

**SHADOW
FALL**

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For Papaw

PROGENY

1

There would be no dawn.

Rain fell in cascades from the black sky, submerging him in an ocean of icy cold. His breath fogged the air in front of him, pushing back a spray of water before rushing back into his face as they fled. His legs were tired, but they could not stop, no more than if the very whips of Hell cracked behind them.

A hand clutched his, slippery and cold but strong and unrelenting. His strength was failing, his will near shattering at the terrible turns of the day, but the hand that held him was sure. His mother would not let go of him. She would not leave him, as his father had.

In the past few hours he had known nothing but peril and loss. His mind was numb with the despair of it, as his body was numb from the icy rain. There had barely been any time for him to think about everything that had happened... everything he had lost.

Fear set in, and his concentration faltered. He slowed, pushed back by the rain, forgetting the danger that lay behind them and the urgency of their flight. But the hand that held him

kept on at the same speed, and his mother pulled him forward unexpectedly. Sharp asphalt met his foot and he pitched forward, flailing through the sheets of water as his hand slipped away from hers. He cried out, not from the pain that tore at his knees as he hit the ground, but the fear that his mother might lose him. He could barely see her through this night, though he knew she could only be inches from his outstretched fingertips.

He only had one moment to despair, for her hand grabbed hold of his and lifted him off the ground. Within the span of a few seconds he was moving again, this time in his mother's arms. Lightning flashed overhead and revealed the ruined city around them, but this time the accompanying roll of thunder did not subside. It remained, constant and strange, and despite his fear he could not quell his curiosity.

The boy twisted his neck around to look at the ground retreating behind his mother's hurried steps, and immediately wished he hadn't. It was not thunder he heard, but the crash of boots on concrete. The dark men were coming, like shadows emerging straight from his nightmares.

He turned again to face the way forward, only to see another group of shadows come around the corner. He cried out in warning, but his mother had already seen. She made a sharp turn to the left, and though it had seemed impossible just moments before, this new road grew even darker than the ones they left behind. Lightning flashed and revealed brick walls to the right and left, so close he felt a hint of claustrophobia.

Then, suddenly, his mother stopped. Nothing but solid brick lay before them: the end of the road.

She screamed in frustration and pounded on the wall, sending a spray of water flying with every impact of her fist. A choked gasp escaped her throat amidst her labored breaths, and when she looked down at him, he knew: it was over.

The end had come.

She sat him down on the road and pushed him behind her, shielding him from view as the thunder of the dark men's boots grew ever louder. He stole a glance around his mother's tall form just as the first of them came into view, blocking the mouth of the alley and slowing as they made their victorious approach. He could feel his mother's tension, like a rubber band about to snap, and saw her reach subconsciously to her right hip in a vain search for the weapon that could have saved them...a weapon that was not there.

When the front line came within a few yards of the place where they stood, the dark men stopped as one. The ensuing silence was louder than the thunder of their march. His ears rang in the absence of it, and if not for the continual patter of rain and the sound of his own breathing, he might have thought himself deaf.

For several long moments the soldiers just stood there, rigid in their lines, with expressionless faces behind guns that dangled across their torsos at the same angle: downward left. To his eyes they were more like one mind than many, multiple bodies with a single uniform purpose.

Then there was quick movement. The lines of men seemed to fold in upon one another until they had formed a kind of aisle down their center. And at the end: the road from

which they had come. Escape. Freedom. The boy looked up at his mother, wondering if they would make a run for it. They would never get past all those soldiers, surely. So what was going on? Were the soldiers just taunting them?

His answer came as a sleek black vehicle pulled to a stop at the opposite end of the aisle. His mother's fear intensified, he could tell by the way she gripped him more tightly. But he was smart enough to know she could not protect him, not from this.

One of the soldiers moved forward to open the back door of the vehicle and then stepped aside. There was another pause, and the boy held his breath in anticipation. Even the soldiers seemed to be doing the same.

Black boots touched the wet pavement, and the newcomer emerged from within like a storm of blackness. If the soldiers were dark men, this man was darkness itself. A long black trench coat unfurled as the man straightened and adjusted his clothing. Oblivious to the rain, he advanced slowly, hands behind his back, gazing from side to side at the expressionless soldiers.

When at last he turned his gaze upon them, he wore a sickening smile.

He came to a stop halfway between them and the soldiers, and spoke in a voice barely audible over the rain, "Lovely night, wouldn't you say?"

"I've seen better," the boy's mother replied.

"Can't argue with that," he grinned. "And yet somehow, despite all you have been through, you still manage to look as beautiful as ever. You were always beautiful, always brilliant,

always resourceful. For a moment I thought you might slip through my fingers yet *again*. But all things, eventually, must end. Now you are mine.”

He paced in front of her briefly, watching her out of the corner of eyes alight with excitement, as though waiting for something. When she did not speak, he stopped again and raised his eyebrows in question, “You surprise me, Lauren. You were always so defiant, so full of unsolicited wisdom. I find it hard to believe you have nothing to say.”

“I have no more breath to waste on you.”

“Then again, perhaps the events of today have broken your defiance. Perhaps all that is left is a shattered soul, clinging to what little slivers of life remain. In the last twelve hours you have lost nearly everything. In the next twelve minutes I expect you’ll lose the rest. So if you will not fight, perhaps it is time for you to *plead*.”

“Pleas have no value at the feet of a monster.”

His smile darkened, “You are the one to blame for what I have become, Lauren Charity! You, your traitorous husband, your self-righteous brother! It is because of you that I am what I am.”

“Save the sob stories for someone else, Patrick. You’ll get no pity from me.”

“*Never* speak that name in my presence!” he spat. “The man who bore that name is dead, as is the world that made him. What I have built in its place is grander than any kingdom ever established upon this earth. Soon all will know the lesson you learned too late: the World System is inescapable.”

“Yet with all your soldiers, your lands, and your weapons, still you are nothing but a tyrant. History bears witness to your fate: tyrants always fall, in the end. One day someone will bring your World System crashing down around you.”

“Perhaps,” he flashed a menacing smile. “But not today. That day, if it ever comes, will only be after you have long rotted away in the grave. Like those who have gone before you, who wasted themselves on a cause that never yielded its promised reward. You should have listened to me long ago, Lauren. The only thing worth trusting in this life is *power*.”

“Words from a man who has not known love.”

“I tried love once,” he sneered. “Perhaps you remember.”

A tense silence descended on the alley, interrupted only by a distant crackle of thunder. At length, the dark man went on, “Let us talk honestly now, you and I. Your life in Silent Thunder is over...but it need not be the end of you. You can—”

Lauren broke in immediately, “You know I will never do that.”

“Not for your own sake, no. Your self-righteous sense of purpose runs too deep. But things are not the same as they were then.” He paused, then took a step forward. “I’m curious: how far will you go to save your son?”

Lauren’s muscles tensed and she drew herself up protectively, “You stay away from him.”

The boy shrank back against the wall as the dark man reached out and grabbed his mother by the face. He moved within inches of her and hissed, “You still don’t get it, do you? Look around! No one is coming to save you. You are mine.

Your son...is *mine*. Maybe you still believe that there is a power in this world working for your good, that some God will stretch out his hand and intervene. But you are wrong. There is only one god here, and his name is Napoleon Alexander!" He took hold of her arm and flung her back against the line of soldiers, "Hold her!"

The soldiers obeyed, and the boy—now exposed—looked up at Alexander with every ounce of courage he could muster. He wanted to run, but he did not so much as back away. He simply stood firm and unmoving, eyes shifting between his mother's helpless face and Alexander's hateful glare.

"What is your name?" Alexander asked.

The boy did not answer, but screwed his features into his best attempt at disdain. What had the man called his mother? Defiant? Well, he would be the same.

Unsettled by the child's seeming lack of fear, Alexander grabbed him by the shoulders and demanded, "What is your *name*?"

"His name is Elijah," Lauren answered.

"Elijah Charity," he mused. "The spitting image of his father...though he has your eyes. I used to think there was power there, in those depths...that they could read me like an open book."

"Let him go," Lauren pleaded. "Your fight is with me. He has nothing to do with this."

"And what then, my dear? March my soldiers back down this alley and leave him here alone, to starve in the Wilderness or die of exposure to the cold? No, a quick death would be

so much more merciful, and he can have it, with your help. Unless..." Elijah saw a sudden glint in the dark man's eye. "Perhaps you wish for me to mold this child into something else...something more amenable. The son of Jonathan Charity, a loyal servant of my World System. Wouldn't that be the ultimate irony?"

Elijah, understanding Alexander's intentions, leaned forward and said in as strong a voice as he possessed, "Never."

Alexander's expression soured, "I suppose I should have known better. He has his father's stubborn heart. Yes, I believe the quick death will do." He picked Elijah up by the shoulders and held him about a foot from his mother, "Say goodbye to mommy, Elijah."

Elijah was pulled out of Lauren's reach before he could speak a single word, and the next thing he knew he was in the arms of one of the soldiers. That was when he decided to start screaming.

"Take him into that room there. Wait for my instructions."

The soldier did as he was told and carried Elijah into a place of even deeper darkness, followed by the slam of a door that shut the two of them off from his mother, Alexander, and the rest of the dark men in the alley. He could still hear their voices on the other side of the door:

"Lieutenant, draw your sidearm and prepare to execute the child on my command. Confirm!"

There was a click next to Elijah's head and the soldier holding him yelled out, "Understood, sir!" Elijah began to scream louder, but the soldier clamped a hand over his mouth to silence him.

“You monster!” his mother shouted. “May God exact justice on you for your inhumanity!”

“A choice is before you now,” Alexander began. “You can renounce all that you are and leave your life in Silent Thunder behind. Do so, and your son will live. Not by your side, of course, but any life is better than none at all. Refuse me, and both you and your son will die today.”

She did not respond.

“I’m going to count to three.”

“Patrick—”

“*One.*”

“Wait!” his mother pleaded. “He’s just a child! He doesn’t have anything to do—”

“*Two.*”

“Okay!” she wailed, her voice betraying utter dejection and defeat. “I’ll do whatever you want. I’ll give you whatever you want. Just please, leave him out of this.”

There was a moment of silence, broken suddenly by a long stream of Alexander’s cruel laughter. “Well, it seems that everyone does have their price. Even the great Lauren Charity. Unfortunately, however, I have no real interest in you. It just made sense that if I was to take everything from you, I should take your dignity as well.”

“You unimaginable son of a—”

“What was it your father used to say?” Alexander cut her off. “That quote you were always so fond of? Ah, yes... ‘No matter how deep the darkness of the night, the sun will still rise tomorrow.’ Well, I’m afraid there will be no more sunrises. Not for you, and not for your son.”

“Wait! There must be something—”

“Lieutenant...” Alexander’s voice was calm, regal, and emotionless. “Fire.”

Lauren screamed, and the shot rang out.

301-14-A sat up straight in bed, ears ringing as though the gun had gone off right next to his ear. His breath came in ragged gasps and his heart pounded wildly—he was terrified half out of his mind. He reached up to his face and found it wet with tears, then ran his hand through his hair. Surprisingly, it was dry.

But the storm, the rain, the pursuit...it had all seemed so vivid and real. Almost as though he had actually been there. *No*, he thought. *I’ve been here the entire time.* Liz lay peacefully beside him, the sheet covering her up to her neck. Her chest rose and fell rhythmically, confirming that she was still asleep. He sighed, thankful he had not woken her. This was one dream he was not eager to explain.

He slid carefully out of the covers and stepped onto the carpet, stumbling through the darkness toward the bathroom. He flipped the light on and steadied himself against the wall. His entire body was numb with exhaustion, both physical and emotional. Maybe that was what had sparked the dream. He reached for the bottle of paste on the sink and applied some of it to his wounded left shoulder. *Miracle Heal*, soldiers called the stuff. It had been two days and already the shoulder felt good as new again.

He shook his head. Two days since Silent Thunder staged that false ambush on him and Derek Blaine. Two days since the battle at the Weapons Manufacturing Facility. Two days

since Jacob Sawyer's death. It seemed like it had been much longer than that.

301 finished with the paste and lifted his gaze to the mirror. As he stared into his own eyes, echoes of the dark alley resurfaced, and he shook himself back to reality. It had only been a dream, probably a result of the multitude of irrational fears that had cropped up in his mind over the last couple of days. That one had been the most vivid, but there were also others. Dreams of terror, dreams of tears, and dreams of blackness. Pain, sorrow, and loss. Rain and fire.

Pax Aeterna.

The words were burned into his mind, as dangerous as they were frustrating, Jacob Sawyer's final testament before passing into the abyss. Seemingly innocuous, unintelligible even, except for the fact that they had followed 301's question: *You knew my father? Who is he? Where can I find him?* And then, what Liz had told him: *Pax Aeterna* was the name of Jonathan Charity's Spectral Gladius. At first his mind had reeled from the shock that he could be the son of the System's most notorious enemy, but almost immediately he began to discount it.

Jacob Sawyer had been on the verge of death. Attributing his last words as the answer to 301's question might assume too much.

The files from the Capital Orphanage recorded him arriving when he was one year old. While it seemed he and Jonathan Charity's son were of a similar age, the boy would have been five or six around the time of his father's death. The dates simply didn't match up.

To cap it all, the death of the child had been confirmed in the palace records by the Ruling Council. It didn't get much more official than that.

Still, the entire situation gnawed at him. Perhaps that was where these dreams were coming from: a projection of the fears that this ordeal had created. He took a deep breath, thankful that the effects of the dream had begun to fade. *No need to worry*, he assured himself. *They were just dreams. They don't have to mean anything.*

He found himself wishing he could talk to Grace. They had shared so much while in one another's company, he had no doubt she would have some insight.

But then he felt a heaviness in his chest as it hit him what Grace must be feeling in that moment. Her father was dead. Silent Thunder, in all likelihood, was finished. For all he knew, she had already fled to the Wilderness with whatever remnants of the rebellion Jacob Sawyer had brought to the city. But wherever she was, she was in a lot of pain...pain he was partly responsible for.

His gaze shifted to the clock on the wall, and he sighed. Still a good while until dawn. Sleep might not find him again, but it would be foolish not to try.

2

Scott Sullivan stood completely motionless, hands behind his back, watching as the first traces of light crept up onto the horizon. His expression was blank and his eyes were cold as he surveyed the city that would one day be his—the city he would soon be forced to leave. But it would only be a temporary exile. In the courts of the World System he had known power, but it was power limited by Alexander’s whim. When at last he returned to take this city for his own, he would reign supreme.

Emperor. The title evoked greatness and strength, connecting him to rulers of the past all the way back to the Roman Empire and beyond. But what was Rome next to the Imperial Conglomerate of Cities? Who was Caesar, next to him? Rome and its emperors were but a prelude to him, a foreshadowing of the conqueror who would surpass them all. Where they had failed, he would succeed; where they had fallen, he would stand. He would be feared and remembered in life as well as in death: the great Emperor Scott Sullivan, vanquisher of the mighty World System.

But that was not the man he saw staring back at him from the reflection in the darkened glass. He saw a man broken by countless compromises to his principles and his passions, all in the name of a government he had only supported for fear of death. Could he continue onward with the illusion of the untouchable ruler? Could he continue to fool those around him and even himself, when deep within his soul sounded the cry of the man—the man of principle—he once was?

Or had the tragedy of his circumstance placed an irrevocable imprint upon him, banishing that man of virtue to the recesses of his mind forever?

Lust for power had taken its toll. After all, of what worth was humanity when the divine was right in his grasp? He could become a god...a savior who would deliver the world from the cruel hand of its oppressor and grant it new life. His name would be spoken among the legends for centuries to come.

All he had to do was sacrifice millions of lives to get there.

The sudden snap of his office doors startled him from his reverie, and he turned—half-expecting to find a column of the palace guard there to place him in chains. The longer he stayed in the palace, the more paranoid he became. He breathed a sigh of relief, however, when he recognized Orion. The man wore a grave expression—one that suggested his relief might be short-lived.

Orion shut the door carefully and strode forward, a blue folder clutched tightly in his right hand. He looked around the office suspiciously—an act that always sparked a flare of jealousy in Sullivan. His quarters were impressive, but

nowhere near as lavish as those of the MWR. For that reason he preferred to receive his guests in the Hall of Advisors.

“Is this room secure?” Orion asked.

“Yes,” Sullivan replied. “What do you have?”

“The results of the investigation into the Shadow Soldier’s file,” Orion said. “I suggest you read it, sir...right now.”

Orion placed the folder on the desk between them and slid it forward, then stepped back as though to get out of the way. Sullivan reached down to open the folder, and the room went eerily silent as he read the first page—the silence before a tempest.

At long last Sullivan spoke, his voice barely a whisper, “Is there any chance, Colonel, that what I’m seeing is a mistake?”

“No, sir,” Orion said. “I checked and rechecked. The Shadow Soldier is not who we think he is.”

“Does he know?” Sullivan tore his eyes from the page and returned them to his Chief of Staff. “Does the Specter Captain know the truth?”

“Does it matter, sir?”

“No,” Sullivan closed the file. “I suppose it doesn’t.” He stepped back to the window behind his desk and gazed once again upon the horizon. The sun’s gleam turned the skyscrapers into burning embers, his favorite time of the day. “It would appear our last excuse for delay has been removed. We cannot use the Shadow Soldier now. The time has come to move.”

“Move, sir?”

Alexandria, pearl of modern civilization, center of Earth. *I will return for you.*

“Yes, Colonel,” Sullivan closed his eyes, shutting out the vision of the great city which he now must leave. “There’s no longer any reason for us to be here. Begin the final evacuation.”

Elizabeth Aurora’s bright blue eyes stared blankly at the ceiling in 301’s bedroom, the pit in her stomach growing larger as the guilt of the previous night washed over her. She felt dirty, covered in the grime of her transgression—not because she had seduced 301, but because she had used him. There was something she wanted, and sex had become the only currency by which she could get it.

But that wasn’t how it started. She and 301 had been on-again, off-again throughout their teenage years. In many ways it had been the only thing she could really count on. When she returned to Alexandria after their year apart, she had hoped to rekindle that old spark. And then came Sullivan with his mission, and his promise, to corrupt it all.

She thought to win back the affection of a man, but instead found herself resorting to old tricks, using her body as a weapon to get what she wanted.

Even so, she had failed. 301 was not the same. He had always been a complicated man, but there seemed to be something deeper about him now, as though there was a part of him she just couldn’t reach. Perhaps she made her move too late. He had fallen in love with another woman—a slave, no less. Since then she had tried everything to win him back, to no avail.

He was still in love, despite what he tried to tell her. A woman always knew—it was in the eyes, in the vacant expression. And every time Liz saw it she knew that even if she gained power over 301's body, Grace Sawyer would always have his heart.

She felt the warmth of his body next to her, and turned to gaze at him. He slept soundly, at least for now. The past two nights he had woken in a cold sweat from some nightmare, though he would never tell her what it was about. She often wondered with a hint of jealousy if he dreamed of Grace.

The thought of him pining after another woman while next to her—while in her arms—made that empty pit in her stomach that much harder to bear. What did Grace Sawyer have that she didn't? Was it that midnight hair, those mysterious and guarded eyes—or perhaps the illusion she presented as the damsel in distress?

An answer came unbidden to her mind: *She has a heart. You lost yours long ago.* Her throat constricted and her eyes moistened, but she fought back the emotions before they could reach the surface. If she had to give her heart in order to receive one in return, she would rather be alone. The men in her life had only known how to grind a woman's heart into dust, and so it was best to keep that heart buried. But she had kept it buried so long and so deep that she didn't know if she would ever be able to find it again.

She blamed the Capital Orphanage. They trained her to be a cold and calculating warrior—to use everything she possessed to advance her own fortune and power. Beauty was

the most valuable of those possessions, and she wielded it every bit as well as 301 wielded a sword. Her body was just another weapon in her arsenal, and over the years it had proven to be a much more potent advantage than any blade or firearm she could carry. But eventually such tactics take their toll, and rarely a day went by when she didn't desire to feel...loved. It had been so long since she felt that—if she had felt it then at all.

Her earphone beeped on the side table next to her, and her heart pounded with dread. She reached for the wrist device to see who it was, and her fears were confirmed: a blocked call, which could mean only one thing. She retrieved the earpiece, put it in, and turned her head away from 301 as she pressed receive. Then she whispered, "Specter Aurora...go ahead."

"Separation priority message," an automated voice replied. "Aurora, Elizabeth. Execute Evacuation Protocol B. Repeat, execute Evacuation Protocol B. Extraction in thirty minutes." The line died, and Liz froze. The consequences of her deal with Sullivan were now to be reaped, in the contingency he had assured would never come to pass. She wanted what he offered her more than anything. All he asked, in addition to the pound of her own flesh she had already given, was one final sacrifice.

A sacrifice she didn't know if she could make.

Trying not to think too hard about what she had to do, Liz leaned over the side of the bed and reached to where 301's weapons belt lay, thrown haphazardly on the floor the previous night. Her hand closed around the nearest weapon—his battle knife—and she raised herself back up, shifting to face him as

he continued to sleep. With her free arm she lifted her upper body and came to rest against him, feeling the direct warmth of his skin on hers.

She held the knife above him and gritted her teeth in anticipation of the plunge.

But she hesitated for one moment, and then two. The tip of the knife came to rest against 301's neck, and she willed herself to do what must be done. What was 301 to her anyway? Just another man who had taken advantage of her...who had *used* her. And only after he had spurned her affections in favor of another...a woman she could never replace.

Even summoning her anger was not enough, and her hand began to shake as her will fought against her conscience. There was still a part of her, despite everything, that cared for him. She could not kill him.

At almost the very same moment she made her decision, 301's eyes snapped open and his body tensed as he stared at her—and then the knife—with astonishment. “Liz? What are you doing?”

“I'm sorry, 301,” she said with sincerity, and slammed the butt of the knife into his temple, sending him back into a forced slumber.

She stabbed the sharp end of his knife into the side table and stepped out of bed, gathering her clothes from around the room. She dressed quickly, then walked around to the side of the bed where 301 lay. She knelt over him as she fastened her weapons belt, and brushed his lips lightly with her own one final time.

“Goodbye,” she whispered.

Liz straightened and walked away, pausing for a few seconds to look back at him from the doorway before leaving the suite.

The hallway was deserted—not surprising, given that it was barely past sunrise. Her comrades should still be asleep. She stopped in front of the elevator and pressed *up*. Quick movement to her left made her reach instinctively for her Gladius, but for the moment she refrained. Without turning to look, she recognized Derek Blaine’s arrogant stride. What was he doing there? Did he know, somehow?

Blaine stopped at 301’s door, about halfway down the hall from her position, and she breathed a sigh of relief. Of course. He was just coming to meet his partner. She chanced a look at him, knowing his eyes were already on her. Blaine smirked knowingly, as though catching her making the walk of shame. Then he knocked on 301’s door.

Liz pressed *up* again, her heart rate increasing with the anticipation. 301 lay unconscious. He would not come to the door. How long before Derek forced his way in and found her out?

“301!” Derek knocked again, a trace of concern in his voice. “I know you’re in there, I can see your girlfriend out here!”

Come on, she thought impatiently at the elevator. *Why was it taking so long?* She eyed the stairs to the right, and shook her head. No way she was climbing the stairs to the docking bay. That was more than 50 floors!

Derek pounded again, and at last the elevator doors opened. Liz nearly jumped inside, pounding the button for the docking

bay and pressing it several more times for good measure. The doors closed, and she slumped back against the cold steel. *That was close.*

She caught a glimpse of herself in the reflection of the stainless steel doors and let out an exasperated sigh. Her hair was a mess. She did her best to look presentable as the elevator rose—without stopping, thankfully—but affected little change. *Well*, she thought. *Not the most pressing thing right now, after all.*

The elevator came to a stop and the doors opened, allowing her to step out onto the docking bay floor. A group of ten palace guards stood in the lobby, blocking her path. Palace guards? At the Spire? Sent by Napoleon Alexander, perhaps, to bar her escape?

She reached for *Ignis*, and the lead guard held up his hands, “Hold, Specter Aurora. We bring word from the emperor.”

Derek Blaine tried for a third time to reach 301 by phone. Still no answer. He pounded again on the metal, so hard it stung his hand, “301! Can you hear me?” Derek felt a sinking in his gut—the very same sensation he experienced on the eve of battle. Something was just...wrong. He placed a hand on *Exusia* and pounded one more time, “Captain, if you don’t answer me in three seconds I’m coming in! One! Two! Thr—”

The Spire’s screaming alarms drowned out Derek’s final word, and he activated *Exusia* by instinct.

“Blaine!” Derek turned to see Admiral McCall marching in his direction, Spectral Gladius in hand. Though he didn’t know why, there was something in the admiral’s stance that alarmed him. For all he knew, McCall could be a part of whatever was happening. Derek moved *Exusia* between them as the admiral drew closer.

“What’s going on, Admiral?” he asked suspiciously.

McCall eyed Derek’s blade with cool understanding, “From what I’ve been able to ascertain in the last few minutes, there’s been an uprising—of which I am not a part, by the way.”

“An uprising?” Derek asked. “You mean the rebellion?”

“No,” the admiral shook his head. “This is something else. Premier Sullivan and the majority of his staff are missing, and several officers and personnel loyal to him are also AWOL. There are reports of battles in the city, one right here in our own docking bay. For all intents and purposes, it appears we are on the cusp of a civil war.”

Derek’s eyes narrowed, “Then how do I know—?”

“If I *was* fighting for the other side, I certainly wouldn’t approach *you*, now would I?” McCall retorted. “Not to mention the valuable time I would already have wasted in conversation, seeing as I could certainly have bested you in a duel by now.”

After a moment of consideration, Derek dropped his battle stance, “I wouldn’t be so sure of that, Admiral. I’ve never actually seen you in action.”

“I daresay you’ll get your chance soon enough,” McCall glanced at the door. “Where is the Specter Captain?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been trying to reach him by phone, but he hasn’t—”

“Break it down,” McCall ordered. “Now.”

Derek cut a hole around the door’s magnetic lock and kicked the metal slab hard, knocking it loose so that it slammed into the floor. He leapt over the threshold with *Exusia* in hand, “Specter Captain? Are you here?”

He rushed to the bedroom and found 301 lying still upon the bed as though asleep. “Captain!” he yelled, drawing nearer. “Captain, wake up!” And then, considering that the alarms had not roused him, Derek concluded that his partner must not be *able* to wake. He checked the side of his head and found a fresh welt that confirmed that theory. His chest still rose and fell, however, so he wasn’t dead.

Derek came alongside the bed and shook 301 violently, “Captain, wake up. *Wake* up!”

301 stirred and let out an anguished groan. His hand shot up to his injured temple and he barely opened his eyes, “Derek? Why are you here?”

“What happened, 301?” Derek asked. “Who did this to you?”

“It was Liz,” he said groggily, shaking his head in disbelief. “I woke up and found her over me, about to stab me with my own knife. Then, everything went dark. She must have knocked me out.” At that moment he distinguished the alarms and motioned to the ceiling, “I suppose that’s her?”

“Yes and no,” Derek said. “She’s part of it, I think, but whatever is happening, it’s all over the city.”

“It doesn’t make sense,” 301 sat up. “Why would she try to kill me?”

Derek pulled the knife from where it had been stuck in the side table, “Orders, I presume. Orders that it appears she didn’t

follow.” He paused and handed the knife to 301. “Now hurry up and get dressed. The admiral is waiting for us.”

301 nodded and with Derek’s help rose to his feet. He threw on his uniform with surprising speed, despite the occasional stumble from lingering dizziness.

“After this is over, Captain,” Derek said with a smile. “You and I are going to have a long talk about your taste in women.”