was turning into.

Kylan quickly saw where the confrontation was heading and wrapped his arm around Jericha's shoulders. "Come on, there are some people I want you to meet."

He guided her past the others, and the three shared uncertain looks.

"Kylan really doesn't know what she's all about, does he?" Arawan asked.

"No," Lance replied. "And I hope to the Gods he never learns. It would break his heart."

"He'll learn," Blake sighed, removing his hat and brushing off imaginary dust, needing to do something with his hands. "One day he'll learn. I just hope it's not today." He slapped his hat against his thigh and placed it on his head again. "Let's make sure she behaves."

†††

Blake watched Jericha carefully upon entering the house to meet the people and friends Jeshen had brought into his world. She exhibited proper manners, greeting those she knew personally with the usual show of sympathy: hugs, saddened face, the occasional; "I'm so sorry. Yes, Jeshen was a good man. It's a loss to all." For those guests she didn't know, she remained polite.

Blake was surprised by her show of respect, but couldn't allow himself to believe she was sincere. He gave her fifteen tickars to rip this gathering to shreds. But as a hovarn passed and all remained peaceful, he began to ease up his suspicions. She seemed to honestly be there to support Kylan. He finally gave up the need to keep watch over her actions and headed over to the food table to load up a plate. Lance and Arawan approached a few moments later, agitation in their expressions.

"They're both gone," Lance said.

Blake knew immediately what his friend meant. He glanced over to the living room and dining area. "No sign?"

"Nothing," Arawan said. "Lance and I just finished doing a sweep of the house."

"Fack," Blake hissed.

Lance rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, looking like he was ready to spit plasma bolts. "Godsdamn, but that girl can be one fackon headache."

Blake set what was left of his food down on the table. "Arawan, stay here and keep the guests busy. Lance and I will check outside."

Arawan nodded agreement and quickly moved into the throng of guests, asking if she could assist them.

Blake and Lance headed out of the house and looked around, but there was no sign of either Kylan or Jericha.

"I'll check the barn," Blake said.

"I'll check the shuttle. She better not be doing what I think she's doing."

The two headed off in different directions.

Chapter 3

The moment he neared the opened doors, Blake picked up voices from inside the barn. He turned to flag down Lance, but what he heard stopped him.

Kylan and Jericha's voices came from the area of the third stall, as did their images from the shadows thrown at Blake's feet by the sunlight filtering in through the upper windows on the other side of the barn.

Kylan's horse was boarded here. A beautiful Callatolan mare named Penelope, with a red and gold coat and a disposition that was both playful and gentle despite its large size and six legs. From the shadows falling out of the doorway Blake could tell Kylan was brushing her down, saddle nearby ready to place and ride.

"I hear what you're saying, Jer. But I still have one solaren of school left. I can't leave now."

"Oh, to hells with school! I quit and look where I'm at now. I have my own ship, my own crew and I'm swimming in spoils that are making me rich."

"Then what do you need me for?"

Blake listened carefully. He'd yet to be detected by either of them, but that didn't mean he couldn't be sensed. He hoped Jericha was too wrapped up in her sales pitch to realize he was listening.

"Because we're family, Ky, isn't that reason enough? We're mages. Now that your parents are both gone, you belong with me and others of your kind. Lance and the others, they're be'vacha. Their inability to harness energy is their detriment. And for that the Society is talking ways and means to keep mages under control, even to the point of sterilizing us."

"Oh, those rumors have been going around for over a decaren now. Besides, if they wanted us dead, why in the hells are they continuing to inoculate against the threat of plague?"

"Who's to say those inoculations are against plague, Kylan?"

Silence.

Even Blake was jarred by that question. At first the reasons for the inoculations had been valid. Blake could still remember the terror through the systems when the outbreaks of plague hit twice in one solaren. He'd lost a couple of friends to those devastating and merciless illnesses.

"That's ridiculous," Kylan said. "Ever since the inoculations, we've had no outbreaks."

"Oh, come on!" Jericha sounded frustrated to the point of impatience. "Who's to say that the Society didn't start those plagues in order to initiate the inoculations? And if they started it, they can contain it, evidence being no further outbreaks."

"To what purpose, Jer?" Kylan raised his voice in anger; something Blake had never heard him do. "A decaren is a long time to wait to kill us off!"

Jericha released a low growl of aggravation. "Gods, Kylan! You've been listening to Blake and Lance too long. Look, the Society is planning a massive move to wipe out the mages, and I suspect the inoculation program has something to do with it."

"Show me proof, Jericha. Your paranoia is not proof! Your suspicions are not proof!" A tick of silence. Maybe Jericha had been too dumbstruck to respond right away to Kylan's challenge. "Your locket sprung open," Kylan said softly, not as charged as before. Maybe he felt awkward at challenging his own cousin to provide proof of her suspicions. Kylan never got into anyone's face unless he felt it was necessary. He despised conflict, but when he challenged, he usually had a damn good reason.

There was the soft click of a locket closing; then more silence.

Blake listened intently, wondering how this would end. He heard Jericha walk off from Kylan a few steps. The urgency in their conversation had suddenly dropped.

"I don't have the proof, not yet, but I'm working on getting it." An almost apologetic tone crept into her voice. "Kylan, they fear our power. They fear us overthrowing their control of things."

"Well, do they have a reason to be worried?"

This time the silence grew deafening. Whether Jericha's fears were founded or not, Kylan had looked at this political argument from both sides, something Jericha never wanted or bothered to do.

A wave of pride rippled through Blake. Kylan chose to feel Jericha out and managed to do a damn good job of it, too.

"The strong will always eliminate the weak, Ky. It's the nature of the Universe."

"So say those who conquer others they consider inferior. Is that how you think, Jericha? If so then the be'vacha fearing us is warranted."

Jericha did not confirm or deny this, which made Blake even more nervous as to her state of mind.

"My magick tells me to help people, Jericha, not harm them," Kylan went on. "To harm anyone, even if they appear as an enemy is against my code of belief."

"Kylan, we're heading for a war. Mages against the be'vachas and the be'vachas are not going to let us go peacefully. They'll torture us before they burn us at the stake! After all these cenvaren the Terran prejudices are still in play even out here in the vastness of this galaxy! Do you want to die at their hands?"

"If I go into battle with you against them, I could still die at their hands."

"Yes, but then it will be by your choice."

Blake heard enough. He stormed into the stable, grabbed Jericha by the throat, and pushed her against the stall wall.

"Blake, no!"

"Stay out of this, Ky! She's trying to get you killed!"

Prickles of energy rushed over his hand, up through his arm to his shoulder. A slight wave of dizziness swarmed over him and he knew she was retaliating against his attack by magick. Refusing to let go, he glared at her, and noticed her pale skin and sweating brow. Was her magick causing such a diverse physical reaction? He'd heard of such happenings before with mages, but never had he seen it manifest from Jericha or even Kylan. Sometimes the magick took so much energy that the body would react with signs of fatigue, illness. But the magick she used against him now was small, not enough to cause such a drastic change. Had she tried to influence Kylan during their conversation by using magick? The thought of her resorting to such manipulation angered Blake even more, and he tightened his grip around her throat.

One hand on his, trying to free herself from his stranglehold, she used her other to clutch at her locket. Maybe she thought by his grabbing her throat the clasp to the thing had broken and she wanted to be sure it was still there. She clawed at his hand and grimaced. "Let me go, damn you!"

Penelope nervously stomped in her stall and Kylan waved his hand over her head to calm her fears. "Easy, girl. Easy." He turned to Blake. "We take this outside. Now!" He led the way out of the barn.

Blake released Jericha's throat and backed off. "Ladies first!" he sneered with a wave, inconspicuously wringing his hand of the tingling that still ebbed through his nerves.

She made a dramatic show of rubbing her throat and coughing to clear it. "I could have killed you just then, Blake. I didn't."

"And that makes you an honorable mage? The fact you even thought of killing me makes me question that." He pointed to where Kylan waited for them. "Move."

Furious, she stomped off after Kylan who waited out by the barn entrance, pacing, both agitated and angry himself. "I get why you're worried, Jericha." He looked at Blake. "And I get where you're coming from, too." He walked up to his cousin and locked gazes with her. "Jericha, I love you. You're my family, but you're heading down a dangerous path, and I just can't follow you. I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave. And unless you come to your senses ... don't ever come back."

Jericha gaped and Blake finally released the smirk he'd kept hidden since she'd landed.

She scowled at Kylan. "You're just like your parents. They went in search for evidence of the dangers being hatched against the mages, and look what happened to your mother as a result."

"What are you talking about?"

She laughed, looking at him in disbelief. "You really don't know, do you? The hyper-thrust your mother rented that night? It was rigged to crash! Your father knew about it and never sought out those Society chuggers that killed her. He was a chug—" she stopped when Kylan winced at the intended insult. "No, maybe not that, but he was a coward, nonetheless. And now so are you."

"Hey, now hold on just one fackon tickar!" Blake took an angry step toward her.

Kylan held out his hand to stop him. "She's entitled to her feelings. I understand where they're coming from and why." He looked at Jericha, confused. "What do you mean they rigged the hyper-thrust? Who? Why?"

Jericha scoffed. "By the Gods, your father didn't tell you, did he?"

"Tell him what?" Blake demanded.

"In the last six moren before she died, Majeen was working for the Society. And whatever she was doing, she was in deep. I have no idea what Majeen was doing within Society ranks, but she was there and ... working for an Overlord."

Kylan shot Blake a pained expression. "I can't believe this," he groaned.

Blake took his arm and gave it an assuring squeeze. "Just what are you saying, Jericha? That Majeen was some sort of plant?"

"I wish I knew all the details, but I'm saying yes, she was. For reasons I haven't found out, yet. But I did investigate the crash report. I have colleagues who are able to infiltrate accident investigation crews. What they found scared the hells out of me. Her signal relay lines were sabotaged, knocking out the shielding to make it look she would be vulnerable to a lightning strike, but the shuttle was not hit with lightning. The scorch markings around the area where they said the lightning hit? Nevonian plasma residue was found, and that can only come from a Society weapon, in this case a bomb, set to go off when Majeen hit a specific speed."

Kylan and Blake looked at each other. Blake clenched his fists. This was news Kylan didn't need to hear, not now, but there was no stopping it. They had to see this through. "Do you have evidence of these so-called findings from your colleagues?" he asked.

Jericha's shoulders slumped and she looked away. "No. They disappeared before they could send me their files. I'm assuming they were discovered and killed. I haven't heard from them since their last communication almost a solaren ago."

Blake threw up his hands. "Convenient!"

"Look, all I have is what they told me. Forget the Society investigators. They're going to cover up anything that makes them culpable. I'm finding out the truth on my own. What I did find out, so far, is that one of the employees to the rental agency Majeen obtained the hyper-thrust from? He started only a few days before she arrived and quit only a day after her death, citing 'sudden' personal reasons. You've got to admit that is suspicious!"

"And I suppose he made the rain come down in torrents complete with lightning and thunder!" Blake challenged.

Jericha rolled her eyes. "Cavosa weather stations predict the weather accurately to within ten percent. You know that as well as I do, Blake. And isn't it funny that she was released from her assignment and sent home just before one of the largest rain storms to hit this area was scheduled to occur? Her emergency contact information would have given away her home location. A bit of planning here, setting up there and you've got yourself a nice little assassination made to look like an accident."

Blake huffed. "Jericha—"

"And the Mage Councils?" Kylan interrupted. "The Elders? None of them have said anything about this to us. I suppose you don't have their reports either?"

"They're disavowing any corroboration to my suspicions. Possibly because whatever they wanted Majeen to find out is under confidential status. But I truly believe that whatever she found out, it was enough to get her killed."

Blake tightened his hold on Kylan's arm, a means to keep his friend from falling into this cavern of fantasy playing out in Jericha's mind. Either she truly believed what she was saying (but without proof Blake could only doubt that possibility), or she had gone too far overboard to get Kylan on her side. Blake was willing to bet on the latter.

"Jericha, you've always been paranoid about the Society," Kylan stated. "Now you're saying that Mother was a plant, found out and killed as a result? I can't believe you would stoop so low as to make up such a story."

"I didn't make it up. I'm working on getting the proof, Kylan. I just need time."

"You should have brought something with you to prove your claims. Anything!" Kylan criticized. "You can't expect me to accept your assertions based on your word, alone. Indeed, Mother was on a Society job for her archeological department, cataloguing some artifacts for a businessman on Ma'haearo. As for your claim her hyper-thrust was rigged, the signal relay system was hit by lightning, severing all signals from the computer link to the steering controls."

"In a forested area where there were no witnesses and just as the speed limit could increase from city standards to country," she smugly replied. "The lightning explanation is a ruse, Ky. They falsified the reports. It wouldn't be the first time murder cover-ups have happened."

Kylan released a frustrated groan. "Gods, Jericha, you're looking for evil under every rock and behind every suspicious look! Whether your claims are justified or not, violence never solved anything. I cannot and will not follow you onto that path."

She stepped closer, their noses almost touching. He admirably stood his ground. "Fine, Kylan. You want to keep your head under a rock, that's up to you. But as far as violence never solving anything, tell that to the Overlords." She spat on the ground at his feet, a gesture signaling she was done with him, and turned on her heels, heading back to her shuttle, furious anger revealed in every step.

Blake moved closer to Kylan. "Jericha's lied so many times in her life, she's starting to truly believe her own stories. You know she's wrong about your mother, right? Lance, John, and I checked the hyper-thrust ourselves. The salvage wrecking lab corroborated the reports on the signal relay. They checked and double-checked that area of the lightning impact. She wasn't murdered, Kylan. It was a freak accident. I'd bet my life on it."

"I know," Kylan sighed, weary and just a breath away from losing his resolve. Jericha's confrontation had taken almost everything out of him resembling strength. "If he thought she'd been murdered, Father wouldn't have slept until he brought everyone responsible to justice. He couldn't let go of the guilt of spending those extra days on his own assignment. He could have delegated his duties to his partners and come home to meet her, instead he'd chosen to seal those deals personally. His not being here may have made the difference. That's what drove him to his grave."

Blake watched Jericha head for her shuttle. He didn't see Lance who must have still been inside, looking for anything he could use against her. "She's also wrong about you being a coward, Ky. You never have been, never will be."

"I'm tired, Blake. I'm going for a ride." Head down, Kylan walked back into the barn.

"Yeah, well I'm not done with her yet." Blake took off after Jericha to both tell her off and to give Lance a chance to get out of the shuttle before she got there.

"Blake, let it go!"

"It'll be all right, Spryte. Head on out. Lance and I will catch up to you."

Kylan would go out to clear his head. Something he always did when he was upset. There was a special clearing near their lake he'd ride to and spend time just thinking things through. Jericha had played her hand. He'd called and raised and won the pot. She had shown her cards, including the ones up her sleeve. Kylan had finally seen her for what she was. Blake would make sure she knew it, too.

When he caught up to Jericha, he pulled her around to face him. "You're going to listen to me, now, Jericha!"

She yanked her arm free. "And what are you going to tell me, Blake? That I better not go anywhere near Kylan or you'll have my head on a spike?"

"I was thinking a platter, but sure, let's go with spike."

"He's a mage," Jericha seethed and jabbed her forefinger into Blake's chest. "We'll see how you feel when he's been labeled a criminal and put in chains, tortured, and executed simply for being what he is!"

"And how much of that will be from the Society and how much will be from the mages, Jer? You're just adding to the fackon problem, not solving it! Kylan's making the right choice and if you ever come near him again with the intention of pulling him to your cause, you're going to have to go through us first. And that won't be easy because Lance and I obviously care about him more than you do!"

"Oh, I care, you self-righteous chugger!"

With that insult, he could not stop his reaction. He slapped her—hard.

She fell to the ground holding her left cheek, blood oozing from the corner of her mouth. She laughed. "Guess I hit a sore spot with you, huh?"

Blake shook with anger, furious rage boiling, enough so he had to force it back or risk pounding her into the ground. "I'm not the one looking for blood, Jericha," he seethed.

She got to her feet, not bothering to brush off the dirt and dead leaves from her clothes, but she did spit the blood from her mouth at his feet. "Doing a fine job of it so far, ain't ya', sweetheart?"

He ground his teeth, clenched his fists, aching to hit her one more time, but knowing she probably wanted him to do that—to give into her taunts.

She shook her head, her teeth stained by the blood he'd drawn. "No. You're worse than a chugger, Haden. You don't run from a fight, seeking out the blood of the dead to fill your belly as you lay low. You just refuse to lift a finger to help. You're content to let mages fall to the way side. You're not one of them, so why should you care, right? I know your kind, Blake. I've been running up against people like you all along. Stick your head in the sand why don't you? It'll make a nice target for the Society when they catch up to your smuggling ops." She

swatted his butt to indicate her point. "And when they do I hope they blast a hole in it so wide you can fly your damn ship through it." She spat at the ground again and stormed off.

"You better watch your back, Jericha!"

She turned on him, her green eyes turning black with Darkling magick.

The extent of it surprised him. No sign of white whatsoever remained in her eyes. "Jericha, you—" but he never got out the words. She pushed out her hands. The force of power slammed into him, casting him back about ten tereks. His hat flew off his head, but was hooked around his throat by its leather thong. He landed so hard the wind was knocked out of him. "Gods-fackon-dammit!" he growled through gritted teeth.

"That's just a taste of what I can do, Blake!" she shouted. "As far as I'm concerned this conversation is over!" But when she turned around she found a Nev aimed right at her head.

Lance held it steady in one hand, muscles primed over the solaren by carrying the weight of the thing into and out of battle. "Jericha, if you don't get off my property within one tickar, I'm going to blow you away here and now for trespassing. You are no longer part of this family." He glanced over to see Blake clumsily getting to his feet. "Blake! Are you and Kylan all right?"

"Yeah. Kylan's fine, but it's what we suspected. She tried to talk him into joining her cause."

She flashed another grin at Blake and from that distance he could see her eyes were still as dark as midnight. She thrust out her hand to the side and a rock rose up in the air from behind Lance and to his side.

"Lance!" Blake warned, but too late.

The rock slammed against Lance's head, knocking him unconscious.

She laughed as Blake pulled his Nev and aimed it at her. "You fackon kuenas!" He knew from that display of power, she'd never allow him to fire at her, but he reacted instinctively. Maybe there was a chance. Slight, maybe impossible. He checked to see the Nev was set to kill.

Unfortunately, that tick of hesitation was enough. With a mere twist of her wrist the Nev flew from Blake's hand into a group of shrubs. He'd never find it in time to use it on her.

She laughed the hideous cackle of the insane. Running to her shuttle, she climbed aboard. As the doors closed she chortled, "Next time, Blake, I won't be so nice!"

Blake clumsily stumbled to Lance's side, pulling him into his arms. "Lance? You with me?"

Lance opened his eyes and winced against the sun's light. "What the hells happened?" he moaned.

"Jericha used her magick against you that's what happened."

The roar of the shuttle's engine igniting filled the air and almost drowned out Blake's words. The lift-off stirred up the dust and shrubbery around them. Blake flung himself over Lance, protecting them both from the gravel and debris swirling and pelting their bodies. In mere ticks the shuttle streaked across the sky and up into the stratosphere, fading out of sight.

"Is she gone?" Lance asked.

"She's gone." Blake checked Lance's eyes. "You've got a concussion. Come on, I need to get you back to the house. Doctor Karoff can take a look at you."

He pulled Lance up and draped an arm around his neck.

"Did she turn Kylan's head?" Lance asked, bleary and dazed. He stumbled a bit as Blake started half-dragging him back to the house.

"Naw, you kidding? You'd be proud. He kept his head when I lost mine."

Lance managed a smile. "Thasss my brother," he slurred.

"Damn, ekha'ren, that rock hit you hard." And her eyes, they had gone full-on black. Not the indigo normally associated with Darklings.

It was said that when the eyes turned full black, it meant the mage had tapped into the highest form of Dark magick available to them. Jericha had found a means to do that, and that made her even more dangerous than Blake first thought. If Kylan, who also held Darkling tendencies, got into Jericha's grip, there was no telling what she would do to his heart, his mind, even his soul.

The need to protect him tripled.

"Where issss Ky?" Lance asked as they moved clumsily down the hill to the front lawn. Arawan ran out to meet them.

"I think I know where I can find him, Lance, but we need to get you back to the house first. You've been concussed."

"I'm fine, I—" he stumbled again.

Blake tightened his grip. "Right. You're fine, but I need you to hold me up, okay?"

"You okay? Sshhee hurt you?"

"Naw, just a bit winded. You're doing fine. We'll hold each other up, okay?"

"S'kay, Blake. Shhure."

And when they reached the edge of the front lawn, Lance collapsed. Arawan hurried to his side and draped his other arm around her neck. "What happened?"

"Jericha. Magick. Rock. He's got a concussion."

"Fack it all to the hells. And Kylan?"

"He headed out to his clearing. I have to find him."

"Go. I'll take care of Lance. Doctor Karoff!" she called out.

Blake let Arawan take Lance inside, watching his friend for a few ticks until he was safely within the walls of the house.

The guests just stood there, watching, gaping, and gawking. Idiots. Did no one know how to handle a crisis? He hoped for Kylan and Lance's sake that Arawan would dismiss the guests from the premises. The family needed some time to themselves. Especially after Jericha's surprise visit.

Pulling his hat from around his neck, he smacked it against his legs to shake off the dust and put it on his head. He looked up at the sky and saw the faint traces of the fuel streak to Jericha's shuttle, far out of reach.

For a moment he truly wanted the damn thing to explode, wiping her out and the problems she was sure to bring with her. For a moment the desire was strong. Then he thought how Kylan would feel if he knew how much Blake hated her. He probably wouldn't have to worry about how Lance felt. He was pretty much in alignment. But Kylan? The kid was able to make up his own mind about things, but he was loving and loyal to his family, and he honestly meant what he said to Jericha. Perhaps he even thought he could convince her to back down from her agenda and find a peaceful resolution to her problems, imagined or otherwise. It was one of the reasons Blake loved being around the kid so much. Kylan always made him feel centered. He and Lance both did, but Kylan was the kid brother. The one to look out for. The one to stand by.

Going for a ride.

Well, that was code for 'you know where to find me.'

And Blake did. He ran back into the barn and quickly saddled up his own horse, Scallywag. A Terran gelding with a black coat and white hooves.

As he rode out of the barn and headed for the trees of the forest nearest Kylan's home, he kicked Scallywag into a full gallop.

He found Kylan sitting at the northern side of the lake, with the early evening sunlight reflecting off the ripples, the water gently lapping at the bank, intreas from Kylan's feet, which were tucked in close, arms around his knees. "I saw a streak of light in the air," Kylan said without even turning to see it was Blake he spoke to. "She take off all right?"

Blake dismounted and tied his horse next to Kylan's at a nearby birch tree; then went to sit next to his friend. "No. I mean her ship is fine, but she isn't. She hurt Lance, used her magick against him."

"How is he?" Horrified, Kylan scurried to get up, when Blake caught his arm to stop him. "He'll be fine. Doctor Karoff is looking him over now, and Arawan is with him."

Kylan draped both arms back over his bent knees. It hurt Blake to see how defeated he looked. "Gods, Blake, what the hells happened to her?"

Blake shook his head. "I wish I knew, Spryte. But I'm more concerned about you. I, uh, I overheard you back in the barn. You're not having second thoughts about what you said, are you?"

"No. I firmly stand by my philosophy."

Blake let out a relieved breath. "That's good to know. Because you were right to tell her how you felt. Your brother and I, we talked at length about you taking up a weapon. We don't ever want you to have to kill, Spryte. Not if you can avoid it."

Kylan sighed. "I know you're both just looking out for me. But with Father gone, now..." he stopped, working hitting him.

Blake wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him to his side. "Easy, kid. I know it hurts."

Kylan quickly wiped his eyes of the tears threatening to spill. He rested his head against Blake's shoulder. Such intimacy between them was natural. Kylan had been like this since Blake had met him when the kid was

ten, during the time Blake and Lance had entered the Optelarin Army Academy and became friends in basic training.

Kylan had warmed up to Blake without hesitation, listening with rapt attention to the stories of his childhood. It may have been telling Kylan he'd grown up as an orphan with no real family to call his own that the physical closeness became a thing. As soon as Kylan learned of Blake's orphaned state, he'd come up to his side and hugged him, tears in his eyes as though not having a family was something Kylan could never conceive. All of ten and he understood even then how such pain could be harrowing for a soul.

Blake had taken Kylan to his side from that moment. And moments like these, though now few and far between, were natural for both of them. It was true and it was good and Blake wouldn't change a thing. He hugged Kylan close. The kid needed some grounding of his own and Lance was too injured right then to be the big brother. It was up to Blake to stand in, something he didn't mind at all.

"I know she's going crazy with this whole thing, Blake, but I do agree with her reasons. They're not something we can completely ignore."

"It's more than that now, Spryte. It's like you said, she's going about it all wrong. I just can't let that crack about you being a coward go, or how she tried to manipulate you with that muck-chuck about your mother being murdered." He clenched his hand into a fist and shook his head. "She's dead wrong about those things. Dead wrong."

Kylan raised his head and looked at Blake with a smile. "Easy. I'm the injured party here and I'm handling this better than you are." He practically chuckled, the threat of his breaking down into grief evaporating. He instead focused on trying to ease Blake's anger, but it would not be quelled.

"I called her a 'fackon kuenas'. I'm sure she heard that."

Kylan shrugged. "I'm sure she's been called worse."

"How do you do it, kid?" Blake looked at him in wonder. "How do you stop the anger from controlling you?"

"I go to a special place in my mind and heart. Grandmother taught me weons before she died."

They looked at each other. "What?" Kylan furrowed a brow, skeptical of the look Blake gave him.

"Can you take me there?"

His brow relaxed and Kylan thought about the request for a moment. "I'm sure I could, yeah. Why? You don't believe in this muck-chuck, as you call it."

"It's not that I don't believe it exists. I've seen it used everywhere all my life, but you actually showed me the good in it on the day you saved my life against that rampaging buck. So take that as you will."

Kylan smiled. "You can do this yourself, you know."

"Naw! That I can't believe. Come on, Spryte. You know I'm a born and bred be'vacha, all non-mages are. I've never felt any energy flow through me, not like it flows through you. Ever."

"You feel it with your ship, though," Kylan explained. "The Spiflicated is just a hunk of metal with wires and filaments, iron bolts and rivets to keep her together, but to you she has a soul. You bond with her. You love that ship as much as you love your friends. You commune with her. And that's all that magick is—getting in touch with the elements of creation. Everything has a consciousness, Blake. Even I know that your ship is part of you. Just as much as Lance, Gaelin, John, Elias, and I are. You're not be'vacha. No one really is. There are just those who haven't awakened to that fact, or refuse to."

"More of an opinion, Spryte. But keep trying. You may swing me over to that opinion in the future. So come on, take me to this place you spoke about. Jericha riled me and I want to be as peaceful as you are now before I head back. I want Lance to know everything's all right. You and he both deserve to have some peace right now. I don't want my anger to be the reason it's not happening."

Kylan took in a deep breath. "All right. I concede for now. Close your eyes."

Blake did so. There were a few moments of silence before a relaxing warmth spread over his chest. He opened his eyes just enough to see a small glowing ball of indigo form out of Kylan's palm, centered over his heart. He closed his eyes again.

"Now. Think of a place you love to go to again and again. Where the trees are green, the flowers are blooming and filling the air with their scents. Maybe there's water somewhere nearby."

"Tape'n'sha Waterfalls," Blake said and smiled. He could see the place clearly; a place from his childhood where he would run to when times at the orphanage would get too intense. When the headmasters took certain

liberties with their charges, he would go to the waterfalls of Tapen'sha and swim and hide from them. It was calm and quiet.

"Can you see it?" Kylan asked softly. "Are you there?"

"Yes." And Blake was there. In his mind he could smell the roses, honeysuckle, geraniums. He could smell the jasmine and the sweet clean water of the falls after a fresh rain. He could hear the birdsong in the trees. He could feel the spray of cool water over his face as the falls splashed into the natural pool, and the warmth of the sun washed over him through a brilliantly blue sky. He laughed softly. "I can see it, feel it, and smell it, Spryte."

"Your senses are alive in your mind, Blake. Release your anger there. Release it and let the place take it from you."

Blake harkened to the suggestion.

And in a few more ticks the warmth was gone and he was gently pulled back to the present. He opened his eyes and smiled. "That was fackon amazing!"

"I can teach you how to do it, Blake. It's not difficult to learn. Even for a be'vacha."

Blake could see the hopefulness in Kylan's eyes. He stood and held out his hand. "If what you say is true, kid, then I'm not ready yet. Let it be."

Kylan smiled, content to let go of this on-and-off-again discussion. He wrapped his hand around Blake's forearm and allowed his friend to pull him to his feet. "Let's head back," Blake smiled. "Need to see how Lance is doing."

And nothing more was said.

Nothing more needed to be said.