

Cassius and I drift from the blackness into the airlock. The outer door closes behind us with a muffled thump. We each grip the metal rungs inside, on the airlock walls. Red light throbs down from the ceiling as the mechanism finishes its cycle. Pressure slowly pumps into the room, followed by breathable air. We pull our razors from their holsters on our hips. Two lazy silver tongues of metal float in the air, two meters long, stiffening to just over a meter of straight sword as we toggle them to their rigid state. The red light becomes green and the interior door of the airlock opens with an asthmatic gasp. As ever, Cassius makes sure he's the first through. I follow dutifully behind, my razor at the ready. He glances back to make sure I've made it through the aperture before closing it behind us. Inside the ship, gravity slowly tugs our boots to the deck.

We're met with the echoes of our own footsteps. The repair bay is empty except for tools and clunky evoSuits for extra-vehicular repairs on the ship. Pale lights embedded in the gray ceiling crackle above, tossing shadows about the room. I tap my tongue twice against my back right molar, causing the electrodes implanted there to activate and send a message to my suit. My helmet retracts instantly into a small compartment at the back of the neck. I breathe in the scent of cleaning solution, like the sort they use in public washrooms in transportation hubs. The chemical burn clings to the hairs inside my nose, nostalgic in a way, reminding me of those first days with Cassius.

That was a lonely time. The better part of me felt carved away as we fled Luna, and I knew I would never again hear my grandmother say my name, never follow Aja along the garden paths to train before the morning Pachelbel bird even woke. I wish I could forget the cold feel of

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the bathroom floor against my hands as I sobbed in the dock hotel room we rented on Phobos. Cassius had left me there alone to go purchase the *Archimedes* before the Great Crash, and fifty million Silvers watched how much all their imaginary money meant when the banks ran dry. It was the first time I had been alone to think. To notice that the strands of love that connected me to the world were severed. All the people who had ever loved me were gone.

I was alone.

And not just alone. I was hunted.

I *am* hunted.

I was named for a Spartan general who had the mind of an Athenian, and who claimed to be descended from Heracles himself. Like that man, I was born into something that is both mine and not mine. A heritage of worldbreakers and tyrants. It was my ancestor, Silenius au Lune, who first fell upon Earth and transferred the balance of power to Luna. Seven hundred years later I was born the son of Brutus au Arcos and Livia au Lune. Heir to an empire that stretched from Mercury to Pluto.

Now, that empire is a fractured, sick place so drunk on war and political upheaval it's likely to devour itself in my lifetime.

"Eagle to Mother Hen, we're inside. Level sixteen. No signs of life," Cassius says.

"*Copy, Eagle. May I remind you to use words first this time instead of blades?*"

"Unlike certain pilots I know, I have impeccable manners, Mother Hen."

"*Captain,*" she stresses. "*I'm a captain.*"

"If you say so, pilot." Cassius lets his helmet retract and winks at me. Gone are the curves of youth in his face. They've been replaced by the hard, uncompromising lines of manhood. But there's that twinkle in his eyes, like a light inside a far-off tent, making you feel warm even

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though you're still outside. He is my best friend, my only friend beside our pilot, Pytha, but he keeps me at a distance because he thinks he must guide me, act the paragon at all times. He thinks I don't see how wounded he is. How I'm a replacement for the brother Darrow of Lykos took from him. But I know he looks at me and sometimes those lonely eyes see his late brother, Julian.

Selfishly, I wish they just saw me.

I follow Cassius into the hall. The ship is barren and gripped by a peculiar quiet, as if her metal grates and rusted girders were all in the same slumber that grips her engines. Something here is amiss. Cassius shares my mind. Silently, we make our way through the ship using the blueprints we pulled from the *Archi*'s computers. But before we've gone far, we find a smear of blood on the floor leading from a side passage to the central lift. We trace the blood to the starboard escape pod bay and there, before the doors, we find a massacre.

Gore congeals on the walls. Body fluids pool on the dented floor. The whole room redolent with the tangy scent of iron and sick, so much that I would gag were I not conscious of Cassius's eyes on me. Don't be so mawkish. I've seen this before. Bloody handprints streak the escape pod door, as if men were trying to claw their way out. Yet there are no bodies. I sense the horror, see it, but try not to let it touch me. I view the room with the distant eye, removed and analytical, as my grandmother taught me. See the world as if it were inside a fishbowl. Do not let the fear touch you. Fear is the torrent. The raging river. To fight it is to break and drown. But to stand astride it is to see it, feel it, and use its course for your own whims.

Easier said than done, Grandmother.

"The crew was killed here. Less than a day ago," I say, examining the state of the blood. When I was a boy, my grandmother had investigators take to me to murder scenes in Hyperion

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City. I saw things there that still give me nightmares. I bend now on a knee, my mind high above the room. “At least those who attempted to flee. Not that it would have done them any good.”

“Poor souls,” I murmur. “At least we know now who is responsible.” Cassius looks over at me. “If it were just pirates, they would have left the bodies. Two men did this. Or women. Our size, at least, by the boot prints. No blast scoring or char. They did this with blades . . . and hammers.”

“Ascomanni,” Cassius says.

“Evidence suggests it.” I take a bit of the blood on my finger and wipe it on the sample tray of the datapad built into a socket on my evoSuit’s left forearm. “Brown, Red, and Blue DNA markers. Our smugglers. They killed several then dragged them out. Some were still alive for that part.”

“You watching, Pytha?” Cassius asks.

“*Unfortunately,*” she says quietly over the com from her seat in the *Archimedes*’ cockpit. Our suits feed her visuals as well. She’s more sensitive to violence than Cassius or I. “*No sign of ship signatures from the Gulf. But if it’s all the same, will you please hurry it up? I’ve got an itch about this.*”

Cassius and I follow the blood trail to the lift, where I find a bit of fingernail wedged into a crack in the wall. Someone tried to escape from their captors.

Once, the Ascomanni were just deepspace legends, dark whispers shared by traders and smugglers to new recruits in the swarthy hollows of asteroid cantinas or docking bay watering holes. In the deep of space, so they’d say, there lurked Obsidian, who escaped the Society’s culling of the Obsidian race following the execution of King Kuthul at the end of the Dark Revolt. Hunted by extermination squads and Olympic Knights, they followed Thalia, Kuthul’s

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lover, out into the darkness, where they began to change. For years they've plagued the far colonies of Neptune and Pluto, but remain little more than myth to the Core.

But now, with the Obsidian diaspora from the poles of Earth and Mars, that myth has become reality. Untethered from morality, new bands of Obsidians, alienated by the new strange world or freed from military slavery to Gold masters, embrace the legend of the Ascomanni and turn to piracy.

They've not so much left the Ice as they've brought the Ice to the stars.

Inside the lift where the blood trail leads, a huge red thumbprint from a hand nearly twice the size of mine smears the button for the thirteenth deck. Cassius presses the button with the hilt of his razor. I feel the righteous anger building in my friend as we rise. He stares at a single tiny smudge on the floor, and I wonder what thoughts pass behind those bold eyes, where he goes when silence rules him.

The lift wheezes to a stop, shuddering as the doors part and reveal the hall leading into the thirteenth floor of the old vessel. Cheap white lights barely illuminate derelict halls, casting wild shadows. Air ventilators with clogged purifiers rattle in the ceiling. Down the center of the hall, a red trail bifurcates the rusted metal flooring. Handprints smear the ground to either side as the dragged humans tried to escape. Cassius leads and I follow the trail, our razors held behind us at a diagonal as Aja taught us, our aegises—thick bracelets on our left arm capable of emitting a meter-by-meter semi-opaque shield for short durations—held deactivated before us.

Faded yellow signs on the walls indicate washrooms and crew quarters. We check the rooms as we go. The first several are abandoned. Unmade beds and turned-over pictures and chairs remain as evidence of violence. Most of the crew, it seems, was caught sleeping.

Inside the next room we find the crew, or what's left of them. Corpses have been stacked in a heap near the far wall. A stale pool of blood expands from the pile and in it I see the reflection of a single terrified eye. I rush to the pile and pull the dead to the side to find six shivering survivors beneath the corpses. They're bound and beaten and tied feet to hands. I bend to free them but they flinch away making inhuman, squealing noises. Cassius bends to a knee and removes his right gauntlet so they can see the Gold sigils on his hand.

"Salve," he says in a deep voice. The prisoners calm, the sign bringing them courage. "Salve, friends." Their eyes search his face and find the Peerless scar.

"Dominus . . ." one without a gag murmurs, weeping. "Dominus . . ."

"Peace. We've come to help you," I say as I ungag a paunchy Red man. One of his eyes is swollen shut from a gash at the eyebrow. He smells like urine. "How many are there?" I ask. His crooked teeth chatter together so terribly he cannot even utter a single word. I wonder if he's ever spoken to a Gold. I rest a hand on his shoulder, intending to comfort him. He flinches back. My hand, though not large for a Gold, is nearly twice the size of his. How afraid he must be. "Goodman, *salve*. Peace," I say softly. "You are safe now. We have come to help. Tell me how many there are."

"Fifteen . . . maybe more, dominus. . . ." he whispers in a thick Phobosian accent, fighting back tears. I look over at Cassius. Fifteen is too many for our liking. "He is . . . on . . . on . . . the bridge with the captain."

"Who is?"

"Their leader. Are . . . are you Moon Lords?"

"How did they board you?" I ask, ignoring his question. "Do they have a vessel?"

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He nods. “Came from the asteroids, they did. Therix—our helmsman—fell asleep at the watch. Drunk.” He shudders, barely able to speak. “We woke and . . . we woke and they were in the hall. Tried to run. To get to escape pods. They punished us. . . .” His crooked teeth chatter together. I’m so close I can smell processed garlic on his breath and see the black heads of clogged pores on his bulbous nose. The veins on his neck stand out due to fluid redistribution from extended time in the ship’s low gravity. He’s pallid and weak in the bones. I wager it’s been half a life since he’s felt the sun. “Their ship boarded through the cargo hangar.”

“Explains why we couldn’t see it,” I say to Cassius.

He ignores me. “Why are you so far out here?” he asks the man.

“Shouldn’t have been . . . shouldn’t have taken the money.”

“The money from whom?” I ask.

“The passenger. The Gold.”

Cassius and I exchange a look. “There’s a Gold on board?” he asks. “What sort? Did they have a scar?”

“Not Peerless.” The Red shakes his head, and Cassius breathes a small sigh of relief.

“She came to the captain on Psyche. Paid us to . . .” He swallows, glancing over our shoulders as if expecting an Obsidian to appear there. “She paid us to drop her at an asteroid. . . .”

“Which one?” Cassius asks.

“Uh, 432 Nika.”

“Where is that?” Cassius asks me.

“Near the edge of the Gulf,” I say. “One of the closest to Rim Space.”

“Yeah. Captain told her nothin’ was there, but she paid much as our freight. Told him shouldn’t get involved with Golds. But he didn’t listen. He didn’t listen. . . .”

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“Did she give a name?” Cassius asks.

“No name.” The man shakes his head. “But she sounded like him. A Lunaborn.” He points at me, and I know Cassius has the same thought. Are the Obsidian here for the ship or the Gold? It perplexes me. What’s a Luna Gold doing out here?

*“Boys.”* Pytha’s voice crackles in our ears. *“Boys, we have company.”*

“How many?” Cassius asks.

*“Three Ascomanni ships inbound.”*

I stand. “Three?”

“How the goryhell are you just now telling us?” Cassius snaps.

*“Couldn’t pick them up because of the asteroid interference. They must have called in more of them to haul in the Vindabona.”*

“What grade?”

*“Military, third class. Two four-gun lancers, and an eight corvette.”*

“It’s a gorydamned hunting party,” Cassius curses quietly. We could go toe-to-toe with a lancer, but a corvette could rip *Archi* to shreds, if they can catch us. “How long do we have?”

*“Five minutes. They haven’t yet spotted me. I suggest you burn ass and get off that heap.”*

I rush to cut the remaining restraints off the prisoners. “I need you to pop off that asteroid and burn for the *Vindabona*’s transfer tube,” Cassius says. “We have people to evacuate.”

*“They’ll see me if I make an approach,”* Pytha says.

“They might have the guns, but we’ve got the engines,” Cassius replies.

*“Copy.”*



“Can you all run?” Cassius asks the crew. They stare up at him without answering. “Well you’re going to have to. The Obsidian are still out there. You see them, you keep it together and get to the tube. Let us fight. You obey everything I say or I leave you to die. I need you to nod.” Cassius pauses until they do. “Good.”

“What about the Gold?” I ask Cassius.

“You heard Pytha,” he replies. “We don’t have time.”

“I won’t leave someone behind for those barbarians to keep. Especially not one of us.”

He laughs. “One of us?”

“You know what they do to Golds.”

“I said no,” Cassius snaps. “It’s not worth the risk. And if she’s out here, she’s not some lost little sparrow.” He surveys the wobbling crew before us. “Everyone quiet. Everyone together. Now follow me.” Cassius is first out the door. The prisoners follow quick as they can into the hall, back the way we came. I guard the rear, helping along a limping Brown. The bone of his right arm sticks out of a tear in his green jumpsuit. Cassius looks back to make sure I’m keeping pace. We load into the lift we rode up on to take it back down to the third level. But as the doors begin to close, I shrug away from the Brown and jump past the smugglers to exit the lift just as they shut behind me.

“*Gorydammit, Lysander,*” Cassius says over the com as the lift carries them downward, away from me. “*What do you think you’re doing?*”

“What Lorn would do,” I reply, walking back the way we came. He says we don’t have time, but I know how careful he is with me, how cautiously he guards my life. I won’t let that cost another theirs. “I’ll be sensible. Make a quick reconnoiter and see if I can extract the Gold.”

He’s quiet for a moment. “*Hurry, but be smart.*”

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I smile. “Always.”

I adjust my hand on my razor and move back down the hall, passing the living quarters where we found the prisoners. Sweat trickles down my spine. I take efforts to calm my breath, but every corner I turn I expect to see a savage waiting with bloody teeth and hollow eyes. My heart throbs up into my throat.

Then I hear them.