

THE LOST VISIONIST - SAMPLE

HELIOS REQUIEM
BOOK 1

RONIE KENDIG



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THE CONTRACT

VIS'VASAGATA, DREBARCO (KRUTHEON)

Victory evokes a surging resonance that, not unlike death, invites one to abandon restraint and embrace what invigorates courage. In the last hollow note before claiming success, I bellow a roar as I leap and slam my lightblade down at the impudence that dared set himself against me. Defied my orders. Disrupted my plans.

The jarring violence from the collision of our weapons rattles down my arms, but it is nothing compared to what I pour into my steel blade—*ousía*, the very essence of my soul—and seek to drive into the traitor.

The *ousía* has but one rule: it cannot mix with what it is not. As dark cannot with light. As copper with steel. Only infinitely more agonizing is its galvanic corrosion when an infused blade meets the *ousía* of another.

With it, I thrust every measure of rage and contempt at the repugnant traitor. The impact spews sparks of green and drives him back a step, making him stumble. His weakness fuels me—reminds me he deserves this punishment, so I give chase. Aim my lightblade again. “Learn your place!”

In a surprisingly deft move, he blocks my strike in high guard.

Even as my blade clacks and *tsings* against his, I anticipate his follow-through and hike back. Land. And shove my lightblade at him before he can recover. Feeling the vibrating tension of steel severing flesh and sinew, grinding against bone in his abdomen, I sense my *ousía* surge into him. Watch his blue eyes, ablaze with defiance one second, widen in shock, then understanding.

Pushing closer, chest to chest, grip firm on my lightblade, I stare into eyes replete with agonizing recognition of what is happening. “Even now the *ousía* eviscerates your betrayal, your very existence.” Rage thrums through me as I shake my head. “I gave you *everything!*” I give my lightblade a brutal, decisive twist.

Grunts and moans gurgle through his chest as he pitches into me. Chokes a breath. “You,” the betrayer rasps, struggling to speak beneath the agonizing pain, “gave me ... *nothing.*”

“I adopted you when you were but an urchin.” Yanking my blade free is as symbolic as it is fatal as the *ousía* turns smooth, sharp steel into a serrated edge, shredding his insides. “I taught you. Trained you. And what do you do? You betray me! Arm our enemies against me. Strategize against my Ikons.”

“And it”—he strains and winces in pain—“was long overdue.” He clutches his gut with one hand and lifts his wavering blade in the other as his legs buckle. But he remains standing, vague echoes of the warrior he is holding him upright. “You are nothing but Death’s mistress.”

His galls yank me forward. “Augh!” I jam my boot at his gut.

The blow cants him sideways. He trips over his own wavering legs. The verdant green glow of his lightblade vanishes as he is forced to release it and throw out a hand to break his fall. He lands hard on a knee, the near-crimson ground splatting him, the blood of his compatriots saturating his clothing just as his guilt stains his soul.

Nostrils flaring beneath my helmet, I am tempted to finish him right here and now. But there is no pleasure in ending an unarmed betrayer. Especially not this one. I want him to fight. To see his strength is so. Much. Less. “I acknowledged you as my spawn. Brought you into the fold. Allowed you fight with my Ikons. Join us as we correct the course of humanity and—”

“Correct it?” He chokes a laugh, crimson sliding from his mouth. Holding his mortal wound, blood sluicing between his fingers, he wobbles. “You are *eliminating* it.” With a slow, determined shake of his head, he lifts his chin. “No more. I won’t allow innocents to be annihilated. You cannot go unchecked, UI!”

Laughter reverberates through my chest as I circle him, savoring the pain so obvious in his labored grunts, the jagged breaths that tease him with the hope of survival. “And who is going to stop me? You, who are at Oblivion’s door?” Chuckles rise from the Ikons as an odd disappointment flickers through me. “I had such high hopes for you, *brakadir*.” The term from our ancient tongue possesses a depth and breadth not found in modern languages. It is fitting, considering what he has cost me. The mockery he has made of me for believing that with him in our cadre, we could alter ... everything.

He gives me a beleaguered, weary look. Wavers and wobbles as he tries to stand.

“You cannot lift yourself off this ground. Why did you ever think you could defeat me, an immortal?” Anger thrums again at his impudence, at what he wrought against me. I crouch to peer into his eyes. “All this time, I could not figure out how the humans were surviving.” I roll my hand with a flourish and straighten. “Some even thriving!” My steps squelch against earth. I pause, lift my boot, the suctioning noise ominously loud. Eye him. “Their blood yet saturates this field, because the spawn who not only dared convince them to defy me, also armed them!”

Face blanched from the grievous wound, he glances down, breathing heavily.

“Did you truly think it would work? That you could manipulate the battle

in your favor, give the spineless a chance against immortals?" The audacity squeezes my chest.

He shakes his head, agony his only ally. "Those so-called spineless have more courage than you ... could fathom. These wars you wage—a ruse—unbalanced, unfair. It's not a conflict of honor but ... decimation. Of course I will ally with them. Do whatever it takes to take you down."

I smirk. "Fair? You want fair?" Before his weak heart can beat again, I traverse space and time, retrieve a Tàlsaëg document. "Here is fair—a Decree from Sasvaka."

My betrayer barks a laugh, then is seized by a bloody coughing fit. "Nothing," he says, his lip curling, "good comes from Sasvaka. Decrees are as corrupt ... as you ..." He lowers his head. Sways beneath the pain.

"What? You think you're so much better—a half-breed. You dare to instruct the Ikons?"

"I seek to make things *just*." His words are a growl that he wields with inexplicable strength.

Alarm vibrates through me. It angers me. *He* angers me. "*Just*? Do you think I am unfair, without scruples that I—"

"Yes." The quick answer is sharper than the lightblade that manifests as an extension of his arm, crackling with green ousía.

"A challenge, *Brakadir*? In your sorry state?" I cackle, proud of what I have honed in him.

His nostrils flare. "Your reign ... of terror must end, Ul." He heaves a breath, mustering his courage. "The innocents you ... slaughter may have no meaning to you, but they do to Ror. To me." His words come faster, surer. He swallows. Straightens. "It must end. No more will I participate in this evil."

"Participate? You *are* this evil—you have shed their blood. *You* have warred!" I extend my lightblade, summoned again by the rage he stirred. "Now you set yourself against your better and pander to creatures who hunger and thirst after pleasure and greed? You are *weak*, Betrayer."

"In body, perhaps, but—" He doubles beneath a wave of pain. Hand braced on his thigh, he again forces himself straight with that impressive fortitude. "*You* betrayed Ror by turning his gift—"

"Augh!" Curse him for wielding a worthless, feckless god to chastise me. I slam into him, taking him to ground as I retract my sword to a dagger's length. Stab it at his neck.

Even then, I thud the last six inches to the ground. Realize he's gone. Instinct throws me up. Whirling, I feel the searing force of his lightblade down my cheek. I fold. Narrowly escape the violence of his ousía. "You dare!" With a flurry of hard, punishing strikes, I unload on him, more than one hitting true. "You're weak. Pitiful! Pathetic!"

“Stop, please—he’s gravely wounded!” someone cries. Around us our cadres have gathered. His Haze. My Ikons. To witness.

“You don’t fight fair,” another declares.

I slash up from low guard. He weaves on shaky legs as I again aim for his neck. “I will make you regret turning against me.”

His sweaty, bloody face radiates disgust. “I regret noth—”

My blade catches his neck. The *ousía* tears at flesh and sinews.

“Augh!” He staggers, clapping a hand to the injury that is spewing blood onto his armor. He slumps to the ground.

Shouts erupt from the sides.

Furious with how easy it has been to stop his betrayal, I thirst to sever this traitor’s life. Bring an end to that which has tormented me far too long. But ... if he dies, I cannot teach him a lesson. He learns nothing. The others learn nothing. So, I must show him his errors, his blatant weakness.

I straighten. “You want *fair*?” Where did it ...? Whipping around, I spot the contract for that delicious Sasvakan contest, the *Tàlsaæg*, fluttering on the ground. “I’ll give you fair!” I grab his arm.

He tugs back, breath wheezing from his chest. “No.”

As usual, he is no match for me, for my strength. I haul the betrayer’s body across the field and snatch up the Decree.

“No!” He strains, but his strength has been depleted, foolishly sacrificed in defying me.

Breathing against the paper, I infuse it with promise, customizing it to my will with the *ousía* spreading over the ink. In Sasvakanese, which contains more power than most gods possess, I speak, “Let it be as it is written. Sealed with the blood of two.” I sneer at him. “For all eternity.” Smearing the paper over the cut he bestowed on my cheek, I tie myself to this contract.

“Ul!” *Ilkrieza* yelps from behind me. “Do not—it will—” Murmurs among both cadres drown the words.

“No,” the betrayer hisses, trying to shove away.

I ignore them. They do not understand. Will never understand. When I hoist his arm up, the *brakadir* twitches. Only as I look into those pathetic blue eyes do I realize he’s still fighting me. “You will learn.”

“No ...” he agonizes, eyes rolling back in his head.

The field falls silent when I drag his bloodied hand over the Decree. Anticipation quivers as the stain sinks into the fibers of the paper. My chest constricts beneath its binding force. I probe *Brakadir* for any sign of the same. A heartbeat passes, then two. Finally, he spasms.

“Now,” I laugh, knowing the bloodoath of the *Tàlsaæg*—the game of souls—is sealed, “we shall play. For all eternity.”





CHAPTER 1 THAT RECALCITRANT DELVER

LIRO, BRAVEBANE (KO'RISH)

"MEASURED IS LETHAL! MEASURED IS LETHAL!"

As anticipated, with thousands of fanatics gathered for the Betrayer's March, the odor of delving stung his keen nose receptors. Theseus Helstaar smirked and angled toward that strident scent, slipping from the shadow of the Archive Hall building into the morning light. Appreciating the path yielded by the shouting mob, who parted at the sight of his armor and enormous Féirhound, he searched for the rogue.

Raucous shouts plaguing the city center made verbal communication with his trusted Féirhound impossible, so he sent the command along the céangal blood-bond they shared. *Xuli, bilati, bilati!*

Agile and lightning-fast, Xu seized on the "seek" command, effortlessly negotiating the teeming crowd. Her long, silky black fur blurred with the shadows beneath the tangle of bodies.

Pulled onward by the noxious smell, Theseus closed in on its source. Skirting the undulating revelers that surged like a river toward the arena in the distance, he flicked his wrist, activating the agria weapon mounted to his forearm vambrace.

"Viscount!" The urgent voice of Gunnery Sergeant Nilisa Dukgenski stabbed through the comms.

The crowd parted, and Theseus followed the haiasphor—the specific smell put off when a visionist delved—stench to a little park with waist-high hedges that cradled a series of benches. An elderly woman sat on one, smiling out at the vacant space before her, hand sweeping back and forth, as if petting a dog. Beside her sat a twenty-something rogue. Beside her sat a twenty-something rogue. His left hand rested on the woman's shoulder, while his other moved in a typing motion. The brigand had the elderly woman under a mindjack, convincing her she was petting a dog while he tapped out her credits account.

Outraged that the visionist used his abilities to rob an elderly woman, Theseus sped up, gliding through the crowd like an arrow through muscle and sinew.

"What're you doing?" Duk comm'd again, warning in her tone.

"Viscount," PICIS—his Personal Integrated Communications Intelligence System—intoned in his helmet, "presence of haiasphor is confirmed."

“Register active hunt on my mark. Now.”

“Imperial Syndicate Law—”

“Now, PICIS!” Lunging, he caught the man by the throat and hauled him to his feet. His Apex Energy Guard System—AEGuS—supplied the name and other sundry vitals of the Imperial citizen. “Calry Je—”

“I cannot do that, Viscount.”

On his visor the hunting outline blinked red, not blue. What in the clarity?

“Viscount!” Duk appeared at his side, shoving between him and his quarry. Face flushed, breathing thick, she flashed concerned brown eyes at him. “I am sure *the clade* will be grateful for your assist.”

Assist. Haë. Sight and mind. What had he been thinking?

Wiry and frantic, the delver backed up. Spun to flee—and careened right into the broad chest of another Trakari, who caught Calry and nodded his thanks to Theseus. He stalked away with the recalcitrant delver, trailed by a lanky man in a gold uniform—his Facilitator.

His *mandatory* Facilitator. An impediment required of all Coimedaí who were contracted with the IMF as Trakari in order to Neutralize a target. A Facilitator Theseus currently lacked. Which meant he had no business hunting.

Jaw tight, he ignored the concerned look Duk flashed. He wouldn’t apologize for doing what he’d been trained to do—hunt delvers. With a double tap, he retracted the AEGuS to the perc collar, a visual reminder that he wasn’t authorized to hunt right now. Accursed IMF laws.

“What happened?” Duk asked as they headed away from the park.

That thrumming in his veins that ignited when he detected haiasphor had taken over. He stretched his neck. “They’re everywhere,” he bit out. The reassuring bump of Xuli’s warm, soft snout against the palm of his hand brought him back to himself. Helped him stow his frustration. “I just came to talk to Mentor about getting my Facilitator replacement expedited.”

“Just so happens you decide to do that on Brak’s March, haë?” Duk teased.

“This place is rikkin’ crawling with delvers,” Sergeant Crais Tzigane grumbled as he stomped over to them, retracting his AEGuS. “Got me why the ISF suppresses everything about this Brakadir, yet every year, here his sycophants are, shouting and raging.”

“If the Imperials didn’t allow people their superstitions, it’d be worse than repressing myth-based lore.” Gaze tracking the crowds, Theseus spotted another Trakari intercepting a delver who had a girl dancing provocatively, clearly oblivious to her actions beneath the mindjack.

“You have to admit”—Duk’s hand rested on the pulse blaster magged to her thigh holster—“it’s terribly romantic, haë?”

Theseus scowled.

“Not delving. I meant Brakadir, the immortal who comes to help save our

quadrant, falls in love, then sacrifices himself to save both! How can you not call that romantic?"

"That notorious *hero* is called the Betrayer for good reason—he brought delvers to Helios!"

Duk blinked. "That's not why he's called the Betrayer." She frowned, glancing at Tzigane. "Is it?" She seemed to decide for herself. "No, it's not. He's a hero."

Sight. Unable to take her enamored view of delving, Theseus turned, signaling Xuli to himself with a low whistle. "I'm going to find Mentor."

"Wave us when you're done," Duk called after him.

To avoid having to fight the crowds, Theseus clung to the perimeter of the Archive Hall with Xuli, who sailed up the steps into the multi-agency building. He strode down the long passage to the cavernous hall with its dark wood shelving and tables, warm glow of lamps, and quiet hush of studious research.

Crossing the open area, he gave a nod of acknowledgment to the archival librarian perched on the central round hover-dais as it rose—right along with her arched, disapproving eyebrow—to the third level. He aimed for the administration wing, banking right toward Mentor Camus's office.

"Good rise, Mentor." Rapping on the ajar door, which swung inward, he glanced around the cluttered space, noting the little sitting area, then the desk, which held a tray with a bowl of soup, a half-eaten sandwich, and fruit. He touched the bowl—still warm. He guessed Mentor would be back soon.

Xuli trotted in and sniffed the food, then lifted off her forelegs for a better whiff.

"Leave it." Theseus shifted around stacks of books and wooden chairs piled with tomes to reach one of two tall windows that stood in elegant opposition to the cramped office. He scanned the ongoing revelry below, spotting Duk and Tzigane maintaining patrol.

On her hind legs, Xuli peered out the window beside him. Her front paws steadied her but shifted the satchel, books, and parchments littering the sill. She squinted, her ebony coat glistening beneath the noonday sun. Her tongue retracted, snout closed, and ears swiveled forward, rapt attention on something of intrigue. She released a keening whine, anxious to return to the fray.

"Soon," he promised.

Her nails scritch across books as she strained forward. Before he could warn her off, Xuli leapt onto the wide ledge for a better view. Her weight dislodged the large satchel completely, knocking it to the floor. Papers skittered loose from the book that landed spine-up.

"Clumsy, Xu." Crouching to retrieve the mess, Theseus reached for the text bound in Olde Age hide. Just beyond the tip of his finger, a peculiar symbol

had been depressed into the cover. Pulse ramping, he visually traced the unique script on the time-stained paper.

He had no explanation for the thought that popped into his mind, but somehow he knew—*knew* this was a banned text. What in the clarity was Mentor doing with contraband?

Stunned and furious, Theseus snatched up the papers splayed across the floor in gaping admission. He swiveled to grab one out of reach and suddenly realized he could see out into the open corridor and research hall. Saw the familiar gold uniform of Syndicate officers sweeping past even as behind him came another loud clap—thanks to Xuli no doubt.

Sight! Those officers would not grant mercy for such contraband. He pitched himself across the office. Even as he careened into the door, he met the scowl of the archival librarian on her hover-desk as she skewered him with disapproval for the noise.

Door closed, he put his back to it. Took a ragged breath and stared at the pages. When his gaze again found that symbol, partially rubbed off, the impression lost, he felt his nerves vibrating. What in the clarity was going on? Why would Mentor have these?

After flipping the lock on the door, Theseus returned to the desk and set down the supple leather book. Considered where to insert the pages that had come free. Rough beneath his fingers, the papers were largely in the neat, orderly hand of Mentor. Notes?

The Olde Age text and its script were definitely not Mentor's. It wasn't even written in Imperial Standard. Each page had another, newer piece of paper attached to it, these containing Mentor's flowing Imperial Standard. He read the first transcribed lines and felt a punch in his gut. This wasn't just a banned text. It was supposedly written by Brakadir! "And Mentor's translating it ..."

Sight! A banned Olde Age text and Theseus was reading it—with his overlays active! Too late realizing his mistake, he jerked his gaze up to the dusty, dark blue-and-black tapestry of the Commorant flame emblem. "PICIS, deactivate retinal overlays." Once the reticle vanished from his vision, he breathed a little easier.

Technology existed to translate foreign languages, but all data absorbed from the overlays were fed to the ISF and would trigger an alert to the banned text. That'd get him arrested and who knew what else, considering his position.

Fanciful piece of lore in hand, he recalled the myths about this fabled savior, whom revelers were even now celebrating in the streets below. According to Brakadir's followers, the sacred text was a warning. How confounding that ink and paper had been so prevalent in a time that had datachannelers. So much could've been recorded of that period if Brakadir had

used a DC or flexscreen. But then, as Mentor often asserted, a lone EMP would wipe a DC clean.

Passing voices in the hall made him tense and anticipate a knock. When none came, he let out that thick breath and returned to the text. He should put this away. If he were truly a dutiful Coimedaf or Imperial citizen, he would destroy them.

How long had Mentor been working on this? When had he come into possession of it? Theseus gently fanned the crinkling pages. Though dozens—if not a hundred or more—pages long, only sections had been translated. He'd never bought into the Brakadir lore. So ... was this even real?

"What," rasped a voice from behind, "in all the veils are you doing with that?"

Theseus jerked around and found Mentor rushing at him. "Me?! What are you doing with this?" Unwilling to let the text be confiscated, he angled it from the shorter man's reach, moving to yank Mentor's key from the door and nudge it shut.

White-gray hair enlivening his ruddy face, Mentor blustered. "You have no business—"

"This is a banned text!" Theseus pointed to the ledge where Xuli's heated breath bloomed across the glass as she watched celebrants below. "You left it sitting in the open."

"That is not your—"

"You're a Mentor," he hissed, waving the book and feeling a strange rage in his veins. "You *teach*—taught me!—that content like this is myth, conjured lore! Yet you're not just reading but translating—"

"You *can't* read that. It's far too dangerous."

"Of course it is! You know perpetrating myths like this—"

Mentor Camus made another attempt to snatch it back. "They're watching you!"

Theseus retained the text. "Of course they are! I'm a *Trakari*." He couldn't hide the snarl at that word. He had taken the contract to work directly with the Imperial House out of desperation to save his family. Had it been a matter of preference, he never would've sold himself to the very regime that had stripped the Helstaars of their own royal titles in the First Age.

Mentor wagged his hand. "Give that back before it's discovered and you lose even that contract. There are over two hundred ISF agents in the crowds outside."

Gentle with its fragile spine, Theseus turned his attention to the text. The scrawled words registered. He sucked in a breath, then read aloud, "' . . . the account as recorded by Brakadir relating to Cycle 41.9035.05 in the era of King Hadrovius IV.'" He lifted wide eyes to Mentor, only to find him staring at the

door. "This relates to the Quinary!" Doubt fogged his thoughts over the implications of the timestamp. "This text—it's supposedly by Brakadir."

Gray eyes met his. "Not supposedly."

Theseus started, his thoughts ricocheting. "What ..." He chortled. "Are you trying to say he's real?"

Mentor's thin face tightened and he flicked a hand. "Hide it!" For such an aged man, he moved deftly toward the credenza. Grabbed the satchel and tucked it beneath his desk.

A second later, Theseus saw the doorknob turn. With no time to hide the text, he turned from the door and zipped the text beneath his light-armor jacket and perc plates. Feeling the rush of air as the door opened, he fastened the clasp and folded his arms over it. "PICIS," he subvocalized via implant, "reactivate retinals." The reticle reappeared in his vision.

"Trakari Helstaar." The mech'd voice preceded two Paladin, who thudded into the office, visored helmets sweeping the space. The pair stepped aside and presented an Imperial officer—and not just any officer. That black sash indicated a first marshal, one of the IMF's highest ranks.

Sight—were they here about the text? He fought the urge to look at Mentor, whose nerves churned in the air, stinging Theseus's receptors.

Short, with mahogany skin and black hair smoothed into a tight bun at her nape, the marshal held her head high, severity gouged into her young features. "I am First Marshal Xiupang of His Majesty's Imperial Military Federation."

Xiupang indicated relation to the emperor himself. Which explained her young age and disproportionately high rank.

Chest burning beneath the contraband, Theseus caught the subtle thrum of Xuli's irritation via the céangal and signaled her to heel. "How may I serve you, First—"

"Try an apology."

Theseus faltered. "For ...?"

"Missing our prearranged meeting and making me track you down."

"What—" As the word left his tongue, he recalled the Overwave he'd meant to read. From the IMF. "Apologies, Marshal. I had clade business with Mentor Camus and lost—"

"You answer to *me* first," she barked.

"That is not accurate, I'm afraid." Mentor stepped forward, hand on his desk, as if protecting the satchel. "The clade maintains oversight of our hunters, even those contracted for a time to the Imperial House."

Dark eyes blazed. "You Commorant dogs always think you're better than the rest of us."

At the barb, Theseus clenched his teeth. A weak mind and insecurity made one belittle others. "I believe my Féirhound would be offended you called me a dog."

“Trakari Six-Two-Nine,” she snapped to Theseus, “you are out of compliance with Imperial Military Uniform Code Mandate T-15.552.01, which requires contracted Coimedai acting as Trakari to have an assigned Facilitator present during Neutralizations.”

The absurd protocol all but implied Coimedai would dishonor themselves by killing without justification or contract. It was another brand of Imperial overreach, yet it was law. Said law not only tethered Coimedai with a Registered Imperial Visionist—the only ones legally authorized to delve—but since his last one had quit month past, he’d been unable to hunt. “I’ve been waiting weeks—”

“This is Facilitator Ivara Reddark.”

The name struck hard, vibrating down his spine as Theseus met the gaze of the Facilitator. “You.”

Tight white curls haloed a round face and matched the crisp, white jacket that marked Reddark a RIV.

Outrage charged through his veins. “This—no. Absolutely not!”

Reddark stepped one of those glittering gold boots forward. The ensemble was overkill, just like the epaulets and gleaming white duster that’d make her an easy target on hunts.

“Is there a problem?” Something in First Marshal Xiupang’s words and expression said she knew exactly who they’d assigned to him. “Ohhhh, that’s right. You two were betrothed.”

“False.” Theseus glowered at the woman who had betrayed him, his family, and Bijurn. Delving was not only wrong but a heinous violation of a sacred space—the mind. Wearing a badge just because the emperor condoned some delving didn’t eliminate the desecration. And inserting *this* woman into his Coimedai duties ... “House Helstaar would never bind to a coward.”

“Then,” the first marshal crooned her victory, “there is no complication in assigning Miss Reddark as your Facilitator.” She nodded to the RIV. “You are hereby delivered and attached to Trakari Six-Two-Nine until further notice.”

Reddark gripped the handle of her bag like a lifeline, nerves wailing in the air.

“Trakari Helstaar, you are now again in compliance.” First Marshal Xiupang snapped a nod, then with sharp precision, performed an about-face and left with her Paladin.

Theseus considered Reddark. It wasn’t that long ago that she’d lived in Bijurn, which meant she hadn’t long been an RIV. What was the extent of her training? “Have you worked a hunt?”

“I am fully trained, registered”—she indicated the gold badge hanging at the hip of her white duster—“and a Level 3 Visionist.”

“Not what I asked.”

She hesitated then straightened her spine. “This is my first assignment.”

A beginner! Frustration tightened his shoulders.

"I cannot believe they saddle someone of your notoriety like this." A Coimedai himself, Mentor understood the condescension of having a Facilitator, let alone a rookie.

"Penance for my desperation," Theseus muttered.

Her dark eyes raked him. "Fitting that we reunite on the day of the Betrayer's March."

"I didn't realize you were marching."

Mentor Camus coughed a laugh into his fist.

"Do you ever do actual work?" Reddark complained. "Or do you still think your title grants you dispensation from working like the rest of the quadrant?"

"I *hunt*—when there's guilt or a contract. Unlike you, I don't go around killing for the fun of it."

"I do not—"

"We have a job?" Theseus asked Mentor, needing to silence Reddark. To not hear her justify delving.

"Indeed, now that you have the RIV, I can activate this hunt the Provost sent." With a flick of his hand across a flexscreen, Mentor Camus waved him the intel. "Your targets are landing in a few hours at Southside docks."

"Targets?"

"Yes, two—they work in tandem."

"Stacked hunt," Theseus noted in quiet approval. "My day just improved." With a wry grin, he eyed the RIV. "Time to Neutralize delvers."





CHAPTER 2 MISSION FOCUS CONFIRMED

LIRO, BRAVEBANE (KO'RISH)

BACK IN THE MIDAFTERNOON SUN, THESEUS TAPPED HIS COLLAR, ACTIVATING THE AEGuS, which haloed around his head. "Viscount to Four-Oh-Seven. I'm in possession of a Facilitator and cleared for duty—"

"I am not your pos—"

"—and have orders. Meet at Southside docks."

"Good copy. Southside docks," came Duk's steady reply.

When Xuli pressed her shoulder to his thigh to signal her readiness, Theseus hustled down the steps. Even as his boot hit the sidewalk, he plotted his course through the crowd.

"Would you slow down," Reddark griped as she caught up. "I can't run with this bag."

Theseus took the bag from her, threaded his arms through the straps, and slung it to his back. When he refocused on the street, a garish orange face careened at him. Shock and alarm punched the breath into his throat. He jerked from the enormous visage with a strangled shout.

"Sorry, sorry!" The puppet-master fought to control the thing.

Snapping, Xuli lunged, snapping and barking, forcing the puppet-master to scramble off.

"Easy, Xu." Humiliated—both that he'd cried out and that the thing startled him—Theseus couldn't tear his gaze from the garish puppet towering over the revelers with a head easily as big as its body.

The face sat amid billowing, iridescent green material that spilled down and dusted the street. Bulging-disk eyes and black lines formed the eyebrows, nose, cheeks, and chin. No wonder parents used Curikari tales to scare recalcitrant children into submission!

A shudder rattled down his spine. No wonder parents used Curikari tales to scare recalcitrant children into submission!

"What is this?" Reddark taunted around a laugh. "The mighty Viscount Helstaar cowering from a *puppet*?" Her trilling laughter grated. "I'm surprised you did not take it out with the agria."

Irrked at her mockery, he straightened. "The Imperials are full of contradictions—that thing perpetuates a myth they arrest people for speaking of, yet they allow it for Brakadir's March."

"The Curikari is not a myth," Reddark countered as she hustled to keep up. "You've heard of the Slayer of Cities, haë?"

"That's biased lore and irrelevant. Stick to the hunt."

She huffed. "You really hate me, don't you? Can we talk about our relationship—"

"You mistake me—*this*." Theseus slowed, gathering his decency before addressing her, then pushed every ember of the fire she'd set to his life into his eyes. "There is no relationship, no hatred, no anger. Our only *connection* is that you are Facilitator Reddark assigned to Trakari Six-Two-Nine, which happens to be me."

Startled, she considered him.

"My job is to hunt. Yours is to verify. That's it." Though he detected her hurt and irritation, he resumed course. "We need to reach the docks before the targets land." Mercifully, silence held fast as they caught a hovercab to the seaside market. During the twenty-minute trip to the docks, he scanned the intel Mentor had waved, while Xuli snored at his feet. Two targets: Nerub Faron and Seferi Ukelo, a male and female respectively. Their images holo'd in the air, and he angled the vambrace to ensure the RIV saw them as well.

Disembarking, he smirked as Xuli shook out her fur, then lazily stretched her spine with a satisfied moan after her nap.

"Where is your Paladin team?" Reddark asked.

"The Four-Oh-Seven is not your concern." Continuing down the street with Xu, Theseus probed the scents in the air. Southside docks catered to those who'd fallen on hard times, their desperate plight encouraging some to justify illegal activity. The sharp reek of ammonia hitting his receptors warned the sewers weren't far. For the most part, these docks facilitated intercontinental trade ships, both seafaring and air ships. Interplanetary arrivals landed on the other side of Liro, within shouting distance of the military base. Though the Syndicate controlled docks, this smaller, more distant location with less IMF presence made it easier for someone to sneak in-country without proper ID.

"Are you sure your team is here?" Facilitator Reddark glanced behind them. "I don't see them."

"That's the point." Technically, he wasn't a member of Paladin Echo 407, but they'd worked enough hunts that they considered Theseus a part of their team. He noted his Féirhound vanishing around a corner. "Rules of the hunt: stay with me, avoid Xuli, and say nothing until I ask for confirmation."

"Excuse m—"

"I need to process the scene and scents without interruption or distraction. As a RIV, you should know this. It would've been part of your training."

"Your dog—"

"Féirhound," he corrected.

"Where did she go?"

"Tracking, getting the lay of the land. She can take care of herself and will return when it matters."

The quiet hum of late-afternoon business drew them onward. Fading daylight surrendered to the dull glow of Liro streetlamps. On the right side of the port, clanging masts of seafaring ships bobbing in the bay added to the din. Landing floodlights erupted in full brilliance to the left as a small transport descended, its reverse thrusters blasting the area with hot air and churning the waves into foamy tips.

"Here." Dislodging her bag from his back, Theseus angled aside and urged her behind a personal flier. He stuffed the bag out of sight beneath a crate. "We'll retrieve it after the rogues are Neutralized."

"But that is everything I—"

"Neither of us can afford to wrestle its bulk while hunting, and"—he pointed to a descending transport—"pretty sure our targets are inbound." Crouched at the stern of the flier, he watched the dockmaster amble to the podium at the landing pad entrance, while monitoring the transport's alignment on a DC. Once the crackling of lowering supports echoed in the air, the dockmaster tapped the device. Ground clamps rose from the dock and secured the landing struts. With a hiss, the transport's aft door yawned open, lowering as its gaping maw filled with people ready to disembark.

Using his vambrace to verify the ship's designation, Theseus double-tapped the comms implant, activating the live feed. "*Taldea*, this is Trakari Six-Two-Nine in position. Transport has landed."

"Copy that, Trakari Six-Two-Nine," responded Commander Takki Khata from the *Taldea*, docked at the pad near the bustling city center. "Echo Three and Four had a mechanical delay but are now en route. Five mikes out."

"Understood. Mark start time of hunt as"—Theseus glanced at his vambrace's digital readout—"thirteen-fifteen-point-five-five."

"Confirmed. Hunt began at thirteen-fifteen-point-five-five."

He took in the Southside dock and the people moving around it. A lone figure slipped astern, altogether avoiding the customs officials registering arrivals. That looked like the female target, but where was the male?

"Isn't that—"

"Haë." It didn't surprise him that the rogue team had split up. Made a hunt tricky, but nothing he couldn't handle, thanks to Xuli. Using the céangal bond, he sent Xuli after the female target. *Tail, don't interdict*, he pulsed, knowing she'd stay with Ukelo so he could wait for Faron.

"The target is getting away." No sooner had the words left Reddark's mouth than the sleek black form of his Féirhound darted through the jumble of bodies moving along the street as Xuli assumed a casual pace behind the female. "Your dog ..." Amazement flitted through the RIV's scent.

Theseus smiled inwardly. "Told you she'd return when it was important."

Once customs processed the disembarking passengers, the workers returned to their security hut. All save one, a male, who bypassed the small customs hut, slid through the hefty pylons, and removed the transport company jacket he wore, never breaking stride as he tossed the jacket in the churning bay.

Gotcha. "*Taldea*, eyes on delver. Shifting pursuit to 'Neutralize' on my mark." Voice echoing in his AEGuS, Theseus powered up the agria. "Three ... two ... mark."

"Mission focus confirmed, Six-Two-Nine," comm'd Takki. "We have you on CoRe." The Imperial Communications Relay used satellites positioned throughout the quadrant to maintain steady transmission of intel and data across planets.

Thankfully, Trakari weren't required to wait for a Paladin unit, but he always appreciated their assistance. Theseus nodded to the Facilitator. "Ados, you have a darker jacket or cloak in that bag?"

Reddark frowned. "I—yes. Why?"

From his vambrace, he waved her Xuli's locator code. "I've sent you a temporary way to locate Xuli. Find her and monitor the female."

"What happened to 'I hunt. You verify'?"

At her lame attempt to mimic his deep voice, Theseus tightened his jaw. "Cloak up and help, or stay here. Your choice." He straightened and set course to interdict. "*Taldea*, RIV and Féirhound on course to intercept female target."

"Confirm visual on both."

With calm, determined strides, he made his way across the alley and between high-rise buildings. He eyed a fence that separated the civilian landing pad from the dockside market. Tick-tacked it, hiked over, and dropped to the other side with nary a sound. Focused on finding his target, he ran, processing scents that told him to veer right at the corner. Two minutes delivered him to the bustling Fish Alley, where he spotted Faron ten meters ahead, bobbing through the congested area and donning a cap as he went.

"Viscount," Duk comm'd, "Paladin Echo Three and Four trailing the male target in standard support positions."

Which meant fifteen meters behind Theseus, close enough to provide backup but far enough away to avoid spooking the target. "Understood." Shifting out of the open, he closed the distance a little. He worked his vambrace, setting it to Neutralize, and felt the familiar *shink* of the injectile priming in the chamber.

The laughter of a child riffled on rank air that reeked of fish, fuel, and spiced foods. A woman lost control of her rickety cart, spilling her aluminum goods across his path.

Theseus leapt at a wares stand, toed the wall, and spun himself up over the chaos. He landed and spotted his target—looking straight at him. Sight.

Veering right, which took him away from the target, he ducked behind a food cart, ending up no farther from his target than before.

Now at a vegetable cart, Faron had a hand on some kind of round tuber. Why was he just standing there, staring ... toward ... what?

Nerves buzzing, Theseus glanced in that direction and spotted a boy on a footbridge over a small inlet. No more than five or six, the lad had grubby clothes, messy hair, and wide eyes ... Unfocused. Hollow.

Haiasphor, that insidious nidor that roiled off a visionist when they dug into someone's mind, slammed the air.

Theseus faltered, instinct following that rancid smell. Though something was wrong, off, with the boy, he wasn't delving. The haiasphor was coming from behind Theseus—Faron!

The rogue met his gaze in clear defiance, as if he knew something. As if unworried about facing down a Trakari. He nodded toward the docks.

Gut tightening, Theseus didn't need to look. He knew—the bedraggled boy was being delved. That fundamental instinct to protect the innocent soared to the fore. He wheeled around as the lad on the bridge went ramrod straight. "*Taldea*, rogue in active violation."

The lad pivoted like a toy in someone's hand. Palms out like an IAU-1, he reached for the rail that protected him from the murky waters of the bay.

A brawl erupted between some dockworkers and a man in a suit.

Sight and mind! Delving multiple victims at once took insane skill.

He eyed Faron again and the guy smirked, then turned and darted down an alley. "*Taldea*, delver mindjacked a boy and is stirring up violence among the dockworkers. It's about to get bloody here. Might want to alert local authorities."

Thudding erupted, rattling down the wooden bridge and docks, signaling the heavy movement of Paladin. "Echo Three and Four moving to intercept," came Duk's decisive voice.

A bitter nidor assailed his keen olfactory senses, which were heightened even further by his Féirhound. Theseus tensed as a pulse seared past him. Plaster erupted in a violent spray, crackling across the AEGuS.

Theseus dived and rolled up. "Taking fire!" He drew his pulse blaster from its thigh holster, searching for the assailant. Saw nothing but the two Paladin working to get things back under control and separate the dockworkers, now in an all-out rampage.

No time to consider the chaos or help—couldn't lose Faron—Theseus sprinted toward the alley Faron had disappeared down.

"Slag me—the boy!" Tzigane grunted as a distant splash sounded.

"Got him," Duk comm'd around a huff that preceded a larger splash.

After hustling through the alley, Theseus emerged onto Walkton Boardwalk, packed with a mixture of shoppers and Brakadir revelers. Yet no

Faron. Using the AEGuS to scan faces, he felt a knot forming in his gut. "I've lost him." He could smell the delver. The brigand was here, hiding like a coward while he sent others to their deaths. "Show yourself!"

Impact plowed him sideways.

In the split-second it registered, Theseus jerked up and vaulted away from the assailant. "Contact! Under attack!" He pitched himself backward and swiveled around with his pulse blaster. Faltered at the frenzied eyes that were ... hollow. And not Faron.

Sight! Another mindjack. With a flick of his thumb, Theseus altered to nonlethal and fired, sending the blast into the attacker's chest, robbing him of breath and strength. The guy collapsed.

"Unfriendly down," Theseus reported, turning back to the street.

"Be aware, Four-Oh-Seven," Takki intoned from the *Taldea*, "local authorities are monitoring but on standby."

"Tell them to stop monitoring and start helping! I want this rogue—he doesn't care who he delves or injures." Chest taut, Theseus regained affective control of himself. Homed in with his receptors, searching for haiasphor. Nothing. He turned his focus to the céangal to check Xuli. The blood-bond was replete with that same frustration and excitement. Which meant she'd lost the trail but continued searching.

Theseus fisted his hand. How? How had they both lost their targets? A moment later, a thrumming vibrating note pulsed from Xu—thrill! Then a keening whine hit the air.

Xuli was amped! She must've cornered the target.

Theseus sprinted in her direction. He rounded a corner, the scents coming stronger. Amazing the strident difference panic made in pheromones. So much easier to track. He went deeper into the narrow passage. Caught the haiasphor. It was particularly strong—Faron must be actively delving again.

"Heads-up," Takki comm'd. "Just got hit with an official notice that local authorities are moving to intervene. And your RIV is no longer with Xuli. Not sure what happened there."

Sight. What good was a RIV if she couldn't cooperate on a hunt?

Xuli's coiling senses wafted pleasure, indicating she'd found the rogue—one of them, at least.

Coming up around the south block, Theseus entered an alley darkened by towering structures. He flicked his wrist, the *agria* haloing into a visible array that aligned with his retinal overlay, translating shadows into shapes. Stretching his neck, he spotted the gleam of red eyes at the far end. Xu's excitement wormed through their blood-bond. *Wait*, he pulsed as he tested the air.

Her keening whimper pushed back. She hated waiting. Wanted to deal with the foul creature now.

Slowly he advanced, probing the scents, scanning trash bins, crates ...
Where'd you go, vermin?

Strident, hot odor struck his hyper-sensitive olfactory receptors.

Around his extended fist, the agria's targeting halo changed from blue to yellow due to proximity of haiasphor. He let the tech do its job, objects melting away as it reduced everything to vector renderings. Despite the darkness, he now clearly saw the form huddled between a large steel container and the brick building.

"PICIS, confirm target."

A shimmer washed over the AEGuS visor and the man's face. "Identity confirmed, Viscount."

"*Taldea*, fugitive located," Theseus subvocalized and eyed the firing solution taking shape. "Sending pin for RIV. PICIS, go broad," he instructed, the mic going external and internal. "Surrender, Faron!" When no response came, he angled until the array glowed red. "Firing solution locked. Log time—"

"Waitwaitwait!" Hands flew upward as the delver shot into the open. "Please."

Theseus firmed his stance, detecting Xuli stalking closer. "Stand down, Nerub Faro—"

"It's a mistake." The delver shifted to his right, angling for an exit, but clearly hadn't noticed the hulking black Féirhound slinking that direction. "I ... I got lost."

Theseus counter-positioned to maintain his firing solution. "Active delving without registration is a death sentence, Nerub Faro." Where was that RIV when he actually wanted her around? "*Taldea*, system locked. Awaiting RIV's ID-loc." This rogue should be glad a Facilitator was required on-scene before sending the injectile, because Theseus was ready to Neutralize this one.

"How can you do this, kill without prejudice? Are you a monster, coldblooded?"

Theseus faltered. No idea where that distinctly feminine voice came from but it proved haunting. Had he killed so many that he'd lost count? Forgotten the faces?

Never. He remembered every single one.

Shaking off the sudden chill, Theseus noted the delver searching for an escape, but the support Paladin thudded into the juncture with the RIV.

Faron slumped, defeated. Glowered at Theseus. "My abilities came from Thixu—just like yours."

Anger spiked Theseus at the insult. "I do *not* violate the sacred vault of a mind. What you do is a blasphemy of a gift instilled by Thixu. It's deavru."

The man bounced on his toes. "Evil?" His black hair hung limp from sweat and the humidity blanketing the city. "I help people forget! And now I'll help you—" His hands angled toward Duk and Tzigane as haiasphor seared the air.

The snarl from Xuli mirrored the crimson roiling through her long, silky black fur—all in fair warning of an active delve. It matched the feather-light touch Theseus felt ricochet off the céangal bond. Duk yelped and Tzigane stumbled to a knee—prionic spikes.

The rogue pitched himself around and bolted.

Even as the *snap-clack* of Xuli's powerful jaws echoed in the alley, Theseus clenched his fist, sending the injectile. Before the delver could shout and a fraction of a second before Xuli took the guy to the ground, the biochemical retribution pierced his chest.

Three.

The casing, now inside the delver, would dissolve.

Theseus flicked away the agria halo and stalked closer and checked the 407. "You good?"

A slew of epithets filled the comms. Yeah, Tzigane was fine.

Shock froze the rogue's face. "Your RIV didn't ..." Nerub swallowed.

Two.

"You delved me and my team." Theseus shook his head as the team got vertical again. "Foolish, Faron."

Secondary layering mingled with the blood, releasing the DNA-specific nanites that matched the drsti marker found only in the genome of delvers. The man crumpled to the ground in a heap.

Tzigane turned away. "Kos. I hate that part."

"You were supposed to wait for my confirmation!" objected Reddark as she stomped forward.

Theseus straightened to his full height. "You were supposed to stay with Xuli and the second target!"

"I'm not a dog that I can sail over fences and walls!"

"*Féirhound*," he bit out, then pointed to his target. "Verify. Now." Theseus knelt.

Reddark flared her nostrils wide, then looked at her DC. "Drsti marker confirmed."

"Obviously," Tzigane muttered.

Because the injectile only disintegrated those with the genetic marker—delvers.

The last vestige of air in Faron's lungs wheezed out as the injectile vaporized his medulla oblongata, severing the connection of the spinal cord from the heart, brain, and lungs. His face went slack.

Theseus took a blood sample and ran it through the vambrace, which would deliver the results to Coimedaí HQ and Meūxing, the massive space station that hovered in the void anchoring the planets of Helios.

He glanced down into the now-vacant eyes. Right arm over his chest, fist touching his shoulder, Theseus brought his thoughts and will into sharp focus,

to surrender. “Nerub Faron, to Thixu I send you to answer for your violence against His children.”

Xuli trotted over to him, nudged her snout beneath his hand.

Theseus smoothed a palm over her once-again black fur. “Good work, girl. I’m—”

A shriek stabbed his ears, even as a wash of crimson saturated Xuli’s coat.

The second target!

Tapping the agria to load the other injectile, Theseus shoved upward, swiveling and aiming at the woman flying at them, her entire form flooded with haiasphor. But a dolor—a strange one—rippled through her Signature. Grief. Innocence.

Tears streaming down her face, she clawed at them.

“Stand down, Seferi Ukelo. You are—”

Xuli started forward, but stopped, glancing back at him in confusion.

Only then did Theseus realize he’d pulsed a *Wait* command to her, even though the rogue was still delving. “Ukelo!” Something wasn’t right.

“She’s our other target,” Reddark sniped. “Drsti confirmed. Neutralize.”

Sight and mind. She sounded so callous.

When the woman came on, unyielding, Theseus had no choice but to send the injectile.

Gaping as the round pierced her, the woman stumbled. Went to a knee. Crumpled like a wet blanket.

Three.

She writhed on the ground, reaching toward Faron. “He promised ...” Angry eyes found Theseus, and she stabbed her hands at him, the light delve rebounding off the céangal. She frowned at him. “Why can’t I delve you?”

Theseus stared, rankled at what had just happened—no, not what happened. Over that crisp, clear note in her efflux: innocence. It made no sense. “What did he promise?”

Two.

Brown eyes found his. “You made ... mistake.” Garbling, rasping noises came from Seferi Ukelo. She groaned, spasmed. Cried out.

Hand on the dying woman’s shoulder, Theseus felt the faintest flicker of doubt. It had been a just Neutralization. Haë? Had he done the right thing?

Of course he had—she was delving him and the team, without registration.

But the innocent note ...

He swallowed as she clawed at her throat. “Do not fight it,” he warned solemnly. “It will be more painful.”

Dark eyes sharpened with a stunning clarity. “You will soon find a pain you could never imag—”

One.

After offering her the same last rites he had given to Faron, Theseus pushed

to his feet with a final nod to the life that fled. "None but Thixu." The woman's dying words rattled in his head alongside her insinuation that he'd made a mistake. "None."

Stretching his shoulders, he signaled Xuli, who darted to his side, sleek body pressed to his thigh, and released a soft trill that was half growl, half purr. He slid a look at the crowd forming around them. "Back to the ship."

The RIV shifted into his path. "I feel it only fair to warn you that I *will* file a report if you ever Neutralize without confirmation first. It's a high crime, Trakari Helstaar."

"Do not threaten me, Reddark." Theseus held her gaze. "Just as you have a job to do, so do I. And I *will* do it. With or without your affirmation. You failed today. I won't let anything interfere with a hunt."

Her eyes narrowed. "You hate me. Because I'm a visionist."

"I hate what you do—delving is wrong."

"But I'm *registered* with the ISF. I only—"

"This?" He caught the medallion hanging over her right hip. "*This* doesn't make delving right. It makes it accepted."





CHAPTER 3 GENERAL MISTRUST OF VISIONISTS

IMF-PTALDEA, KO'RISH

"DOES IT EVER ENTER THAT THICK SKULL OF YOURS THAT YOU MURDER PEOPLE JUST because—"

"My skull is just fine." Staring at Reddark in the small bunkroom, Theseus paused in the gangway, reaching for the lock panel. "Strap in for liftoff. Chow's at eighteen-hundred. A right and a left to the galley. Otherwise, don't wander the *Taldea* unless you want the first officer to lock you in the brig."

"Yes, the captain—where is he? I need—"

"The *acting* captain is busy getting us off this rock." When fire blazed in her eyes, he hit the panel, the hatch whisking closed between them. Roughing a hand over his face, he headed to his quarters and ducked through the hatch, then sealed it.

After securing Xuli in her crash harness, he dropped into his and anchored in. Ten minutes later, when they hit orbit, he freed himself and shrugged out of his light-armor jacket. Something slapped to the deck. Both he and his Féirhound flinched at the sound. Theseus looked at what had fallen. A wave of shock and nausea roiled through him. There on the perclunium deck lay a brown hide-bound text. The Brakadir chronicle!

Sight and mind, he'd forgotten all about it in the chaos of the hunt. What would happen if he got caught with the thing? Gently, he retrieved it. Checked to ensure he'd sealed the hatch lock. He had to secure the text until he could safely return it to Mentor. With haste, he stowed it in the vault within his wall locker. Took a step back. Felt the strangest coil of dread.

Soni-shower would clear his mind. Or wash away the guilt of having that text. Also ... Ukelo. What was that?

After showering and changing, Theseus donned his shipboards and knelt in the middle of the bunkroom, ankles crossed beneath him as he sank back. Hands on his thighs, he rolled his shoulders and relaxed. Closed his eyes. Breathed in ... out ... and began to recite the Coimedaí Pillars and Oaths. "Preserve the ancient origins of the Commorant. Practice the discipline of daily supplication. Use one's strength only to protect and uphold the weak."

Xuli dropped to the deck and curled up next to him.

Onward with the Pillars. He spoke each one, embracing the sacred sayings, allowing them to center him, then he started the Oaths. "As a member of the

clade, I fight against delving across Helios. Coimedaí follow a challenging ideological battle to defend the mind of society. I swear and promise to always seek to protect the oppressed, the widow, and the orphan. A hunter cannot be slave to sectarian beliefs regarding the sanctity of the mind."

"You've made ... mistake."

The jarring reminder pulled him from his Oaths, but Xuli pushed into his back with a groan.

Appreciating his Féirhound's redirection, he resumed the Oaths. "Coimedaí must always seek truth because Thixu is truth. A Coimedaí must conduct himself with humility and must be the most honorable, the most noble, the most courteous, the most honest—"

"You will soon find a pain you could never imag—"

Xuli stood and thrust her shoulder into his, the céangal no doubt broadwaving his tension to her. She pressed into his face. The *huff-huff-huff-huff* of her sniffing tickled his cheek and ear, which she thrust her nose behind.

"Hey." When she swept her tongue up the side of his face, he jerked away. "Hey, *hey!*" Wiping off her drool, he laughed, then shifted back onto his bunk. His thoughts drifted to the requiem. Curiosity itched to read the translation. However, spending time with illegal content was not a risk worth taking, not after today's events. So he tugged out his small jotpad and did some quick sketches. He'd started this Olde Age method of recording after reviewing a text Mentor once loaned him regarding the Oaths. There was something—a release?—that came with putting stylus to jotpad or charcoal to paper. Not nearly as fulfilling was drawing with the assist of technology. Too, he refused to allow delvers real estate in his mind or sketches, so he never drew them. He illustrated the alley where he'd dispatched Faron but not the delver himself. Or Ukelo ... the innocent.

He scoffed. There was no such thing—she'd been delving him right to the end!

His Coimedaí channeler blinked rapidly, indicating an incoming wave, so he tucked away the jotpad and accepted it.

A visage rippled in a holographic rendering. "Well done, Helstaar," congratulated Provost Otheron, his superior within the clade and the Commorant officed at Luxe City as the liaison between the clade and the Imperial House. "Glad you found those rogue delvers."

"You have confirmation of their identities and deaths."

"We do. Word has already been sent to the Nor'oyan governor whose daughter had been mindjacked."

With a nod, Theseus could not help but wonder if Ukelo had truly been a part of that or just a delver in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"You don't seem pleased."

Theseus was nothing if not direct, but talking with his superior required

respect. "I've noticed some of my ops have been sourced by nobles. Quite a few, in fact."

"I did not realize you were now provost."

Chastised, Theseus knew it was not his place to challenge the clade, yet if nobody spoke up ...

"I vet the warrants with Strategy because I am provost. *Source* should not be your concern—Neutralizing delvers is." Otheron glowered. "Or have you forgotten your Oaths, Coimedai?"

Theseus donned contrition. "No, Provost."

"Keep tracking and Neutralizing the violators, and you'll win Imperial favor."

A familiar thrum rang through Theseus. "I will do my duty to Thixu, but I am not looking for the favor of Imperials."

"Sight, what is your problem, Helstaar? Sear your connections at Luxe City, and you'll never find any warrants."

Well aware of the trouble that could cause his family, Theseus held his peace.

"Or maybe you're in a position now that you don't need the funds this Trakari contract provides." Of course, the provost knew that wasn't the case. "Your reputation as a Coimedai made you not only hard to pass up but also one to watch." He gave a halfhearted laugh. "It'd be a shame to cut one of our finest hunters on loan to the IMF."

Would it?

Yes. Yes, it would. House Helstaar did not need more difficulties, nor could they afford to again arouse the ire of the emperor or lose the dirua his family so desperately needed.

"Your next warrant came through." Otheron was suddenly brisk. "Once Strategy vets it, I'll wave it to Mentor Camus so he can relay it. Good payout from a Talsien prime minister."

Another nobleman. Weariness tugged at Theseus, but he supplied the only right answer. "A delver Neutralized is a mind protected."

"Precisely." Otheron nodded.

"I'll watch for the tap. Helstaar out."

A low growl rolled through Xuli at his frustration. "You and me both, girl." He checked his vambrace, surprised to find it was nearly 1800 hours. "Let's get some grub."

Xuli all but flew to the hatch, which Theseus unlocked. Once she sailed out, he glanced at Ivara's hatch, hesitated, then stepped over and rapped twice. When it opened, he thumbed over his shoulder. "Chow time." Not waiting for her response, he headed down the passage to the laundry, galley, and captain's quarters. Beyond the galley, a ladder reached up to the upper-level bridge.

Acting captain and first officer Commander Takki Khata stepped into view,

his black hair cut high and tight in accordance with Imperial military regulations. He eyed a holo readout, then pivoted. Spotting Theseus on the lower deck, he gave a nod.

"When's the new captain coming?"

"Three standard days." Takki turned to another hover display.

Relieved to at least not have *that* battle to face today, Theseus hiked into the galley.

Hair in her usual bun and zipped up in gold-and-black shipboards, Duk sat at the mess table, eating as she scrolled on a DC. "Your double hunt is all over the waves."

Shaking his head that people found his hunts entertaining, Theseus prepped Xu's food. He set the bowl down and his girl plowed into the tasty morsels. Only then did he see Reddark huddled to the side. He pointed to the prep counter. "Food's there. Rehydrator works." He shrugged. "Most of the time."

"Something smells good." Reddark inched nearer.

"Tzigane made protein stew." Duk jutted her jaw toward a small brown container anchored on a rack.

Theseus remembered the last time he'd eaten that and the trauma it'd wreaked on his gut. "Thanks for the warning."

"Oi," the big guy grouched as he clomped into the galley. "That's me mum's recipe." He offered a bowl to Reddark, who accepted.

With his rehydrated food, Theseus slid onto a black stool across from Duk at the arc-shaped table.

Holding the upper lip of the hatch, Takki swung himself inside. He clapped Theseus's shoulder. "Clade waved me the next target—Talsar." He flicked a food tray into the rehydrator, then his gaze landed on the newcomer. "You must be the RIV."

"Facilitator. I'm Ivara Reddark."

The commander indicated to each member of the team. "Duk and Tzigane." He set a hand to his chest. "Commander Takki Khata, first officer."

Reddark bobbed her head. "Nice to meet you."

"I'd say likewise," Tzigane said, as he grabbed some of his stew, "but I can tell our guy there doesn't like yeh." He shrugged. "Family first and all that." He sat at the table and dug into his bowl.

Duk narrowed her eyes at Theseus and Ivara. "You two have history? Or is this your general mistrust of visionists coming into play, Viscount?"

"Both," Reddark supplied.

"Is that going to be a problem?" The commander held Theseus's gaze.

"Only if she's late again."

Tzigane licked stew from his thumb and considered Reddark. "You know better than to delve us, haë?"

The RIV drew in a sharp breath.

“Redirecting.” Takki chomped bread as he flicked his hand toward the wall. “PICIS, display Trakari mission 225.8 map in the galley.” He waited until a holographic display came to life on the wall. “Talser.”

Theseus detached the channeler from his vambrace and rifled files from Strategy. Found the new target. “Apparently, the delver sent prionic spikes into a herd of cattle. The herd then trampled a prime minister, killed her husband and two sons. Injured thirty in the melee.” Would he ever *not* be repulsed by what delvers did?

“Recommend landing on the north side of the city and coming up through the grain fields.”

“Agreed. I think—” A thump hit his forearm and pulled his gaze to the vambrace. Theseus tensed, realizing it was his personal comms. Only family used that channel. This couldn’t be good ...

“Something wrong?” Concern creased Duk’s brow.

“I’ll be back.” Theseus pushed to his feet, signaled Xuli, and stalked back to his quarters. Inside, he secured the hatch, and jammed monitoring. Gut churning, he received the wave. “Helstaar.” The delay of the relay satellites frayed his nerves.

“Theseus!” Maman’s frantic voice finally erupted and struck like a dagger. “We need your help!”

He winced, the provost’s warning clanging in his mind. “I can’t this time, Maman. I have a warrant—”

“She’s at Academie in Sjosa. If the authorities find her—”

“Aca—*What?*” That was hundreds of kilometers from the sanatorium! “*How?*”

In truth, it did not matter. Sweet, innocent Rija had been terribly wronged, to the point of breaking her mind. Half the time she had no clue what she was doing. He could not say no. *Thixu first* meant his calling as a Coimedaf came first—a sacred duty to rout delvers. But with Rija being at a government facility, he must interdict before something happened that they could not come back from. The provost’s stiff tone on their last wave warned him one more misstep ...

“If she’s caught this time, Theseus, they’ll put her away for good. You know I speak true. And it won’t be Pagala this time. It’ll be prison, maybe even that horrific spectacle in space!”

Meūxing. The behemoth space station that was the Imperial seat of power.

He’d do anything for his sister, but he was on thin O₂ with the Syndicate. Abandoning the Talser warrant would end his Trakari contract. Likely get him excommunicated from the clade, but what would happen to Rija if he didn’t? He grunted—what would happen to Bijurn if he did and lost his income? “Ask Koren—”

"He's with your father inspecting the mines."

Sight ... Waves didn't reach belowground.

"Halad and Raloran aren't here," she went on, tears streaking her flushed cheeks. "Besides, contacting them would only draw Imperial attention."

Like waving him wouldn't? No, he knew the truth of it—Halad was likely ignoring waves, and Raloran probably wasn't even on Ilreth right now. His Oaths stated, "*Use one's strength only to protect and uphold the weak.*" So, was it not his obligation to interdict?

"Say you will come, Theseus. I beg you!"

Dragging a hand over his face, he blew out a breath, then tapped the code into his DC to power up the *Cosaint*, his personal, nimble raider docked in the bay of the *Taldea*. "As you will," he acquiesced and started packing his ruck. Surreptitiously, he tucked the requiem and jotpad into an inner pocket.

"Thank you," Maman breathed. "You have her signal ...?"

"I do—her beacon is still active." It was a sad state of affairs when necessity dictated a family embed a tracker in a loved one for safety concerns. "Have the staff ready the Engram."

She faltered. "Is that ... necessary?"

"Maman." He stilled from packing and focused on her hovering image. "Think about where she is, what she's doing. If by some miracle I manage to get her out of there before she does something criminal, we'll need to ensure she cannot again escape and injure herself or someone else."

Sorrow sliced through her elegant features. "I know ... it's just ..."

"All will be well, Maman. I'll secure her."

"You always do."

Theseus opened the hatch, and Xuli trotted out into the central gangway. "I'm at least four hours out, so keep trying Koren in case he can get there faster." He shouldered into his ruck and started in the opposite direction, toward the lower docking bay. "I'm leaving now. See you soon, Maman."

Wave cut, he entered the access passage to the shuttle bay assigned to his raider. Once inside, he palmed the panel and the hatch irised closed behind him, only then allowing him to open the one to the *Cosaint's* bay. The steady thrum of the raider's engines and the heated wake that struck him seemed a portent of what was to come.

Shouldering aside the ominous feeling, Theseus followed Xuli up the rear bay door. Aboard, he headed to one of three lockers in the aft compartment. "PICIS, seal the bay."

"Sealing now, Viscount."

A hiss sounded, the interior cabin pressurizing as Theseus slung his ruck into the locker. Something slipped free—and he jerked to catch it. When the supple hide of the Brakadir text landed in his palms, he huffed. Of course.

"*Cosaint*," Takki's perturbed voice crackled through the speakers. "What are you doing?"

Theseus glanced at the cockpit, contemplating not responding. When Xuli moaned as if mirroring his feelings, he watched her settle into her cocoon—a hammock-like harness to hold her secure.

"Viscount, report," the commander insisted.

After shutting the locker, Theseus pulled himself past the small galley, walled-off latrine, and hiked into his crash couch. Stored the text in the console and went through prelaunch measures. "PICIS, set course for Ilreth." The five-point harness snugged him securely as he opened comms. "*Taldea*, rendezvous in Talser at first light."

"You have a warrant to execute, Viscount. Standard protocol is to report to the designated location immediately. Any deviation—"

"No deviation," he countered, keying up the separation sequence. "Maybe a slight ... delay. I'll be back before they know I'm gone." He hoped. The bay door opened and the ship cameras showed a shield wavering into place to protect both ships. "*Cosaint* to *Taldea*, separating in five ..."

"The new captain will be scorched. IMF will vent you—"

"Three ... two ..." At the whine of the *Cosaint's* engines, he activated the uncoupling sequence. "One." He hit the release and felt the notable loss of momentum as his raider slipped free of the heavy corvette, which continued on its trajectory. "Separation successful."

"High fate, *Cosaint*. *Taldea* out."

Luck had nothing to do with this. It'd be Thixu—because Theseus needed a miracle to save his sister and his career.

Once a safe distance from the *Taldea*, Theseus fired engines and banked hard toward Ilreth. "Hold on, Xu. We're about to enrage the IMF and clade in one move." The ship handled smoothly, and the steady drone felt as comfortable as putting on his favorite boots. He logged the flight, his gaze streaking over the instrumentation—and hit the ancient text. Again, he considered scanning it. Seeing what in the clarity was so fascinating that Mentor would risk excommunication in order to translate the text. But just touching that thing felt sacrilegious, a violation of his Oaths.





CHAPTER 4 GLINTING DEFIANCE WAVERED

SJOSA, KETHIDEN (ILRETH)

SOME HOURS INTO THE *COSAINT*'S FLIGHT, A DISTINCTIVE NOISE CAME FROM BEHIND Theseus.

"Xu, what ..." He glanced back to see what Xuli was doing but faltered to find her, still in hammock, alerting. Ears and eyes trained aft in rapt focus. A subtle red hue glimmered through her silky black coat. At the thrum of warning through the céangal, he grew acutely aware of the contraband he held. The way she was acting said someone else was aboard.

Silently, stealthily, he reached for his pulse blaster and freed himself from the harness. Stood next to his crash couch, scanning the semi-darkened interior of the galley, farther back to the latrine, and—

The accordion door bucked, jacking his pulse.

Pulse jacking, Theseus lifted the blaster to high-ready. "Come out! Hands where I can see them!"

The gray barrier folded ... and a shock of white hair emerged—Reddark! She stumbled out, eyes wide.

"What in the clarity are you doing?"

She straightened, jutting her chin. "Where you go, I go." Resolution carved into her expression and stance. "When you got that wave from the beroness, I guessed you'd jump ship. So, I came aboard."

"Stole aboard."

"I'm not going to be left behind, unable to do my job."

"This isn't your job," he countered. "Your job was to be on the *Taldea*, ready to verify *tomorrow*." Frustration tightened his jaw as he considered the complications of being stuck with her. Sure couldn't get her back to the *Taldea* now. No time to turn around or divert.

"This is about Rija?"

No way he'd discuss anything related to his family with her.

"ILR *Cosaint*," squawked through the comms—Otheron. "What in the third quadrant are you doing?"

Just could not get a reprieve, could he? At the triumphant gleam in Reddark's eyes, Theseus wondered how the provost had already learned about this side diversion. Was this white-haired RIV to blame?

He waved Reddark into the nav couch. "Sit. Don't move. Don't speak. If you so much as twitch, I'll lock you in that latrine."

"You wouldn't!" She considered him for a moment. Then her glinting defiance wavered, pushing her to the crash couch, where she harnessed in.

"You are instructed to correct course!" Otheron boomed through the comms. "Last warning—return to the *Taldea* and this will be overlooked."

An alarm sounded. "Viscount," PICIS intoned, "we will soon enter Ilreth's atmosphere. Please return to your crash couch."

Theseus did as instructed.

"Are you zolo?" Reddark complained. "You can't ignore an order from a provost!"

Harness snugging him in, he fired retro-rockets to slow velocity. Using atmospheric drag and controlled braking, he monitored the heat and friction levels as he dipped the nose toward the planet. The ship rattled—conveniently disrupting comms for the next few minutes and giving him some peace. And time to figure out how to avoid the brig or getting vaporized.

This would be it—the career-ender. By the provost's tone, Theseus would end up in trouble with the clade too. Thixu always had a plan, even when everything went awry. It'd be great if Thixu would wave him in on that plan. Give him a heads-up.

Theseus held the *Cosaint* steady. No idea what he'd do with the RIV once he landed. If he could just retrieve Rija and make it to Bijurn ...

Who was he kidding? Nowhere was safe. Imperials controlled everything. Many in the quadrant—House Helstaar included—bore a strong grudge against the Imperial Syndicate for seizing control of Helios nearly two standard centuries past, when every planet had been fighting a deadly toxin.

When the *Cosaint* broke atmo, the groan of the air rubbing the hull proved haunting. He adjusted the yoke forward, angling the raider down, and punched the boosters. G forces slammed him back into his couch as the raider screamed toward the horizon. Hopefully, he could reach Sjosa and intercept his sister before the IMF arrived to complicate the situation.

The raider shuddered beneath him, and he understood too late that the invisible claws of Imperial technology were digging into the ship's controls. His stomach dropped as systems fell silent.

"What is that? What happened?" Reddark shrieked.

"That's your beloved Syndicate seizing control of this ship to kill me."

"They wouldn't—I'm in here!"

He grunted a laugh he didn't feel and flipped the diverter's restart switch. Nothing happened.

He tapped it off. Back on. *Come on ...*

Nothing, save the phenomenal exertion of gravity against his body. He

stretched to reach the bypass switch ... strained ... felt the cold display. Tapped—except he didn't. The ship's vibrations twitched his finger off the switch.

Reddark's scream melded with the groaning ship and the torrential pull as they plummeted.

Theseus growled and surged forward. Nailed the switch. With a shocking jolt, they slowed. Then a roar erupted from the engines. His fingers flew over the array. The ship jerked. With jarring violence, it launched upward and he aimed toward Kethiden.

Though being a Coimedai gave Theseus connections and benefits, his family name and blood carried more weight once they reached the western continent—Kethiden, Shaksasi, Zalreon, etcetera—in persuading air authorities to grant forbearance for his unregistered flight path.

"Are you *zolo*?" Reddark again balked from her crash couch. "Abandoning a hunt, disobeying your provost, *and* entering capital airspace without authorization?"

Yeah, career is as good as sunk.

Considering the digital maps warned there'd be no time to land a safe distance from the Academie and hike in. He'd have to set down in the central courtyard. "PICIS, switch to autopilot and assume control of the landing."

A whirr shuddered through the *Cosaint*. "PICIS has control, Viscount."

Theseus climbed from his crash couch and rushed down to the bay with Xuli. He donned the mid-level powersuit that offered more options than a light-suit but was less cumbersome than a mechsuit. Anything to gain an advantage. Linking his suit to the local constabulary would keep him apprised of the local response and project his timeline. However, it'd give authorities a bead on his location. As it was, landing near the courtyard attracted attention and left him a mere fifteen minutes to locate Rija, secure her, and get airborne again.

"This is asking for a court-martial." Reddark followed him into the bay, shuffling when the roar of reverse thrusters fired as the *Taldea* descended to alight on the lawn.

"Since Commorants aren't military, there can be no court-martial." Fully aware authorities were calling for a strong-but-limited response to the disruption of a symposium at the Academie's Center for Universal Advancement, he could only guess his fears were right—he was too late. No idea why Rija had chosen this place, but she was drawing attention. His chances of getting her out of here unscathed—or at all—were dipping.

In the bay, he clamped his pulse blaster to the thigh holster and clapped one to his spine.

"Weapons?" Reddark railed. "Theseus—"

"*Viscount*," he snapped and pivoted to her, forcing her back a step. "That is how you will address me."

Her eyes widened, but she remained unrepentant. “Do you know who’s on-site? It’s been all over the waves.” She tried to step into his path. “You’re walking into a swarm of draeks—the keynote speaker is the crown prince!”

That intel about royals hadn’t been logged in the Academie’s security protocols for today’s symposium. But it would explain why Rija came here—she’d always been convinced the Imperials were deavru. “Stay here,” he ordered the RIV. “Do not touch the instruments. And—”

“I will not!”

He squared his stance. “Comply, or I’ll secure you. Don’t have time for an argument.”

“I do not answer to you and neither will—”

Lightning-fast, Theseus shoved forward. Amid Xuli’s excited yips, he drove his shoulder into Reddark’s stomach. Caught her around the waist where that gaudy gold belt held that RIV badge, and hefted her over his shoulder.

Squiggly and squirming, she fought his hold as he delivered her to the lone aft brig that was more closet than cell. She stumbled back and caught the edges of the door frame. “You can’t do this. I will make you pay!”

He stuffed her back and hit LOCK. Huffed a breath as the door sealed, silencing her outrage behind the soundproof barrier. Sight, that felt good. “PICIS,” he said as he headed down the ramp, “set countdown for fifteen mikes and temporarily suspend CoRe comms beyond my suit. Activate external mic.” The suit would internalize any command starting with “internal” or “PICIS.”

“Understood, Viscount,” PICIS responded. “External communications suspended until further notice. Clock started. T-minus fourteen minutes, thirty-four seconds.”

His grav boots thudded hard against the stone path and gave a vertical assist up the dozen steps to the courtyard of the CUA building. He signaled his Féirhound. “*Xuli, Rija—bilati, bilati,*” he pulsed.

At the “seek” command, she surged ahead.

Visor rippling with intel from the ship, Theseus pounded after her, aiming for the large, wing-shaped, multistoried building. They rushed through the double doors into the complex. A central atrium sailed upward fifty levels and hugged classrooms, theaters, and a café.

“Viscount,” PICIS sounded from his comms implant, “your passenger is attempting to send a wave to the IMF. Would you like—”

“Intercept and block *anything* to and from her!” Sight and mind, was Reddark trying to get him killed?

“With pleasure, Viscount.”

Refocusing on his task, he reached out with his receptors as Xuli paused, lifting her snout to haul in draughts of air. She processed the scents and headed right.

A woman in a gray business suit hurried toward him, shoes clicking frantically on the marble floor. "Oh, thank the Codices!" Her violet cloth headdress made her pale skin appear translucent. "Hurry, before it's too late." She extended her long arm toward double doors, where a small crowd gathered. "Go on, do your job!"

Wrong assumption—that he was an IMF officer here in response to calls for security. But her error was his gain, giving him unfettered access to the grounds.

He glanced to Xuli as his Féirhound bounded down the atrium, tracking a scent.

"Viscount," PICIS comm'd. "IMF rapiers are in atmo. They will arrive in precisely ten minutes, fifteen seconds."

Feeling the threat closing in, he kept moving. "Adjust countdown timer to get me out in time." As her confirmation whispered through his comms implant, he bypassed a whispering huddle.

"About time!" declared a bald man whose Academie robes were as starched as his spine. "Secure her before she harms someone. The crown prince is in there!"

So, there *was* a royal in attendance. But if so, why weren't royal guards and Paladin filling the hall or guarding the field where he'd landed? Where were the—

Oh no—gunships.

Imperials were notorious for cloaking gunships during events involving the heirs to the throne. The very idea made his nape buzz and hurried him forward. Had to expect that he was about to walk in on royal guards. "Where are the Fángshài?"

"*Inside*," the man hissed. "Where you should be!"

Sight! They'd kill Rija, if they hadn't already.

Theseus shoved forward. Prayed he wasn't too late. "Stay here. Nobody enters!" Shoulder to the door, he gained the interior. The AEGuS targeting system flashed red, an instantaneous scan blinking a half-dozen targets onto his visor.

"Multiple armed targets detected," PICIS intoned.

Beyond the reticle in his AEGuS, he did a split-second recon. A central aisle bisected the small amphitheater and ended in a rectangular stage with exits flanking the outer walls. His visor indicated stadium seating for five hundred. The AEGuS changed the outline of three individuals to red—Fángshài stood on the stage steps, weapons trained on the person who had an arm hooked around the throat of Prince Moteo himself—Rija! She held a dagger to the prince's ear.

Thixu be true. Concern lanced Theseus's focus as he noticed the awkward angle at which the prince had to hold himself, since he had several inches on

Rija. Moteo cringed and stiffened, his expression one of both fury and panic at the blade keeping him and everyone else frozen. Academics huddled on the opposite side of the stage, gazes swinging to him then back to Rija, desperation peppering the air.

Rija had been smart enough to keep her back to the wall as she held her hostage. Otherwise, she'd already be dead.

"Viscount," PICIS squawked, "there is a broadwave of the events in this room being cast across all the western continent. My sensors indicate it is also being waved to Meūxing."

Sight and mind! "Kill the feed." A live wave going out to everyone in the known 'verse showing his little sister threatening the crown prince with a blade ...

"Complying," PICIS reported. "Feed successfully disabled."

Advancing to the stage, he swiped his thumb over the stock of his blaster, setting it to "paralytic."

"N-no! Please." The prince gripped Rija's arm as she firmed her angle and stance.

Theseus winced, regretting that he and his brothers had ever taught their sister blade tactics. Teaching her self-defense skills had seemed like a good idea at the time. Never imagined she'd use it to bring down a prince! But ... why hadn't the crown prince disarmed a slip of a girl like Rija? Surely he had the training.

Stealthily gaining the stage didn't give Theseus a clear line of sight to tag Rija and end this. He hesitated, taking in the disarray of her black hair. The gray jumpsuit, issued from Pagala suggested she'd come straight here. What use was that facility if it couldn't contain her? The administrators would be held accountable for this.

"Do something," hissed a royal guard, hand clamped over a leg wound.

Signaling the guards to clear out the gawkers, Theseus couldn't fathom how his little sister had immobilized a Fāngshài, who were generally as lethal as assassins. That's when he noticed the others had similar wounds in different places—a chest, hand, temple. She must've disarmed one and used his weapon against the elite unit.

He couldn't deny she'd crossed a line this time, one he wasn't sure she could come back from. Not with royals and broadwaves.

"Ah-ah-ahh, Coimedai," came Rija's singsong voice, stopping him. "Any closer and you seal the prince's fate."

Time to assess what fugue stage held her so he could know which tactic to use. His sister had two states—the childlike innocent who sang songs and smiled, and the raging inferno who sought to kill every living beast. The darker fugue version of Rija despised Theseus, called him the spare heir. Or the deceiver, as if her confused mind knew he'd come to stop her.

"What is the prince's crime that you hold him, ma'am?" he asked in a calm, decisive voice.

The prince hissed and arched away from the dagger. "Nothing," he growled.

"Wrong!" Rija's rage burned. "Ailurus told me so."

Not her invisible friend again. Noting his sister's gaze on her captive, Theseus gained another step. Had a better angle to see her.

Innocence wreathed her oval face as Rija cocked her head, gaze going distant. "The children, the children, he has used his sway, caused them all to fall away."

The pattern of words told Theseus this was the childlike version, which meant they had time to end this, keep the prince alive. With Rija in her childlike state, she was unlikely to register his advance, so he kept his movements small as he angled closer. Motioned those onstage to sneak away.

"Not one," she went on, blade still held firmly, "not two, but more a thousand flew. Blood on his hands, blood on his suit, he has made them all moot."

The prince struggled to stay upright. "I've never harmed a child!"

"Lies, lies!" Rija shrieked, her eyes flared with anger as she yanked him back again. "You broke them down, broke them up."

"Viscount," PICIS intoned, "IMF rapiers will land in three-point-two minutes."

Time's up. No choice but to end this now. But how? Hope he was faster than her reflexes?

"Armor, armor he does wear"—Rija tucked her chin and slid dark, haunting eyes to him—"one, two, three, and he's the spare."

Oh no. Her dark side was rising through the thick fog of confusion.

Deliberately, he shifted left, hoping autotargeting would get a lock.

Rija ducked aside, deftly avoiding the lock, and snarled. "No matter what you say, he will pay. You drive my hand—"

"PICIS," he subvocalized, knowing he had to go in hard, "switch to nonlethal, then autofire at first clear opening."

"Going nonlethal," PICIS confirmed. "Autosystems engaged. There is no clear line—"

Theseus launched to the right. The suit shrieked a lock and sent the dart. Careening across the floor, he slid to a stop. Tensed, he watched Rija's slight form crumple in a heap while Fángshài surged toward their prince, who staggered to keep his balance.

Concerned someone might go for her, Theseus punched to his feet. "Clear the stage!" Taking a knee at her side, he hovered over her as royal guards hurried the prince out the rear exit. His gut clenched at the sight of her jet-black hair spilling over her pale face in quiet, peaceful repose.

Oh Rija ...

Palming her shoulder relayed her vitals to the AEGuS system, which registered a steady pulse and a host of other vitals. "PICIS, second dose," he instructed, aiming his vambrace at her. After the subtle thump of the sedative going in, he scooped her into his arms. It might seem overkill to double her sedatives, but Rija-in-a-fugue was harder to sedate than Xuli, whose blood processed paralytics fast.

"Good work, Coimedai." A Fángshài stalked down the aisle.

Sight. How had they ID'd him already?

"My team will take her—"

"Negative. Since I took her down, I must bring her in."

The guard hesitated with a terse expression, clearly not used to being refused.

"Viscount," PICIS said, "IMF rapiers have landing solutions and are descending. Your raider has been tagged and identified."

Little late with the warning. Not waiting for the guard to object, Theseus hurried down the steps and out of the amphitheater. In the main concourse, he pushed through the gathered crowd, which gasped and pointed to his precious cargo.

"Stand aside." He spotted rapiers landing on the long strip of green beyond the courtyard and a handful of Paladin deploying. If he barged ahead, he'd never get to safety, so he ducked into a shadowed alcove. "PICIS, plot a safe path to the *Cosaint*."

The front doors crashed open, and the thunder of IMF rained into the facility.

Nerves vibrating, Theseus waited. When a blue trajectory illuminated in his visor, he readied to make his break for the raider.

"Route is clear," PICIS announced.

Theseus rolled around the corner and pushed through the doors, moving as fast as the body in his arms allowed. "PICIS, locate—oof!" He pitched forward. Dropped to his knees. His unconscious sister bounced from his arms. Fighting to get up, he found his legs heavy, the powersuit uncooperative as he strained toward Rija's still form. *What in clarity ...?*

"Viscount, a neu-bolt struck your powersuit in the back," PICIS informed.

Someone shot him! "Neutralize," he gritted out. He did not need a firefight with Paladin. Unholstering his pulse blaster, he stumbled around in front of Rija even as he searched for the shooter. Felt power thrumming through his suit once more. There, near a large hedgerow—the familiar reflective shimmer of a Paladin's cloaked armor. He fired but saw the blast crackle over the Imperial advanced shielding. As the guard took cover, Theseus shoved upward, hoisting Rija as his suit alerted him to another blast. It struck his

shoulder, but he maintained his feet. Hustled toward the raider. "PICIS, autofire." He felt several thumps as the suit responded to threats.

A black-and-red blur—Xuli—barreled toward another Paladin. Trusting his girl could handle the trouble, he thudded toward his raider.

"Stand down, stand down!" a new voice intruded. "You are targeting one of His Imperial Majesty's contracted Trakari."

Theseus didn't care who intervened on his behalf as long as he could get Rija safely away. Halfway up the ramp, he lurched as the voice finally registered. *No, no keep going.* The coward didn't deserve thanks or recognition. Xu's nails clicked on the deck.

"PICIS" he ordered, "secure rear bay door and start liftoff sequence."

"Complying, Viscount."

In the cargo bay, he laid Rija in the medpod, activated it, and coded in a lock sequence. An ache expanded through his chest as he stared at his sister's blanched face. He palmed the shield, then turned, only then noticing the bay door still open. "PICIS—close bay door!"

"Unable to comply," PICIS replied. "Human biometrics detected."

A form fought the sunlight for entrance into the *Cosaint*.

Theseus snatched his blaster and aimed at the Marine climbing the ramp. "Stay—"

"How did this happen? You need to take off as soon as possible." There was no denying the familiar form of Raal Virris, Imperial Marine officer, former ward of Beron Targo Helstaar, and Theseus's one-time childhood compatriot. Also, coward. Brigand.

"Get off my ship and I will."

Sunlight riffled the dark blond hair trimmed close. "Marines are securing the chancellor and crown prince, but they'll be hunting you and this ship." His brown eyes took in the medpod, and it almost seemed like genuine grief hacked his stony façade. But that would mean he actually had a heart. "She shouldn't be here. You have to get her to safety."

"You're directly interfering with my ability to do just that."

"You should take better care of her."

Sight, this guy brought out the worst in Theseus. Strained every Oath he'd lived by. "Don't you have a job to do somewhere?"

"New position—*this* is my job." Virris's words were inflected with meaning. "IMF wanted Ilrethi Paladin here, ready to engage in case something went wrong while Prince Moteo was on planet."

"You're wasting my time, Virris."

"If you'd told me she was here, I could've interdicted before she even got close to the prince. Why didn't you reach out?"

"Like you have to ask."

Sandy hair caught the blue hue of the bulkhead lights as he faltered. Swallowed. "We are friends—"

"Were," Theseus said definitively. "Were friends. Once. That ended when you brought Rija home with a broken mind and claimed ignorance."

"On my oath, I am not to blame."

"Then *what* happened to her?"

Virris faltered, his bearded jaw opening, then closing. "I told you—one minute she was fine, the next—"

"Don't feed me that same lie!"

"It's not a lie!"

"Enough!" Theseus pushed toward the gangway. Over his shoulder, he tossed, "For what you did here—thanks."

"I can't keep protecting her or you," Raal called after him.

"Then don't." Nerves hot at dealing with this guy and that the Imperials would lock him down, Theseus dropped into his crash couch and started a launch sequence even as he heard a *thwak-thwak-thwak*.

"What was," Virris asked from the bay. "Who's in there?"

Theseus couldn't believe he'd forgotten about Reddark. "My Facilitator."

"You have an Imperial RIV locked in a brig?" Virris balked. "Have you lost your mind?"

"PICIS!" Theseus spoke to be heard throughout the raider. "Set course for Abhail Hall. Fastest route and speed." He made sure Xu was in her cocoon before he hit the manual switch to close the ramp.

A muttered oath preceded thuds as Virris hurried to vacate the bay.

Conscience and ship light one traitor, Theseus piloted the *Cosaint* away from the Academie without contact from IMF rapiers. Which was ... strange. But welcome. An hour later, the majestic Hesi mountain range rose into view and pulled up its rugged hem to reveal the slate gray walls of Abhail Hall. The seat of House Helstaar anchored the Riseka River that stretched around the ancestral house and through the Bold Forest. The southernmost part of the estate lay open to the valley floor and the bustling city of Bijurn.

As he set down on the private landing pad, he felt the strut locks clamp on, then the entire landing pad descended belowground. Not sure it was enough to hide them, but it'd buy time—hopefully enough to get Rija into the Engram.

Theseus and Xuli headed aft, and his gaze struck the brig. He winced, knowing Reddark would be livid. He really did not want to deal with her, but if he left her in there ...

Sight. He slapped the panel.

Reddark unfolded from the steel bench like a slow-moving storm. "This—"

Chest pressed toward the door, he barred her exit. "If tractability is going to be a problem, stay in here."

Uncertainty held her fast, unsure if he was threatening or asking her.

He wasn't sure either. Maybe both. "The IMF is undoubtedly coming after me. Don't communicate with them—just wait it out so I can get Rija to safety. Please."

"Please," she mused. "Bet that hurt."

He retrieved his ruck as the house staff came into view beyond the raider's open rear bay door. "Let me handle this, then do whatever you must."

Her gaze hit the medpod, and she slipped around him. Stared down past the clear shield. "You would never know ... she looks so sweet."

"Rija is sweet." At least, she was. Before ...

Reddark faced him. "You can't run from this. And blocking my ability to communicate with Meūxing brings a lot of extra trouble."

"No surprise." He thumbed toward the ramp. "Come inside."

"What about your sister?" Reddark watched house staff transfer the medpod to a hover-gurney. "Ah."

Theseus exited the *Cosaint* with Reddark and spotted his maman waiting on the upper level of the underground bay, gripping the rail as she peered down into the hangar. Behind Maman, a shadowy figure—the beron himself—returned to the house. His father always refused to acknowledge his daughter's descent into madness or the shame brought on the family name.

He felt a thump against his vambrace and glanced at the wave: COIMEDAĪ HELSTAAR IMF TRAKARI CONTRACT TERMINATED.

Air sucked from his lungs at the termination notice. They hadn't wasted time.

Reddark turned to him. "You ados?"

He'd expected the termination to come, but he'd hoped someone in Luxe City would understand his extenuating circumstances. That he'd still have a way to help the family keep this ancestral home that was more palace than house. Nothing for it now. Steeling his expression, he climbed the steps to the upper level.

He spotted his youngest brother, who must've returned since Maman's wave. "Halad. Well-met, brother."

"Well-met." Halad clapped his upper arm. Absent was his usual biting wit, likely out of respect for the situation. The weight of it hung on them all.

Theseus shifted to his maman and embraced her. "I'm sorry her return home had to be like this."

"Shh, shh." Maman cupped one cheek and kissed the other. "She is home, and that is what matters." Keen gray eyes fastened on something behind him and narrowed. "What is *she* doing here?" The chilled venom in Maman's voice warned the betrayal Reddark had dealt the family had not been forgotten.

"My RIV, Maman. Nothing more."

"So your conniving play against House Helstaar worked in your favor, I see." Brittle words rarely fell from the lips of Beroness Jadenne Helstaar. "You

must be quite proud of yourself to think we would allow you in these halls again after you cost the beron a cycle's worth of wages. Put hundreds of miners out of work."

Reddark seemed unfazed, but a telltale tremor betrayed her nerves. "Forgive the intrusion, Beroness, but I must remain with Theseus as I am assigned as his Facilitator."

"We would not give you his hand, so you found a way to force yourself on him."

"There's a name for women who force themselves on men," Halad muttered coarsely.

"Mind your tongue," Maman chided, then hooked Theseus's arm. "Let's go up to the parlor."

Theseus eyed Reddark. Had she not stolen House secrets, he would've let her go up to a guest room so he could be alone with his family. But he wasn't going to let her out of his sight.

Servants guided the hover-gurney with Rija's medpod into the lower reaches of the house. Xuli broke away and darted down the rear passage, no doubt heading for the kitchens so Cook could spoil her as usual.

In the private sitting room, he sat and stretched out his legs. Roughed a hand over his face. Felt that certain release that came with being home, among family.

"Was it bad?" Halad perched on the edge of a high-backed chair.

"I found her at the Academie—knife to the neck of Crown Prince Moteo."

"Clarity," Maman whispered, touching a hand to her throat.

Xuli trotted into the room, licking her chops from whatever morsel Cook had given her. She claimed her spot near the fire, wedging between Halad's hound and a larger, thicker hound.

Theseus frowned. "Raloran's here?"

"Off-world," Maman said as a servant brought in a tray of hot cider and pastries. "And Marguesse"—she indicated the thick hound—"is such an ill-tempered thing when he's gone. I'm surprised she's allowing Xuli to be so impudent."

His hound had a way of soothing tempers, a dichotomy to the beast who slayed shrew or foe.

Theseus sat forward, elbows on his knees. "Do we know how Rija got out of Pagala this time?"

"Lured the guard with promises of a dalliance, then knocked him out." Halad laughed. When Theseus shot him a stern look, his younger brother shrugged. "What? It's funny! Our sister of ten-and-nine knocked out a man of twenty-and-eight. You don't find that—"

"For clarity's sake, Halad," Maman hissed.

"She will be charged with attempted murder," Theseus stated plainly,

disappointed his brother made sport of this. "She took the Imperial crown prince hostage at knifepoint. On a broadwave." He hated the next words he must speak. "There is no way to conceal her actions this time."

Firelight from the great hearth dancing over her delicate features, Maman turned away, eyes glossing with tears, which she stemmed. Having borne four sons and a daughter, the beroness was still the epitome of strength and elegance. "At least she is home. Though I do hate keeping her in that chamber."

"You must, Maman." Theseus reached for her small hand resting on her lap. "For your own safety, and others'." When Reddark huffed in the corner, he skewered her with a warning look.

Maman balked. "She has never hurt me! Rija is of my own body and would never—"

"She wouldn't know you!" His growled words threw themselves against her grief.

Her throat worked an indignant-yet-fearful swallow.

It twisted his gut, especially when tears turned her irises the color of a churning sea. "I intend no disrespect, Maman, but the situation is dire."

Our situation, especially since his Trakari contract had been terminated. What would she or the beron say once they knew the estate would be short-funded next quarter? That House Helstaar could be ruined? No matter how hard Theseus tried, he always seemed to let them down. Cursed if he did, cursed if he didn't.

Maman's sharp gaze latched onto his, as if detecting his dark thoughts. "What is it?"

"Nothing. It has been a—"

"Lies are not your way, Theseus," she chastised.

Chagrined, he noticed the side door open, ushering in the heir of Bijurn, and rose.

The intelligent gaze of Koren, his eldest brother, alighted on Theseus. "Great gems," he laughed, guiding his large-with-child wife to a settee before diverting and hugging Theseus. "A sad occasion, but I am heartily glad it brought you home." Ever perceptive, he held Theseus's shoulders. His smile wavered, clearly detecting things were amiss. Then, with a nod, he patted his shoulder as if to say there'd be a conversation away from their already-distraught maman and Koren's Imperial wife in her delicate condition.

Koren stiffened at the sight of Reddark, a storm moving into his rugged features.

"Ah." Theseus slid his gaze to the corner where she sat. "She's my RIV and stole aboard the *Cosaint*."

Hands on his belt, Koren stared at her, jaw muscle jouncing. "Kiril." He

waited, eyes locked on Reddark until the guard entered the room. "Take Miss Reddark to the pink room and keep her there."

"Yes, sār."

Reddard rose rigidly, tossed Theseus a glower, then left the room with Kiril.

"Can't stand the sight of her," Koren admitted as the door closed.

"We are agreed." Theseus shifted his gaze to his royal sister-in-law. "Forgive my manners, Duchess. I pray you are well."

A quiet smile touched Min'wei's lips as she laid a hand on her belly, where the next Helstaar grew. Her amber gown complemented her olive complexion. The eldest daughter of the emperor, she had the subtle dark green hue to her hair—a genetic enhancement that made strands cast green the way some brunettes cast red—and small, high-set ears that marked her a Xiupang royal.

Even after a year of having her in the family, Theseus felt strange not bowing to the emperor's daughter. "I beg your forgiveness for the offense our sister delivered your brother."

"Thank you, Viscount." Dimples peeked around her pretty smile. "I am well and quite certain Moteo is too, or my husband would have surely spoken to me."

"You are gracious, Duchess." He nodded to her womb. "And the babe?"

A flush rose through silken cheeks. "Strong, like his father."

Koren barked a laugh. "He's a Helstaar. What'd you expect?"

"A boy, then?" Theseus grinned, knowing Father was thrilled to have the future of Bijurn secured.

His brother lifted Min'wei's hand and kissed it. "The royal physician said the babe has a strong heart and good size—it's that Bijuran tundra blood in him."

"Koren," Maman chided. "Your son is half Helstaar, half Imperial."

"Which means," Min'wei offered sweetly, "he will be the strongest of us all."

It was hard not to like the princess with all she possessed—beauty, intelligence, diplomacy. The subsequent influx of cash from her dowry, if managed carefully, would see them through the next few years. That was—when combined with Theseus's Trakari contract.

Which he no longer had.

A servant entered, swept to the beroness's side, bent, and whispered to her. Shoulders relaxing almost imperceptibly, Maman gave a nod and dismissed the servant.

Likely that had been news that Rija was secure in the chamber. A reminder of what their sister had done to Min'wei's brother hovered over the sitting room.

Koren leaned forward, an elbow on one knee, his hand on the other. "I saw Virris in the feeds. He was at the symposium?"

The acid in Koren's words mirrored what Theseus felt, but he must be forthright. "He interceded so we could get away."

"I do not understand that man." Koren clicked his tongue. "After all we did for him, that he would break our trust and do such injury to Rija ..." He let out an audible growl that lifted the heads of their hounds.

"Guilty conscience," Halad accused. "Hope it rots his brain, smug ba—"

"Halad! Vulgarity has no place in this house or civil society." Maman's strict rules of propriety remained, even if they were grown men. She refocused on Theseus with a tight smile. "You are lingering a while this visit. It is nice, but should you not get underway before you are missed?"

"I have time."

Hesitation split her pleasant visage. "How long?"

He held her gaze, unwilling to add to the stress she had already suffered.

Koren shifted to the edge of the nearby settee. "What aren't you telling us, brother?"

Theseus glanced down. That Féirhound instinct and céangal bond brought Xuli to his side, where she nudged his hand.

His brother, so like their father, studied him. "That bad?"

There was nothing for it. "My Trakari contract has ... ended."

"What?" Maman balked, coming forward in her chair. "Surely you jest. They said you were the best and perfectly suited for it."

"Brother, we needed that income."

Theseus nodded. "Well I know."

Covering her mouth, Maman wilted in understanding. "Oh no. This ... is because of Rija, haë?"

"They fired you because you helped our sister?" Halad snarled. "What a twisted—"

"I do not begrudge you," Koren amended somberly as he smoothed a hand over his jaw. "You chose true but ..."

"We will work it out," Maman assured, though clearly shaken. "We always do. We're Helstaars."

She had more hope than he did, especially in light of the expression on Koren's face.

"We need to talk to Father." His brother stood. "Now."





CHAPTER 5 THAT ENORMOUS RESPONSIBILITY

BIJURN, KETHIDEN (ILRETH)

“MURKHA! *WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?*”

Theseus endured his father’s browbeating. “I could not leave Rija there.”

“That is *exactly* what you should’ve done!” Beard twitching, Father paced before the heavily curtained windows of his library. “Because of her, we have now lost dirua crucial to keeping—”

“I refuse to leave my sister at the mercy of the Syndicate. They would’ve remanded her to a brig or penal colony for the rest—”

“At least there she wouldn’t hurt anyone!”

“It’d *destroy* her!” Repulsed by his father’s words, Theseus abandoned civility. “She’s your *daughter!* Or have you forgotten?”

“Don’t dare think to school me, Theseus Helstaar!”

“Someone needs—”

“Calm, calm,” Koren urged, shifting between Theseus and their father, on whom he turned a cajoling tone. “It is well known you love Rija as much as the rest of us and would not want her injured further.”

Father exhaled and turned back to his large desk. “No, of course not.” Standing over the broad surface, he eyed jotpad ledgers and gravely shook his head. “This House has endured too many losses and hits, both financial and personal. We’ve worked hard to keep this realm flush, our mines operational.” He cast a furtive eye to Theseus. “It is not only this House and hall that needs coin—it’s the thousands in the city and villages who live off the mines. Without the Trakari contract, we do not have enough to cover our obligations.”

Theseus caught the strident nidor of panic and wondered at his father’s severity. *What am I missing?* “I agree losing my contract is less than ideal, but isn’t Bijurn on solid footing for a while, thanks to Koren’s marriage to the princess?”

His brother exhaled heavily. “The LS-2 mine collapsed last week. It took more than half her dowry to aid the affected families and get it operational again.” His broad shoulders sagged. “Combined with Reddark’s betrayal, which cost us a lucrative contract with the Excellencies, we’re back where we started before the wedding.”

“Sight.” Theseus now understood his father’s vitriol. That enormous

responsibility again landed on his shoulders, and he keenly felt the pain of it. "I'll find another way to aid Bijurn. I won't let you down—"

"Excuse me." The RIV's voice cut into their argument. She entered the office, brown eyes sharp. "I have a solution for this problem, if you will listen."

Silver-streaked beard twitching beneath a clenched jaw, the beron straightened to his full height. "What are you doing here?"

Theseus moved toward her. "You were to stay in the—"

"Where is Kiril?" Koren demanded.

"Forgive him, but I insisted on speaking with you. Appealing to the security of his position forced him to allow me an audience. Now," she said with a huff, "I have a solution."

"I have a solution," she bit out.

The beron held his ground. "There was a time your counsel would have been welcomed, but betraying House Helstaar forever silenced your voice in this hall."

"Beron, please—you are out of time," she said, unyielding. "Theseus is out of time. Your daughter is out of time. If you want me berated—consider it done. However, there is a means by which you can secure the safety of your heirs and House." Whether unconscious or not, she stood behind an armchair, as if protecting herself. "Will you hear me?"

"Father," Koren implored. "Our options are limited. Let her talk. It certainly cannot make things worse."

"You underestimate her," Father scoffed, his heaving chest—a rare sight from the normally composed beron.

Seconds took on the weight of anvils. When Father did not object, Theseus gave Reddark a sharp nod, urging her to speak quickly.

She inclined her head. "As you may know, I've been assigned to Luxe City for advanced training. As part of that, I am granted access to court and have become aware of certain ... secrets." She lifted a hand and dared move into the open, apparently believing what she offered outweighed the risk of angering the beron. "Empress Feiya has been secretly trying to find someone His Majesty would most definitely not want found."

"Who?" Theseus asked.

"I don't care who it is!" Father's expression darkened. "Do you think going against the emperor will entice us? Murkha—it would bring the roof down on our heads. I will have none of your intrigue here."

"The emperor would not have to know."

"That sounds uncannily like treason," Koren warned calmly.

"Haë," Father growled. "She decimated our coffers, now goes after the very walls of the House!"

"I merely seek to amend the wrong I have done your family," she asserted.

"No." Father's voice was flat. "I am no murkha. I will not defy Hitero."

"You are being small-minded," she sniped. "Clear Bijurn's debts and Rija's charges by sending Theseus to the empress. If anyone can find this person, he can. It is simple, and while secretive, it is not—"

"How do you know what she'd give us?"

She held his gaze, unease knotting her brows. "I ... suggested you to Her Majesty."

"You *what*?"

Reddark had the gall to persist. "And she said you could name your price."

Something in the RIV's expression did not sit right, but the bait was too tempting not to bite. "Who? Who does she want found?"

"Ah." For the first time, Reddark hesitated. "That is information she will convey to you alone once her terms have been accepted."

Theseus studied her, detecting notes of truth and conviction in the air around her, but also something that wasn't quite deception. Something ... tense, nervous.

"What if he fails?" Koren asked.

Good question, one Theseus hadn't considered. Then again, he'd never failed a hunt.

"Since Coimedai Helstaar has a perfect hunt record, we doubt that is a concern."

"How do you know that?" Theseus balked.

She smirked. "There is little Her Majesty does not know or cannot unearth. Regardless, should his efforts not meet with success, your situation would be as it is." Her gaze landed on the beron. "Your son and daughter installed in an Imperial penal colony, Bijuran lands confiscated."

The idea that power might rest in his hands to save Rija and free this House once and for all ... Sight, what *wouldn't* he do to make that happen?

Theseus pressed the button to summon the butler, who appeared a moment later. "Unega, remove Reddark to the library. Do not let her out again unless we call for her."

The RIV started to object, then eyed Theseus, Koren, and the beron. With a slow nod, she started across the room to the butler, but caught Theseus's arm. "You owe them this," she hissed. "It could free everyone." Then she paused gravely. "Besides, the Fángshài are already en route to retrieve you. For punishment or for a mission"—she cocked her head—"your choice. But ... maybe don't be selfish, Viscount."

A tempest raged in Theseus at her indictment.

Reddark quickly released him and left with the butler.

He hated her words. The truth of them. He dropped into a chair, where Xuli met him, nudging his hand with her snout. Petting her did nothing for the condemnation roiling in his chest.

"*Clearing* our debts ..." Father stroked his beard. "Sounds too good to believe, yet I am unable to wholly discard it."

"Let's consider the situation," Koren said, ever the politician. "Empress Feiya wants someone found. It's a secret. The emperor doesn't know, and Ivara suggested he would not want this person found." He tapped Theseus's knee. "Would you do it, go after this person?"

Theseus smoothed a hand down Xuli's narrow skull, weighted by the question. "To free all our lands and name? As long as I am not asked to do something against my conscience, yes."

"And if it *is* against your conscience?"

The challenge hung around his neck like a noose. "I'd like more intel on this ... but"—he nodded—"how could I say no after losing the Trakari contract?"

"I don't care what that girl claims about the emperor not needing to know," Father said. "The Syndicate has eyes everywhere, so he *will* find out. We would need assurance against repercussions."

"We won't get assurances," Theseus countered, realizing the conversation had turned toward how to make this happen, not *if*. He couldn't blame them. "I'd wager in that hour when Hitero learns of this secret mission, Feiya will deny all knowledge and turn on us faster than Reddark did."

"Undoubtedly." Father scratched his beard as he thought for a long moment.

"Perhaps we could get the arrangement in writing ..." Koren thought aloud.

"Bijurn sits on the brink of ruin, so we could not make demands of any kind." Father looked forlorn, the truth of their situation heavy on his shoulders.

"Ados." Theseus adjusted to the edge of his seat, spine straight. "Clearly, I have to pursue this."

Koren frowned. "Nobody said that."

"I'm a coward if I refuse and risk the family."

Heir to Abhail Hall, Koren no doubt also keenly felt the burden of the situation, yet he considered Theseus for a long minute. "I could speak with Min'wei, if you felt it important enough. Maybe get her take as a royal. You know, before you sell your soul ..."

By his brother's somber countenance and words, Theseus appreciated the concern. "Generous of you to suggest, but her connection is too complicated as a duchess of Bijurn and a Xiupang, not to mention her delicate condition." He shook his head. "No, don't risk it. She can change nothing. You heard Reddark—I'm going to Meüxing either way. Might as well be with the potential to help this House. Haë?"

Grave silence in the room pushed Theseus to accept his fate and stand. "I

recognize my failings, Father. Know that I will do whatever it takes to protect Rija and Bijurn. Now, I want to check on Rija."

Knowing as he did that doing one's duty to family and country should not be done to earn appreciation, Theseus left the room unsurprised that his father neither wished him well nor thanked him. Xuli padded along into the underground passages of the former dungeon that were as intricate and expansive as the main house.

Guards ahead pivoted to him. One adjusted his stance to the fore.

"Good eve, Captain Ardice," Theseus greeted the rust-haired guard and aimed toward the small stone alcove where angled fortiglass offered a view of the chamber a dozen feet below.

There, a stark white-blue structure sat amid the dismal gray of duracrete. The square building held his sister safe within its fortisteel. An embedded wall-screen displayed Rija's vitals.

"How is she?" He eyed familiar brainwave patterns and recognized the slow-wave state.

"Sleeping, sär."

"Self-induced or with help?"

"Two milligrams."

Disappointing. It went better if she slept without medicinal aid. Theseus slid his gaze along the instruments and readouts. The neural interface showed her brain activity held steady. Delta waves, the slowest, highest-amplitude brainwaves, dominated. Good—she needed that for physical repair, growth, and immune function.

"After she threw herself against the wall, we felt sedation was imperative to prevent injury."

Theseus groaned inwardly. "Thank you, Ardice." He peered down into the chamber where Rija lay curled in a corner, her hair an ebony void around her head and shoulders.

He regretted that her privacy must be invaded, but safety demanded it. Still, he resented Raal Virris for whatever part he'd played in Rija ending up like this. The beron and beroness had spent a fortune trying to cure their daughter. Ran hundreds of tests. Nothing worked. Nothing wrong, or so the physicians said. Yet his sister often lost track of reality. Behaved erratically. She'd been so sweet and innocent, a vibrant child.

Theseus wished to hear her lighthearted laughter again. Sigh, he'd even endure her pestering him to adventure through the forest together. Or splash along the river.

"You know what it was originally used for?"

When the soft, thickly accented voice came from behind, Theseus marveled that he hadn't heard the door or the security lock release. "Duchess."

Though Min'wei came only to his bicep, she was short in no other regard,

even in her Imperial floor-length skirts and bright colors. Her attire might seem gaudy to reserved Bijurans, but Theseus found it a refreshing change.

Hand resting on her swollen womb, she joined him at the observation ledge. "You know what the Engram was originally designed for, haë?"

"Well aware." It dawned on Theseus that this was the first time since Min'wei's arrival here a year ago that they'd been forced to secure Rija in the Engram. Was she offended, especially considering the origin of the machines? "The chambers were designed for torture and punishment of criminals in far-distant quadrants. Today's models are more advanced and serve a different purpose. Here, Rija may exist without danger to herself or others."

"And does it help her?" she asked quietly.

A weight settled in his chest again. "She may not know where she is or understand that the forest is an illusion, but her vitals are calmest in here."

Sorrow sliced Min'wei's almond-shaped eyes. "Does it not make you ache?"

"Brutally."

The duchess considered him for a long moment, then watched Rija in silence for a while. "The duke conveyed to me the dire situation of the House and the ... request made of you."

"Request" was a nice way to put it.

She tilted her head, green glinting in her silky black hair from the overhead lights. "The first marshal will arrive in Kethiden shortly before dawn. I would have you understand two things, Viscount." Her assertive tone was atypical for the demure duchess. "First, while Empress Feiya is young and Dubartiian, do not underestimate Her Majesty. Having lived in Luxe City most of her life, she has learned to control what is around her. She ensures everything benefits her. Second, she knows it was your sister who made an attempt on Moteo"—her eyes met his—"and that you rescued her."

Ah. "So, she knows how to leverage me." Well, that was no surprise. When Xuli went onto her hind legs next to him, Theseus smoothed her long, silky coat.

Min'wei touched his arm. "Also, I admonish you to shed the cloak of the Trakari—it speaks of violence and bloodshed. It would be an insult to Their Majesties."

"Understood." He looked back to Rija, thought of what lay ahead, and felt a compulsion to recite the Oaths. He signaled Xuli to his side. "I think I'll retire for the evening. May I escort you?"

"I would be grateful." Min'wei managed a half smile and walked with him back to the upper level. "Please remember that machinations are an art form in Luxe City, but there are allies there."

What a curious thing to say. "Thank you again, Duchess."

After delivering her to her apartments, where Koren met them, Theseus

headed to his bedchamber. He slumped onto the bed and felt the full weight of the day. Of what would happen at first rise ... He'd just tried to keep Rija safe, protect her after her mind had been broken, and this was his reward?

Not that he'd sought one, but sight and mind—must it be so unjust?

Known for efficiency and expediency, he couldn't see a hunt tasked by the empress taking long, so he chose a light ruck and started packing. He upended the old one and stilled when the chronicle tumbled out. Felt an internal twinge at the sight of it.

Enough had gone wrong today. He didn't need to bring more on himself. He tossed it aside and started for his wardrobe. Scanned the clothing. Though he'd always be a Coimedai, he skipped the Trakari uniforms, per Min'wei's advice. Chose Helstaar Blues with doublet, jerkin, and a perc-dusted Helstaar emblem, as well as a variety of shipboards. A couple power gems for his vambrace. An extra pair of boots. Toiletries. Meal packs for Xuli and her grooming supplies.

An hour later, he stretched out on the bed. No idea what he'd face in Luxe City. Could he really save Bijurn and Rija? It all seemed so impossible. What kind of person did the empress want found that could be worth paying off his family's debt and sister's crime?

Thixu, be true. This could not be good.

Xuli alighted next to him, then shifted, knocking something against his temple. Theseus huffed a laugh and moved the object. Felt the hide bundle. Brakadir's requiem. He lifted it and sat up, feeling that inexorable pull again. Probably shouldn't entertain this farce. It seemed trivial compared to what he was dealing with. Yet ... he found himself opening it.



FIRST AGE

THE ACCOUNT AS RECORDED BY BRAKADIR
41.9031.03 – NYS SHIRRIKAI INCURSION – FINAL DAY

DURAK (NYS RH967-8) - ENEKRIS SYSTEM

Death always conquered the living, and he had been its silent observer for far too long. Brakadir stood on the cleft, offering last rites to the millions judged here. Dawn pursued the heavy shroud of darkness across the horizon and forced its surrender.

As Supreme Ikon UI had done to him, delivering yet another defeat.

Scanning the jagged peaks of the razed capital, Brakadir considered what had happened here. Trees and verdant fields had withered beneath the atrocities and devastation of a war not their own. Rust-colored and dusty, the once-fertile valley lay scorched and abused, soil saturated with the blood of its people. Of his champion.

“Die a thousand violent deaths, Brakadir! Ye deserve it!” The curse had come from the father of Limoria, Brakadir’s most recent ampliön—a champion chosen to lead the cause in the fight for their planet. Before the temple of their many gods, the old man had blessed his daughter’s body. Then, he simultaneously leaped off the cliff and drove his own dagger into his heart, adding his last breath to those whose bodies already lined the gorge. Like a final, desperate sacrifice to appease the Ikons.

Impossible—nothing but annihilation pleased the monsters.

Three rises since UI’s latest victory over Brakadir had become complete with Limoria’s death. Her head severed from her body.

Khain Lightlocke, his lieutenant, appeared at his side. “You don’t have to do this.”

“If I do not, who will? They deserve the respect of a burial.” But even as he spoke, Brakadir knew there was a bigger reason he did this each time. “Just as UI forced me into the Talsaëg, so I will force him to comply with *every* rule of the contract.”

One such rule required a twenty-day moratorium so the loser could bury their dead. He glanced at his hand that UI had used to seal the contract. The same one now stained with the blood of the innocent. He shifted his gaze beyond it to the bodies he’d stacked in the deep, long fissures of Nys, then took in the desolation. So many lives lost. A planet razed.

It is so senseless ...

"The others want to head out. Find the Ikons."

Weariness clawed at Brakadir. "Are you so thirsty for more war, more bloodshed, more"—his gaze scraped the burning lands—"this?"

"I thirst for *justice*. As you once did."

"Justice," he murmured, the word foreign on his tongue and ears. No longer did he possess the arrogance that stirred the passion of heroism and lured him into the audacious belief he could defeat the Ikons. Where had justice been when Ul nearly killed him and forced his blood to seal the Tàlsaæg, binding him to *this* for eternity?

The Ikons would war. The Haze would fight. The Ikons would win. The Haze would fail. Impossible odds, unfair advantage. And nothing could be done for it.

Crouching beside the nearest body, he nodded solemnly to the dead man, then lifted him. Carried him to the edge and released him to Ror.

Boots scritch on the dry cleft, Khain shifted. "I'll return when we find them."

Sensing Khain's departure, Brakadir squinted at the still-rising sun. Noted the warmth but knew those rays could not breach the dark crevices of his soul. He resumed his sacred duty. Stacked bodies. Ignited the fire that returned to this grieving planet its people. Moved to another chasm, repeated the same. Over and over. Days turning to weeks until his efforts brought him back to the plinth at the temple.

He took a knee and removed his helmet. Shoved sweaty black hair from his face as he touched the stone beneath which his ampliön had been buried. "Well-met, Limoria. I return you to the embrace of Ror to receive your reward." He gritted his teeth. "Forgive me."

Futile, empty words that could never undo this.

The air stirred with the familiar nidor of a fold—his lieutenant had returned.

Already? How long had Brakadir been here? It felt but a blink, like the lives lost. Awareness flooding him that it had already been twenty-two system-standard days. The grieving time demanded by the rules of the Tàlsaæg had been respected. Now, apparently, Ul was ready to torment him again.

Picking himself up, Brakadir dusted off his armored pants. "What system?"

Khain's V-rigged helmet glinted. "A young one—Helios. Six planets."

Despite fatigue that demanded he walk away, Brakadir felt a deeper sense of obligation insisting he take up his lightblade to again step between the innocent and the Ikons. There was no choice—he *must* fight. Must seek justice.

While the conviction may pound in his chest, it did not dictate *how* he fought. "Show me."

After folding across time and space, Brakadir stood on a mountain held fast

in the final grip of winter. Spring fought to wrest free of the thin blanket of snow and cast her verdant efforts up the slope. He inhaled the piquant fragrance, appreciating its sharp contrast to the stench of Nys.

A particular note in the air shoved his attention to the great city spanning the horizon. Though the forti-steel and -glass buildings refused spring entrance into their territory, there was an unusual elegance to this location. Residential districts abutted bustling commercial areas. An enormous half-circle complex seemed to be the hub of the thriving metropolis, surrounded on three sides by skyscrapers. And there, in the skies above it all—

“Straen.” Brakadir cursed the return of ships he knew too well. This armada, combined with the Ikons, made for a terrible conflict—one of the mind, which brought about the worst cruelties. But if the Haze had arrived early enough ... “How long have they been here?”

“Best we can tell, three solar rises. Haiasphor readings are low and sparse, as if the Straen hesitated.”

Hope collapsed and stirred his frustration. “But the toxin has been released.”

“It has. Ready to pick your amplión?”

Rage, no. Choosing one was a polite way of saying he’d ensure their body would be broken on the altar of Ul’s ego. This planet—he tapped Khain’s memory for the name and found it. “Tell me about Xiavo.”

“Savvy reports this population is more leading-edge than Nys, but Xiavo is not the most technologically advanced in Helios. Another is further along—Inerr.”

Interesting.

“Three Ikons here, Sär Morte is on a planet called Ilreth. Ilkrieza’s exploring another.”

Three here, though. “So, Xiavo”—his gaze traced the tall structures and spires—“will be the epicenter of this conflict.”

“Appears so. We’ve set up a temporary Command center near what we believe to be the political seat. Savvy has the Curates combing the city.”

Curates. It was an idyllic title he’d given his cadre when he believed curating hope was an effective strategy against the Ikons. Now his cadre were known simply as the Haze, since their abilities were but a hazy reflection of the Ikons who’d spawned them.

Standard incursion protocol for a new Talsaæg had Ikons and Haze selecting teams, “Tools” according to the Decree. Brakadir and his Haze used stealth tech to insert among a people, learn local military strategies, identify ally from foe. All in an effort to assemble their core unit with which to fight whichever aliens—the Straen in this situation—the Ikons chose as their weapon against the unsuspecting population.

According to the rules of Ul’s sick game, the Talsaæg, neither Ikon nor Haze

could directly attack the other's side, nor could they fight the battle for the natives of the planet. Arm them, advise them, imbue them with abilities, yes—but *never* fight *for* them. The natives must save their worlds.

"There is a prince who would be a solid tether for you," Khain suggested.

Dread anchored Brakadir to the past. To the decapitated body of Limoria. To the eight champions before her.

As the strongest of the Haze and the spawn of Ul himself, Brakadir learned in the second battle that he could not only imbue his lightblade but another person with his *ousía*, his essence, his intent. But, according to the rules, only one. This amplión became his champion and the leader of the battle against the Ikons.

Talsaæg rules prohibited Ikons from directly attacking the amplión, since he or she became redefined by Brakadir's gift, brought to his level and deemed Opponent by the Decree. Though protected from the Ikons, again and again the champion had fallen after the call of the vile game's Victor, who then took a lightblade to the champion. Again and again Brakadir had watched them die.

"No amplión." The words surprised even Brakadir, but as he lingered on them, they solidified into conviction. "Not this time."

Brown hair rustling in the chilled air, Khain gaped. "Without one, they stand no chance!" His lieutenant was his equal in height and strength. "I know it is frustrating, losing your amplións, but—"

"Frustrating? Is that what you call death?" Brakadir turned his attention to the massive, super-advanced ships in low orbit. Noted the engines. Were those new? Squinting, he did not recall—

"Limoria was strong and determined, but we told her what end she likely faced. She knew. She chose."

"Rage of Ror, Khain. Does that really comfort you? That we *told* her she'd die?"

"Captain said one day your amplión will turn the tide, and we *will* defeat them."

Brakadir sniffed. "Captain is a pilot, not a priest."

"He was, once."

Tightening his jaw, he studied the planet. Tried to focus on the new tactic.

"Ul would see you quit. He *wants* you to prove that you are lesser and he is stronger, better."

"He is—no one can argue it." Brakadir moved to an outcropping, taking in the innocent, unprepared world with ruination at its doorstep. "Let's meet the local rulers."

...END OF SAMPLE...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ronie Kendig is a believer in the power of a good romantic trope and an even better plot twist. With over forty books in her backlist, she has won numerous industry awards and hit bestseller lists. She has lived in Texas most of her life with her own hunky hero, enjoying barbecue and peach cobbler, which they—sometimes—share with Benning the Stealth Golden and AAndromeda the Military Working Dog washout.

Ronie loves connecting with readers! Connect with her on Instagram or through her website, www.RonieKendig.com.



