



# DEATH WEAVER

K.A. EXCELL

# DEATH WEAVER

by K. A. Excell



Rune and Gear Productions

Also by K.A. Excell

The Projector War Saga

Crystal Mind

Crystal Choice

Crystal Truth

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To the family and friends who pushed me to find  
my potential.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Hello wonderful readers!

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Now, on to the novel!



**PART  
ONE**

# CHAPTER ONE

Kriska stared at the burning hole which had once been her apartment. Smoke billowed in black clouds, peppered by little pops of exploding ammunition. Rage built in her bones.

Who had done this? Who would have dared target the home, however temporary, of a registered Bounty Hunter?

Then rage evaporated as she heard the screams. Kriska moved as fast as only a Hunter could, scaling the outside eternacrete wall of the burning building. Above her, secondary explosions from the ammunition caches continued to assault her eardrums with the sounds of gunfire. She closed her eyelids for a fraction of a second, searching her Secondary Sight for the glowing outlines of gunmen—just in case they were using her ammo cache explosions as cover.

No human outlines in the Fabric of Life, only the orange dots of individual shells exploding with non-lethal violence.

She pulled herself onto the windowsill of the apartment above hers where the screams were coming from. The sound of a fire siren started in the distance, but the airships would take too long to help the civilians trapped inside. She smashed a fighting-hardened elbow into the glass which—damaged as it was by the explosion—shattered, releasing billows of black smoke into the air. With her off hand, she eased her ash mask into place and slapped the button which would tighten it down around her mouth, nose, and eyes.

A man dressed in soot-stained Establishment gray pulled uselessly at a steel support which had been shifted by the explosion. It had only moved six inches, but it was enough to block the door behind it.

He stumbled back, coughing in the thick smoke, and gestured to the door. “My children—”

Kriska didn't wait for him to recover from his coughing fit. Her Sight wouldn't let her See the children—they were probably frightened out of their mind, and fear made people disappear from the net of anger and violence she Saw—so she yelled at them instead. “Get on the ground and stay away from the door!”

She wasn't the sort of Hunter who specialized in rescue jobs—the opposite, actually—but that didn't make her useless. She set her shoulder against the steel and pushed. Before the Split, it would have taken a winch or a crane to move the high density steel. She shoved it over with Hunter strength and sheer determination as the cries from behind the door softened.

Behind her eyes, she Saw the violet of death gathering behind three small figures in the other room. Potential for death outweighed fear, which had lit them up in her Sight like a tortured Christmas tree.

How much smoke had they already inhaled? How much longer did they have?

Keeping her weight against the beam, Kriska twisted the handle and pulled the door open. “Go, go, go! Get out, now.”

Behind half closed eyes, she could See the ceiling in the children's room reddening. That was the color of objects about to do serious injury to human life, although it stopped short of killing violet. The ceiling was weakening and, if it fell, they would be caught in the destruction. Not killed, but hurt.

The children didn't exit the room.

Kriska's muscles strained as she shifted the beam back even farther and let it fall. It smashed through the soot-stained plastic flooring and continued downward, but she knew it wouldn't injure anyone. Kriska didn't spare it any more attention as she dashed into the room.

Three little girls lay on the floor. The largest had a hand around the smallest's arm, like she'd been trying to drag her little sister out when she'd finally collapsed.

Kriska looked back at the doorway. The father was on his hands and knees, crawling toward them with uneven motions.

## DEATH WEAVER

The civilians were asphyxiating. The violet claws of Monsters tapped needles along their outlines within Kriska's Sight, eagerly waiting for the Fabric of Life to thin enough they could tear through and snatch those souls from their bodies.

Kriska slapped the adjustment button on the outside of her mask and fitted it over the smallest child. Another tap of the button, a quarter second pause for the biometric scanner to verify the order, and the mask tightened down around the smallest one's face, supplying oxygen. Kriska threw the smallest one over her shoulder and hoisted the older two in either hand. She made it out of the room moments before the roof collapsed behind her.

Her Sight burned red, notifying her that the floor wasn't particularly stable, either.

Kriska gritted her teeth and ignored the burning in her lungs as she started toward the shattered window, only to stop as she looked at the long drop.

Twelve stories.

At eight stories, she'd probably have shin splints from the fall. At nine, she might break her legs. At ten, she definitely would.

Twelve stories, laden with three children? Physics had broken in the Split, but it wasn't *that* broken. Mass counted for quite a lot, and three children were a lot of mass. Even if she got them down safely, she wouldn't be able to scale the building and get the father out before the floor gave way.

And how many other innocents were trapped in this building? This set of apartments didn't cater to families, which was one of the reasons she'd chosen it, but that wouldn't mean *everyone* was at work. What about people who worked the night shift?

She could see the airships closing in quickly, but it would take time to set up anti-grav nets to catch the children, and time for the fire control personnel—normal humans, not Hunters—to enter the building. Time these children didn't have.

Two black-booted feet swung silently through the window in front of her. He landed on one knee, eyes already scanning for threats—or, civilians, more probably. He wore all black, complete with a Hunter cut jacket. He saw the collapsed father before he saw Kriska.

“Can you make the jump with all three kids?” the new Hunter asked her. He pulled an extra mask from the kit on his waist and fitted it over the father’s face, then slung the father over his shoulders like a human scarf.

“Can you survive a twelve story fall with an extra two hundred pounds of weight?” Kriska retorted.

“Here.” The Hunter tossed a silver disk at her. She managed to set a kid down and catch it before it hit the ground at her feet.

The Hunter jumped out the window with a professional calm which impressed her.

Kriska looked at the silver disk he’d thrown at her, found the depression in the center, and stabbed it with a finger. The disk split in two, and she finally recognized it. Pocket-sized anti-grav boot covers. She slipped them over her combat boots and didn’t stop to wonder how that Hunter had managed to get *Galactic tech* here on Earth. The anti-grav covers activated as she stepped onto the windowsill and jumped out into the street.

They activated in two short bursts before she hit the ground. Rolling wasn’t an option with three kids draped over her, so she bent her knees to absorb the impact.

“Where are their masks?” the Hunter demanded. Then he looked at her face. “Where is your mask?”

Kriska laid the kids down on the cement, then jerked a thumb at the youngest—still breathing, thank goodness. The violet around their auras in her Sight had faded.

The other Hunter towered over her, staring. “You only had one mask? What kind of Rescue Hunter are you?”

Kriska would have laughed, but all she could do was cough. Breathing that smoke had been like inhaling acid. “I’m not one.” She held out a hand for more of his extra masks. He supplied three, and she was able to reclaim her own.

The airships were overhead. They sounded like an ash storm in their own right, the roar of engines drowning out everything as fire control personnel swarmed the building. One found her way over to them.

“Situation report. Do you know if there are any more civilians in there?” she asked.

## DEATH WEAVER

The other Hunter closed his eyes, and Kriska did the same. There was some red toward the outside of the building, but nothing definite. “I can’t say for sure,” she said.

“No. The building is clear,” the other Hunter said at the same time.

Kriska’s eyes widened at that. What kind of Sight would let him tell whether the building was clear of civilians?

The fire control woman nodded her thanks and started directing a medical team to care for the civilians they’d rescued.

Kriska looked back at the burning hole in the building where the airships all clustered, and the rage returned. Whoever had done this either didn’t know enough about explosions to keep the blast confined to their target area or had no regard for human life. Killing a murderer was one thing. Taking out civilians was something altogether different.

She stalked toward the explosion, eyes peeled for any sign of who had done this.

Her clue came in the form of a blue, flame-retardant plastic flimsy half slid under the doormat in front of the entryway to the staircase she took to get to her apartment.

She picked it up and scanned it with barely restrained rage.

“Which will you choose,” it said, “scorched earth, or home?”

It felt like a bucket of ice dumped over her head as she stared at the paper.

*Scorched earth or home?*

Beneath the message was the Duanti family crest, five loops topped with the head of a snake.

Mother Dearest wanted to send a message.

Kriska pulled the plastic apart until the ink inside was indecipherable, then tossed it toward the raging flames.

Mother Dearest wanted her to return to the fold, but that wouldn’t happen. She’d left for a reason, and that reason had only grown stronger.

The Duanti family was not something she wanted to be associated with. They were more properly called the Duanti *crime* family, and her mother was their leader.

Mother Dearest would take her in a second, especially now that she knew Kriska was a Bounty Hunter—and no one who

had looked at her apartment would have assumed anything different. Kriska could only hope that Mother Dearest didn't know just what type of Bounty Hunter she was. All Hunters were fast, strong, and their bodies generally defied the laws of physics, but some had other abilities. Summoners could summon powerful weaponry to aid them. Mind Weavers were empaths who could twist the thoughts of others. Tech Weavers were technopaths who could telepathically control technology. Death Weavers could see—and cause—death. And if Mother Dearest knew Kriska was a Death Weaver, then things would get worse than they already were.

Kriska looked down at the melted slag of the note Mother Dearest had left.

No, she couldn't possibly know what Kriska was. She just wanted her to return to the fold.

Kriska turned to leave—no sense in sticking around where one of Mother Dearest's lackeys could find her—only to see that the other Hunter from before was leaning against the side of the building with an indecipherable expression on his face.

"If you aren't a Rescue Hunter, then why are you here," he asked.

Kriska looked him up and down. The new guy was big in all the ways most male Bounty Hunters were: in the shoulders, thighs, calves and hips. He moved with a fighter's balance, like he was storming a fortress. His legs were sheathed in shim-pants—the best kinetic absorption armor in the galaxy, and the most expensive. Half the Hunters in the Patronage would jump him just to get ahold of the armor, but there were enough cops around this orderly hell to keep his head and his wallet attached. Jacket was guild cut, with a spot on the shoulder darker than the rest where a patch had been ripped off.

Well, that was interesting.

Everything about him when he'd come through that window to get those people out said he was a Rescue Hunter, pinged by the same alert which had scrambled those fire control airships, and duly compensated by the Establishment when the fire was under control with no civilian casualties. He had the extra masks, the anti-grav, even an extra set of anti-grav boot covers—and

## DEATH WEAVER

those were the sort of tech even Hunters couldn't get on Earth. But why would a Rescue Hunter need shim-armor? And what did it take for a Hunter to get kicked out of a Rescue Hunter guild?

"You aren't a Rescue Hunter, either. Not wearing that," Kriska said with a nod at the armor. He might've been kicked out of a Galactic guild—maybe even one of the top three: Warbane, Darkbane, or SpecCon, but none of those specialized in rescue. And whatever guild had canned him, they took combat contracts. No other reason to wear shim armor.

The Hunter looked at his shoulder where the patch had once been and grimaced. "I've done my fair share of rescue jobs."

Which was probably true and meant that he at least wasn't from a Dark guild.

As he shifted, metal caught what light managed to bleed through the afternoon's ash clouds. Kriska took another look at him. Harder. What were those guns?

He had two rifles slung over his shoulder, both similar in make. She hadn't noticed them in the heat of the moment—maybe he'd set them down to scale the building—but now they were painfully obvious. Assault rifles with pieces that might've been made in the second millennium but were polished to a shine. They were topped with modern day scopes, and there were no auto-feeds to be seen—so not built for modern military use. A second look at the guns showed the stabilizers for a sniping weapon. They were built from the ground up as a Hunter's dream gun, and he had two of them.

Kriska's fingers twitched toward them, itching to caress the trigger.

She closed her eyelids halfway. The world lit up black with unstable yellow-orange outlines that represented violent individuals at rest. In this case, the fire control personnel still scrambling to get the fire put out. The Hunter in front of her didn't appear—which was concerning, given that Hunters were never that calm—but the guns sure did. The first was a dull orange so dark it was almost brown. Good gun, but nothing special.

Its twin was gold all the way through. That was the same color which had begun staining the outline of Kriska's best friend—Roma, the Ram-44 at her hip. Kriska's eyes opened the rest of

the way, and she did her best not to stare at the golden gun slung over his shoulder.

Just who was this guy, who was invisible to her Second Sight, and carried a golden weapon?

Gramps called them Angels, weapons that were different from the others. They were the kind of weapons Summoners called, but that didn't mean they couldn't find their way to others as well. They sighted more accurately, made shots no other weapon could hope to achieve and, sometimes, they even spoke to her. So, what was he doing with an Angel slung over his shoulder?

Better question: just what had he done to get kicked out of his guild?

In a moment, he was upgraded from random-ex-guild-monkey-here-to-figure-out-his-life, to threat—and a threat she couldn't see with her Sight. Best to get out of here now, swing by her nearest weapons cache—assuming Mother Dearest hadn't found it and rigged it to blow, too—and make her way back across the fissure to the organized chaos of the Patronage. Once she was there, she could hide in the chaos while she figured out what to do about Mother Dearest and her threats.

She turned to leave.

“That was your apartment, wasn't it?” the Hunter asked.

Kriska stopped. “That's none of your business.”

“You're right. It's not. But it does explain why someone like you went to so much trouble to save civilians.” There was a faint derisiveness to his words.

Kriska went rigid.

*Someone like her?*

“I'm looking for a partner,” he continued, “and it looks like you know guns. Barely looked at me. In fact, you barely looked at anything except Raven, and most people think my boy there's just as interesting.” He thumbed the strap connected to Raven's orange/brown twin.

Kriska turned back. He was dangling the Angel gun in front of him by its strap. That would be Raven, then. Odd, that he'd named his gun, too. Or maybe that Angel was one of the ones who talked, and she'd told him her name. It was still odd. Most Hunters thought she was crazy when she introduced Roma.

## DEATH WEAVER

“It could just be coincidence,” Kriska said.

That made the other Hunter smile slightly. “I don’t think so. You know your guns better than almost anybody I know. I need a sharpshooter who’s comfortable climbing, a good fit with the weapon, and has a good record on retrieval missions.”

Kriska cocked her head. He’d seen her climb and seen her ogle his gun, but where had he got the information about retrieval missions? Why did he think she was a sharpshooter? She kept her voice blank. “That’s quite the assumption.”

He produced a tablet. On the screen was her public Hunter record: Kriska Duanti, twenty-six successful terminations, forty-two successful retrievals, Tier I Hunter, no guild affiliation.

She scanned the page, one eyebrow lifted. Then she grabbed the tablet from him. Two could play the research game, and now curiosity was starting to overwhelm sense. Just who was this guy?

“Hey, that’s mine!” But he didn’t make any move to take it back.

“Name?” Her voice was flat.

His smile widened. “John Fitzgerald—but you’re not going to find much information in there.”

She ignored him and typed in his name. The screen went blank for a second, and then came back with the picture of a large, broad-shouldered Hunter who looked exactly like the one standing in front of her.

Kriska glanced at his bounty record and froze.

Completed bounties: None. Guild affiliation: None. Rank: Tier I Hunter.

She looked from him to the impossible board once, then twice. No Hunter got to be Tier I without at least fifty completed and reviewed bounties in their file. And that whole review thing was a big deal. The jobs had to have gone off without a hitch, and that fact had to be certified by no less than three other Tier I Hunters or the Conclave itself. They could be any type of bounty—rescue, retrieval, execution, specialized, or a mix. The types of bounties should be listed in their record. Even private bounties should be listed. He had nothing on the board beneath his bounties tab.

Somehow, this guy was listed as Tier I without a single bounty to his name.

Adrenaline—not the full spurt of battle, but enough to tell her that something was badly wrong with this guy—still moved through her system.

“I told you,” he murmured.

Something—or someone—had wiped his record, and that sort of thing didn’t happen unless he had contacts with the Conclave—connections nobody got without spending entirely too much time with top level guilds, or by working directly for the Conclave. Or, and she’d only heard rumors of this one, he really did work for a Dark guild. They collected the most powerful Hunters they could find, and someone with sufficiently strong Tech Weaver abilities might—might—be able to pull that off. But Dark guilds worked in direct opposition to the Conclave, taking unregistered bounties, instigating wars, dealing in petty crime, working with people like Mother Dearest.

Kriska took another hard look at John Fitzgerald. He certainly didn’t look like a Hunter from a Dark guild. And if he really was some sort of Dark Hunter, he wouldn’t have jumped into that building to save that family.

Which left the Conclave, and that was almost worse. She couldn’t just kill someone who had ties to the Conclave like she could casually murder a Dark Hunter.

The Conclave held the Hunters responsible for every action they took; the single arbiter of life and death for her entire way of life, for all Hunters everywhere. If the Conclave took a dislike to a Hunter, that Hunter disappeared. Permanently. Maybe they got a price put on their head. Maybe something else happened and they just didn’t show up for their next bounty. On Earth, the Conclave didn’t hold nearly as much sway. On Earth, there were governments: the orderly hell that was the Establishment, and the chaotic—well, not heaven—that was the Patronage. Governments were mere holdovers from the days before the crazies set off a planet-cracker and caused the Split, but the Conclave was the future. In the big, wide galaxy, they *were* the law.

And John was *involved* with them. He had to be.

Kriska shoved the tablet back at him, eyelids halfway closed by force of habit. She still couldn’t see him with her Second Sight.

## DEATH WEAVER

No way was she touching him without an army of mercs at her back and a kinetic airstrike in orbit. Packing weapons like that, Hunter record wiped clean, looking for a partner who was a sharp shooter? He was wading thigh high in nuclear waste.

Ordinarily, that would be fine. She could out-fight or outrun any of his trouble which happened to splash on her. But not the Conclave. Even Gramps couldn't outrun the Conclave. And whether the Conclave had caused John's issues, or whether it was only watching him because he was a powerhouse of a Hunter didn't matter. The Conclave was in, so she was out.

She'd been staring at him too long.

"Gonna tell me why you've never taken a job?" Kriska didn't bother to hide the suspicion in her voice.

John shrugged. "Family troubles."

His answer made her stop. Given the burning wreck of an apartment above her, that one hit a little close to home.

"You a decent shot?" Her tone hid a pit trap of spikes as Kriska's hand itched to grab Roma. This guy was dangerous. Maybe not physically—although he might be that, too—but even touching him could get the Conclave involved. She shouldn't engage with him—and yet she did it anyway.

He shrugged. "Not as good as my sister. Raven's her gun."

"Got a range percentile?" She was 99.9 percentile at Mariks, the nearest shooting range to here—which just meant that she was the top shot of everyone who'd ever shot there. Not surprising, given that she almost always worked out with Roma. The better she knew a gun, the better they worked together. Roma had been hers since her mother had decided that her six year old daughter needed to be able to defend herself from the Duanti Crime Family's unsavory business associates. Roma didn't miss.

Even shooting without Roma, Kriska hit what she aimed at. It wasn't just a point of pride; that fact formed the foundation of her life.

John thought for a moment, then nodded slowly. "Ninety-six."

Not bad. At the civilian place where she shot, it would be about average for a Hunter. At any range which catered to Hunters, it would make him one of the best shots in the galaxy. Somehow,

Kriska knew that John didn't just shoot at a hobby place for bored citizens, though. "Where?"

His eyes hardened, and he fixed his eyes at a point far away, behind her head. "My guild."

Well, that reaction was telling. He didn't want to talk about the place that had ripped the patch off his jacket shoulder. No kidding.

"Didn't leave on the best of terms, huh?"

He nodded.

"And I assume your other stats would be just as impressive if I could actually see them?"

He nodded again. "Is that enough to convince you to team up with me?"

If he was that good, and his guild had still canned him, then he was either fired for misconduct—and he didn't give off that abusive sort of aura—or the Conclave had asked them to can him.

"Not interested."

She was already in too much trouble with Mother Dearest. She couldn't get involved with the Conclave while dodging the Duanti Crime Family.

John's eyebrows narrowed slightly. The muscles around his neck flexed, a sign of tension even most Hunters wouldn't have been able to see. His voice was quiet, almost a whisper. "You'd get to use Raven."

Kriska stopped again. Behind closed eyes, the golden outline of that gun called to her.

This was a stupid reason to take the job. She should just walk away.

And what if Mother Dearest had already uncovered all her hidden caches of weapons? What if someone was following her, even now?

Wouldn't a few days on a random job help break her pattern enough that it would be harder for Mother Dearest to track her?

"What kind of job? What location? And what's the payout?"

John held up a finger. "Execution job posted by an anonymous Galactic guild." Another finger. "Here in the Establishment." A third finger. "Payout is two K for retrieval, eight K for elimination with picture proof, and ten K with physical proof. Payment will

## DEATH WEAVER

be delivered to whatever account is linked to your job board or in chits for easy transfer off world.” John’s voice didn’t waver and neither did his eyes, like he could already see the bullet piercing his target. There was no way she could walk away from that kind of money, and he knew it.

Kriska’s eyes bulged. Ten K? “Is that the payout for the whole job, or just my cut?” She hadn’t seen that much offered for a job since they finally figured out Rockchester was the one that had set off The Nuke—the one that had cracked the planet and killed the billions of people that hadn’t fit into fallout shelters. Half of that would buy a ticket to Mars, and off this radioactive, ash filled mess that was Earth, with enough left over to pay Hunter dues for three years.

“Just yours after a fifty-fifty split.”

“Someone really wants this guy dead.”

Forget going back to the Patronage, she could rebuild her arsenal somewhere nice. She could finally get off-world, where Mother Dearest couldn’t touch her. Blue skies, clear air, freedom at last.

John’s eyes only hardened. “He helped kill some important people.”

“How many people are on this team you want me to join? Are they all Lone Wolves, or are you trying to trick me into carrying Guild Monkey dead weight?” She didn’t work with teams. Not since Gramps—and he’d abandoned her. Working with a bunch of people used to others taking up the slack when they screwed up would be a recipe for disaster.

“Guild Monkeys?” John’s eyebrows rose, and there was something like amusement in his eyes.

“You used to be one. You didn’t call in any of your old buddies for this team-up, did you?”

John shook his head. “I can handle all the infiltration by myself and run what technology we’ll require. All I need is someone who can make an impossible shot through an eternacrete wall. The team is just us.”

Two people. That much money. Kriska lifted her chin. No job was this good. There had to be a catch. “I don’t do kids, only—”

“Murderers. I know. I’ve analyzed your file. This guy fits your profile exactly.”

“Then what’s the catch?” Kriska asked.

John frowned. “I did mention the impossible shot through a brick wall, right?”

Kriska snorted. “No shot is impossible, just like no job is perfect. You aren’t telling me something. Who is the target?”

“Are you in?”

“I don’t like teams.”

“The job will take eight hours, plus two hours of planning. We get in, we get out, you never have to see me again. In fact, the Establishment makes it illegal for us to work together outside a guild until at least six months have passed. Even a loner like you can handle ten hours of trust.” Then he lifted an eyebrow. “Unless you don’t think you can make the shot?”

“I can make the shot.”

He shrugged. “Then what’s stopping you?”

Kriska closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She still couldn’t see him with her Sight. Her fingers were trembling for some reason.

She hadn’t worked on a job with a team—even one she only had to work with for ten hours—since Gramps. Was that why committing to this felt like the first step off a cliff?

John wasn’t Gramps.

She opened her eyes and curled her fingers into fists. “I’m in.” She could work for a year—she *had* worked for a year—and not come anywhere near the price of a ticket off this war torn dump and away from her mother. “Where do I sign?”

John nodded slowly, his eyes taking a tour of the building around them. “First, I’ve got a question. Who’s after you?”

Kriska surprised herself with a laugh. “Not to sound like a copycat, but you’re not the only one with family problems.”

“Your family lit your apartment on fire?”

Somehow, Kriska got the impression that this wasn’t the answer John had been looking for.

Kriska’s fingers tightened further in their fists. She pried them open and crossed her arms. “If you don’t want me and my family issues on your job, I can go back to the job boards and grab

## DEATH WEAVER

something else. Eight K is nice, but I'm a Tier I Hunter. I can make plenty by myself." Part of her wanted him to back out of the deal—to take his irradiated bounty and go bother someone else so she could get on with figuring out how to dodge her mother without bringing the Conclave into it. Then she could wash her hands of the whole thing, not to mention this irrational compulsion bringing her closer and closer to Raven.

If he backed out, then it wouldn't be her fault. Everything would end neatly. He didn't want her baggage, she didn't want his baggage. They could part friends and never think of each other again.

Then the blasted man actually found a smile.

That wasn't the face of someone about to tell her no and solve all her problems.

"The job is here in the Establishment. That won't be a problem for you, will it? No outstanding warrants for arson? The person targeting you won't get in the way of the job?"

Above them, the airship triggered its horn. "All civilians will clear the area. Fire containment begins in thirty seconds. Repeat. All civilians will clear the area."

Apparently, the fire control team had decided it would be faster and safer for everyone to just fill the block with foam than continue to deal with a fire set in the middle of her armory.

Kriska grinned. "I'm not the pyromaniac in the family. Isn't that right, Roma?"

The gun pulsed in agreement.

"Good." John held out his tablet again. This time, it had a job screen on it.

Team Fitzgerald-Duanti. Underneath that heading were the details of the job. The payout matched what he said. The job sponsor was listed as *Galactic Guild, anonymous*. The target was listed as *in-person briefing*. Job length was 24 hours.

Kriska pressed her thumb to the sensor to seal the deal.

John pulled the tablet back. "Good. Now let's find a secure place for you to get to know the job and Raven—you'll need her to make that shot."

"I've got an open tab at Mariks," Kriska offered.

All shooting ranges had a conference room and at least limited security to ensure that any Hunter planning sessions didn't get spied on or interrupted. Mariks wasn't particularly high quality, but it would do.

John arched his eyebrows. "No need. I've had a room reserved at Athena's Target Club since this morning."

Kriska ran fingers through her hair and tugged on a few chin-length strands, just to make sure she wasn't dreaming. Athena's was the premiere gun club on this side of the active volcano range which formed the prime meridian. Of course he already had a room there.

How could he even afford something like that? She'd have to mortgage her arsenal just for half an hour of range time, there.

John paused. "Oh, unless you have a place you'd prefer. Maybe a safe house?"

"Oh yeah," Kriska said, and didn't bother to hide the sarcasm. "I actually have a whole cloud palace to myself, ammunition in every corner, and assault rifles galore. One of them's even painted like a rainbow. You'd really like her."

He laughed and started down the street, leaving her to follow.

# CHAPTER TWO

Athena's was insane. It had real wood flooring covered by rugs that sure weren't plastic. The mirrors which lined the side of each lane weren't that spray-on coating everybody else had to use. Nope. Glass. In a shooting lane. In a private suite of shooting lanes, actually, with security guys outside the door—Hunters, not civilians in security uniforms—and electronic sweeps for bugs every fifteen minutes.

The ammunition table in back wasn't plastic, either. Real wood. And the mat where people stood to shoot certainly wasn't a foam composite. It was wool—or close enough Kriska couldn't tell the difference. Sheep had died out about twenty years before the last forests had set themselves on fire and gone out in a blaze of glory. Ninety percent of this stuff had to be imported from Mars or Venus!

But John walked through the doors, cool as a non-radioactive cucumber, and spoke a few soft words to the person at the gun counter. He pressed his thumb to a biometric scanner, and then they were both inside, staring at the most expensive shooting range Kriska had ever seen in her life.

When Kriska whirled on him, she found that John was studying their surroundings almost as intently as she had been. "I suppose it is a little different, isn't it?" he said.

"Who the split are you?"

He blinked. "I told you. My name is John."

"No Earth Hunter can afford this place. And what's the deal with your family problems? And what guild fired you? And how the split are you a Tier I Hunter with that kind of a record?"

His eyes frosted over. He folded his arms. “You first. Family problems can get intense, but they don’t usually involve burning down a block of apartments just to get to one person.”

“No, no. You asked me to do this job with you, not the other way around. If you’re secretly with some sort of Dark guild, then I’m out of here.”

John went rigid, and Kriska could actually see the faintest hint of pale yellow coming from him when she closed her eyes. He took one big breath and the yellow faded. He dropped into an upholstered chair along the back wall and started rubbing his temples.

“I’m not with a Dark guild. The guy we’re Hunting is affiliated with one called Death’s Companion, although he is not a Hunter, and they aren’t based on Earth. He’s here on vacation, and he’ll be leaving soon. We have to get him while he’s here because I can’t follow him off Earth.”

Kriska looked around, but all the security Hunters were on the other side of the glass door, and there was no sound leak from the other side or any of the shooting lanes she could see, which meant it was soundproofed. She pressed her lips together, turned away from the camera in the upper corner of the room, and stared John down. “That has nothing to do with your guild.”

“I left. That’s all you need to know.”

Kriska snorted. “You think running Lone Wolf is all fun and games, Mr. Guild Monkey. You’re in for a surprise.” It didn’t matter how good of a Hunter he was. Give him a week, and he would be broke, out living on the street, and very soon after that he would either be in prison or dead. People like him were always used to having someone else watching their back, so they missed important things. On the bright side, if he was dead, then she could take Raven and hawk his other gun for enough to at least get back to the Patronage. While he was still alive, trading equipment with another Hunter on a permanent basis would get her name on a bounty.

“I know I can’t do this bounty by myself.” The exhaustion was evident in his voice. “That’s why I need you. You’re so violent that I can’t see you with my Second Sight, which means you won’t have any problem making good on the bounty. I’ll get you

## DEATH WEAVER

in there, I'll lend you Raven, and I'll keep anyone off your back. You aren't a team player? That's fine. I am."

Kriska frowned and closed her eyes. She examined the place where she knew he sat, scrutinizing the invisible black with every tool she had. After a while, she could see faint white-blue threads woven together in the place where he sat, giving him the faintest of outlines, the threads blending into the background of the fabric, threatening to turn invisible black once more. She caught a single glimpse, and then the headache cracked over her head like a bat. He was so peaceful, so devoid of conflict, that she couldn't see the threads of his aura with her Sight.

"Looking at peace seems to be just as hard for you as looking at anger is for me," John said. "Aren't we a pitiful pair?"

Kriska gave him a hard look. "I didn't tell you a thing about my Sight."

"It's not hard to tell. You're made up of angry threads, and you can't seem to see me just like I can't seem to see you. Our Sights are similar and yet opposite. I see peace and fear. You see violence and death. Regardless, it's the Fabric of Life. If you can avoid becoming a homicidal maniac, I think we'll make a good team."

Kriska clenched her teeth. "We aren't a team. We're working together for one job, and then we're going our own ways. I need money. You need this guy dead. Once he's gone, believe that I will feel no remorse if your name comes up on my Bounty board."

John laughed. "Somehow I thought you would say something like that."

A bench large enough for four sat at an angle to the gun table. Kriska made her way over to it, moving slowly. She set Roma down on the table and started to run through the calming motions of making sure she was ready to fire, then checking the ammunition box that had already been waiting for them in the room. John's eyes followed her every move, like she was the answer to an unasked question.

Finally, "I told you about my guild."

Kriska started changing out the hollow-points in her clip for the plinking ammo—the high grade stuff, not the dirty bullets Roma hated. "You didn't tell me why you left, only that you did."

“Then maybe you could tell me who was behind burning down the block back there, and we’ll be even.”

Kriska closed her eyes, feeling the ever present anger surge up, making her blood hot. “That was Mother Dearest’s doing. She doesn’t let go of things easily.”

Roma’s metal heated with her rage, throbbing in agreement.

John’s eyes went wide. “Your mother is trying to kill you?”

One word. Ice cold. “Yes.” It was the stony truth, and she didn’t need him prying into it.

John just waited, patient as the grave.

Kriska slammed the magazine back into Roma a little harder than necessary. He wanted more? Fine. She went for flippant. “Oh, my family is complicated—” And homicidal. And tied to violence even more thoroughly than Kriska was. There was so much she wanted to say, and yet she clenched her teeth. “—but they aren’t going to kill me that easily.”

John shook his head when she refused to continue. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have pressed.”

“You’re right,” Kriska said gruffly. “You shouldn’t have. Now let’s get shooting.”

John handed Raven over without a word. When they’d first entered, John had registered Raven as his gun and then registered a temporary range loan to her—which he could only do because they were officially a Hunting team for the next 24 hours. Then, he took his stance one lane over and left her to put Raven through her paces.

A few minutes later, John hadn’t missed a shot with his unnamed gun.

Kriska’s groupings were neater—she stacked bullets as easily as breathing. Raven was warm in her hands, and comforting. Gold overlaid the usual red of her thoughts, the same way Roma’s gold overlaid the web of violence when Kriska was shooting, except Raven’s aura was stronger. The gold radiated outward along the red threads and pulsed every time Kriska let out a shot.

She opened her eyes for a moment to study the groupings. Everything went exactly where she’d wanted it to go.

Content with the accuracy for now, Kriska closed her eyes to really study the images from her Second Sight. She’d never seen a

## DEATH WEAVER

weapon that started out this gold. Roma had been almost normal when Kriska's mother had begun teaching Kriska to shoot, but the more Kriska had worked with her, the more she'd gained that golden sheen. So, who had worked with Raven?

There was a sense—fainter than Kriska ever got from Roma—of a grin coming from Raven as Kriska pulled the trigger three times in quick succession. That sense was followed by the echo of an image. There was a switch on the side of the weapon.

Raven wanted her to flip the switch?

Kriska opened her eyes, located the switch, and flipped it with a grin on her face.

“Wonder what this does?” Kriska called.

John paled by a shade as he looked over at her. “Um, Kriska? Maybe that's not such a good ide—”

She pulled the trigger, and bullets spat from Raven one after the other, recoil heavy into Kriska's shoulder.

Raven was also a machine gun? Could this day get any better?

Raven was grinning along those gold lines she projected, and Kriska refocused on the bullets and the target. Automatic or not, she could make every single bullet go where she wanted if she could just listen to Raven and respond accordingly.

Far too soon, the magazine was empty. When Kriska opened her eyes, John was staring at her, eyes wide.

“I never thought I'd find someone who could outshoot my sister, but I think you may have even outdone her with her best gun.”

Kriska looked at her target, set at her standard distance of 300 meters, and noted the few stray bullet holes from the transition to automatic. She could have bent those to line up with everything else if she'd used her Sight, but it wasn't worth the headache. Now that she knew what Raven was capable of, she wouldn't need her Sight to keep the bullets on target.

After that, there was one neat hole, just a little larger than the diameter of a single bullet. It was packed with flattened metal—the result of an entire clip being stacked on top of one another.

John's target was set at a ridiculous distance, the same as Kriska's. Any typical Hunter would be lucky to keep half the bullets on target. Any civilian would be lucky to hit the thing once. John had made two nice little groupings, maybe an inch

in diameter. He was more than a decent shot. Stacked bullets, though? Not quite.

“You’re almost a good enough shot to be a real Wolf,” Kriska said.

John shrugged. “What can I say? I’m a tad out of practice.”

“And you were a Guild Monkey.” She took another shot, this time aimed to ricochet off an eternacrete block in the ceiling. Lead hit dead center, just like always.

John’s lips twisted into a sort of smile, but he kept sneaking side looks at her as if to ask what he’d gotten himself into.

Kriska only grinned. She’d been asking herself that since the moment he’d swung through the window, but Raven had already made all that worth it. It didn’t matter what the job was, she’d do it with a grin the whole way.

When she’d put several clips through Raven, John called a halt and led the way up to Athena’s conference room. There were two steaming cups of coffee on the table, next to an array of snacks and a fruit bowl topped with currants.

As Kriska settled herself behind one of the coffee cups, John put building schematics up on the screen. “Comfortable enough with Raven to storm a castle?”

He wasn’t kidding. The house wasn’t just a mansion. It was surrounded on all sides with eternacrete walls, towers for security, with a second set of walls around the main building. The target was inside both sets of walls, and there were probably armed guards to boot. If Kriska and John had been civilians, police, or mercs, this job would have been impossible, but they weren’t. Most decent Hunters could scramble a wall like that in their sleep, and the best could jump it straight out. Kriska looked over the schematics again, and her grin widened. She might need to find a foothold halfway up, but that jump wasn’t going to be too bad.

But back to his question. “Not yet.”

John frowned. “You tore that target up pretty good.”

“I could have torn that target up with any old gun off the street. If I don’t build a rapport with Raven, though, she might misunderstand the goal and miss or jam when I need her the most.”

## DEATH WEAVER

Kriska expected him to argue, but he only nodded. “Fine. Take another hour or two at the range, but remember that this guy isn’t going to stay in one place for very long. We’ve already started the job clock.”

Kriska shrugged, then looked down at Raven on the table. She was radiating a dog-like happiness, tongue lolling to one side, eyes bright, ears pricked forward. “You think we can be friends?” Kriska asked.

“What does friends have to do with it?” John asked.

Kriska glared at him. “Quiet, I’m working.”

The gold around Raven’s red outline brightened, and Kriska got the sense, more definite than before, of an assent.

“Great! This partnership is a tad new, so you’ll have to be patient with me too until we work out all our kinks.”

Another flash of assent.

Kriska pulled Roma from her holster and set her next to Raven. “You two think you can work together?”

Roma didn’t have a problem, but Kriska knew she wouldn’t. She watched Raven with a critical eye to see if there were any hidden feelings, darkening of certain parts of her pattern, things like that. Nothing. If anything, she seemed as happy to work with Roma as she was to work with Kriska.

Such a well-tempered gun. Kriska had to wonder, for a moment, just who John’s sister was to have had such a wonderful friend by her side, and why she’d given Raven up.

Raven darkened just a bit—not a jealous type of darkening, but a sad kind. John’s sister had been sad, with flashes of anger. Raven couldn’t stand to watch, so she’d hitched a ride with the blue-green one.

Kriska looked up at John. He would be the blue-green one.

She wanted to ask what had happened, but the question got stuck in her throat. It wasn’t any of her business. They weren’t partners, they were just doing this one job together, and then they would part ways.

“Well, then. Now that’s settled, I think I’m ready to go.”

John’s eyes were a bit wide. “Already? I thought you had to build trust. That takes time, right?”

Kriska stroked Raven's casing absently. "Of course. And maybe with your friend there, it would have taken a tad longer." She nodded her head toward Raven's non-golden twin John had slung over his shoulder. "Raven and I had a conversation, though, and I think we'll suit each other just fine."

There was a moment where John was probably trying to decide whether Kriska was entirely sane, but he came down on the side of it *probably doesn't matter*.

"Right," he finally said, and pulled something up on his tablet.

Kriska looked down at the thin rectangle with interest as he slid it across the table. It held the picture of a man, roughly five and a half feet tall, with red-orange hair and a stupid, pudgy face. Kriska blinked at it, unsure just what about the face made it so...well, stupid was the right word. It almost looked like those eyes—too large for the face, and ever so slightly too far apart—needed round copper glasses to hide his vacant hazel eyes. She'd seen someone like that before. But who? His ghost floated just beyond her reach.

She pulled the tablet closer. The picture looked better once she put imaginary glasses on top of the sharp, but smallish nose. Take out the solid gold watch on one wrist, replace the tuxedo with a red polo shirt and slacks, put a tablet in his hand, and the vacant look was familiar.

*Jimmy Comhen.*

The name was written in bold, white letters against the black background beneath the picture, above the flashing red *execute*.

She'd never seen that name before, but there was an echo in her mind. It was almost like—

Kriska screwed her eyes shut, not looking for the Fabric of Life this time, but a memory that was buzzing around her head. Where had she seen this person before?

Over ten years ago. She'd been a small child, too strong to hide her new Hunter abilities from Mother Dearest for long.

She sat behind an array of security monitors watching one of Mother's business deals. There was no sound—not for little Kriska, although it could be enabled when needed—but the picture was sharp as crystal. Mother Dearest with her ironed black hair, sitting across the table from a man in an unassuming green

## DEATH WEAVER

polo shirt. Unassuming if one didn't know what the three interlocking triangles embroidered on the collar meant.

The man had gestured to the young adult standing against the wall behind him: glasses over a vacant expression, red polo shirt, tablet in his hand.

*Jimmy*, the man had said. *My aide*.

The Comhens worked in smuggling. Small time, Earth-only smuggling. More than that, Kriska had never been able to uncover. The important part was that they worked with—worked for—Mother Dearest.

Kriska's eyes snapped open, and she stared at the photograph. She had seen him before, over ten years ago. He'd been a shadow in the background, the unimportant nobody brought in by one of Mother Dearest's associates. And when Mother'd had his boss shot after he'd thrown Kriska halfway across the library, Mother had shoved her dead business associate's bloody ring into the assistant's—*Jimmy's*—hand and told him to *get out*.

There, in the image John showed her, on Jimmy's finger, was a ring with three interlocking triangles. The same ring. It lacked the red tint it had acquired in memory. Less blood. Same ring.

Not all crime families were the same, but this one looked like it followed the basic rules. Family name doesn't change just because the boss and all their relatives are dead. Next boss takes the family name.

*Jimmy Comhen*.

"Kriska?" John's voice was hesitant.

Roma was in her hand. Kriska blinked at her friend, who's aura had brightened with concern. When had she unholstered Roma? Or had Roma just jumped into her hand?

"I'm alright," Kriska whispered to Roma. "That was just a bad day, is all."

Roma dimmed past her resting tone to a muted red. Pouting.

Kriska thought back to that day, only a few hours after she'd been assaulted by Jimmy's boss, Mother Dearest had shown Kriska to the shooting range in the Northeast corner of the house and given her a gift. That was the day she'd met Roma.

"Not the whole day," Kriska said, as she realized why Roma had taken a pet. "Just—"

Mother hadn't killed Jimmy's boss in front of Kriska. She hadn't been the greatest mother, but even she knew better than that. She'd told Security to take care of it, while she'd held Kriska in her lap. Mother had no idea that shock hadn't given way to tears until Kriska watched a Monster tear Jimmy's boss's soul from his body.

Being thrown across the library, she could handle. Yet another death? That was too much for any child.

Roma's aura warmed again, a comforting hue with gold displayed more prominently than red. Kriska brought Roma to her chest in a hug.

"Kriska, what are you doing?" John's voice had an edge to it this time.

Kriska shook her head to clear the memories and looked down at the picture again. "Jimmy Comhen. An associate of the Duanti crime family, and someone I should have killed a long time ago."

John arched his eyebrows. "Duanti *crime family*?"

Kriska couldn't even fake a smile. "I told you that I had family issues."

"Clearly." He took a deep breath. "Is this going to be a problem?"

Going after her mother's business associates was a hobby. The fact that he had such a big bounty on his head was only a bonus. This one, she would do for free.

"Not if he's dead by the end of the day."

"Well then," he said finally. "Let's come up with a plan."

The first part was easy. Jump the wall, then rooftop run to the second, jump it, and set up a perch. John would use some sort of technowizardry to figure out exactly where the target was, then he would relay that info to Kriska over the comms system, and Kriska would execute him from afar. John would grab the evidence, and they would be out of there before the guards could get excited.

Unfortunately, targets never cooperated with the plan.

# CHAPTER THREE

They made it over the first wall just fine, but the layout of buildings inside that first wall was nothing like the schematic said. Every other building had been demolished and, while Kriska thought she could make the jumps from roof to roof, John wasn't as sure.

It was too early for them to split. They needed to clear at least the second wall, just in case somebody needed a boost, so they crept along the wide open walkways, lit by colored lamps floating in helium bags.

Both wore masks—Kriska with ease, while John checked his every so often. The atmosphere here was cleaner than in town, but everywhere on the planet had at least a trace of helium, carbon monoxide, ammonia gas, ozone, or ash in it. Plus, breathing with an infusion of canned air meant she didn't have to worry quite as much about gases pumped into the atmosphere to catch unwary visitors. In her time as a Bounty Hunter, Kriska had seen all sorts of gaseous lair-security systems. It could be anything from laughing gas, to neurotoxin. The mask stayed on.

Kriska moved with one eye open and one eye closed, watching yellow-orange figures move around them. There were two sets of two guards each close enough to be a worry—one on the opposite side of the building they were crouched next to, and one two streets behind, walking back toward the gate.

The pair on the other side of the building stopped to talk, and Kriska motioned for John to follow her. They ghosted past the intersection while the guards were facing the other way.

When they were far enough away from all the guards that Kriska was sure a Hunter whisper wouldn't be heard, even by another Hunter, she turned to John.

Her voice was barely a breath—more lip-reading and subvocalization than anything else—but this was just another piece in the Hunter skillset Gramps had given her. “Guards are clear until the wall—assuming the wall is where you said it would be.”

Visually, nothing loomed on the horizon, but an image disruptor could easily hide something with such a regular shape. Kriska certainly couldn't sense it. Guards and mercs carrying weapons were one thing, but cold hard stone was something else entirely—unless it was being hucked at someone's head. Then, she could probably sense it.

“Any guards near the wall? Or where the schematic said the wall would be?” John's whisper was almost identical to the one Gramps had taught her, which was great. Some Hunters had such thick accents that she could hardly tell what they were saying.

Kriska closed her eyes and scanned the area. There was a cluster of colors (mostly yellow, but with some orange and angry red) around where John thought the center of the compound would be. Before that, there were isolated pairs of red and orange, but nothing close, and nothing following a path that would tell her *there, that's where the second wall is!*

“Not that I can find.”

“No civilians in the compound,” John said.

Kriska opened her eyes to stare at him. That's right. His ability to see peace and fear would be perfect for spotting civilians. Wouldn't he be better suited to life as a rescue Hunter of some kind? Disaster relief or something? Saving people in Chicago from tidal waves every time there was an earthquake?

He shrugged. “It's a useful skill—especially when I bet you can't see civilians. Am I right?”

Kriska frowned. She could see normal people walking around the street most of the time because everyone got frustrated and she could see that frustration. But anyone who was calm, or especially scared, vanished in a shower of blue sparks. The only ones whose violence tended to outweigh their fear were combatants.

“Let's just go already.”

They moved down the lane at a Hunter's easy lope, careful about the sound of footsteps, and then stopped.

## DEATH WEAVER

“Two guards on the other side of whatever this is,” Kriska said. In front of them were a bunch of buildings just like the ones they’d passed, and absolutely no people. The auras were close—one a light red, almost like a gun at rest, and the other a headsplitting yellow color—probably three feet away from Kriska. It was hard to tell when the only things she had to judge distance by was the depth of the blackness and the color of the auras that showed up.

“It’s close enough to the map,” John said.

“Then I guess this is goodbye.” Kriska grinned.

John shook his head. “Wait just a second. We’ve got to get over the wall without triggering any alarms first.”

“You worry about making the jump, and I’ll deal with the guards.”

Kriska looked up at the grey sky and almost wished they were in the middle of an ash storm. Heavier masks were required, but it would also short out a lot of the alarm tech. Circumnavigating people was so much easier than dealing with technology. Why couldn’t John have been a technopath? That sort of Sight would have been handy, right about now.

Kriska shrugged to herself. Wishes wouldn’t fix anything. Only people could do that.

She backed up a pace, then ran full Hunter tilt at the wall. Just a moment before she reached it, she crouched almost all the way to the ground, and leaped with explosive power. She could hear the *whap* of air hurtling away from her as she left the ground behind. Her vision started to darken just a bit as blood was forced away from her brain and pooled in her legs. It had been a while since she’d attempted a jump this high—perhaps she was out of practice.

She reached the apex of her jump, looked down, and saw the central compound stretched out before her. Boy, was the schematic wrong again. The central facility wasn’t another collection of buildings, but one big one, and there were a bunch of cars parked around back—nice cars, that didn’t go spilling helium everywhere as they drove, with sleek lines, glossy paint, and windows tinted so dark that they could kidnap someone without letting the person stopped next to them at the intersection see

a thing. There were purple stains in some of the cars—some of them had been implicated in death. Only the final tearing of the Fabric of Life, the triumph of the Monsters that hid behind the curtain, created that kind of stain.

Immediately below her, Kriska could see the two guards. They caught sight of her at the same time, but she was plummeting toward them far too quickly for them to do anything about it. She landed, folded, and rolled so close to the first one that he stumbled over her and went down. His aura had climbed to an alarmed orange. A whack to the back of the head, and he crumpled, leaving her with the guard that was already reaching for his gun.

The second guard's aura was the kind that strained the Fabric of Life wherever he was, full of tattered strings from too much killing done too quickly. His aura looked like her mother's.

There was only one thing to do with someone whose aura looked like that.

Roma jumped to Kriska's hand with anticipation, and Kriska guided the bullet along golden lines. There was a suppressor attached to the muzzle for this job—Roma wasn't a big fan of it, but she knew the reason. The suppressor hissed, and the walking hole in life crumpled to the ground.

John landed behind her.

"What did you do that for?" His voice was fractionally louder than a Hunter whisper.

Kriska jerked a hand at him to *be quiet!* "He's a murderer. Probably takes joy in it, too."

John crouched down by the first guard, feeling for a pulse. "Are you going to shoot this one too?" Even she couldn't miss the hard, angry edge to his words.

Kriska blinked. Why would she do that? "He's fine."

"The bounty doesn't cover guards, Kriska. What you just did was murder!"

Kriska looked down at the guard at her feet. There was a neat little hole in his head, blood trailing from it into open eyes that hadn't had any warmth when they were alive, let alone now.

She remembered herself as a child, caught in the fingers of a man just like the one at her feet. There had been a weapon

## DEATH WEAVER

in his hand, then—or maybe his hands had been the weapon. The memory was blurred by terror and by the sight of life fraying around him. He would have killed her then, except for her mother. One murderer killing another. Was it good? No. Was it better than letting him kill hundreds of people?

Kriska found her voice hard, even in the whisper. “One death to save many more—say what you want, but I don’t care what is or is not lawful. That execution was justified.”

“Execution? Kriska, you just killed someone. If the Conclave finds out—” John’s face was pale, and his eyes were stuck to the corpse at Kriska’s feet.

“You can’t see what I see, John. He deserved it just as much, or perhaps more, than our target does.” Kriska glanced around again, checking for more guards that might have heard something and come their direction to check it out. Two guards, a couple hundred feet away. They strolled slowly, unalarmed. They’d be here in just under two minutes, though.

John was glaring at her, but even the anger she could see in his eyes didn’t increase his potential for violence. She still couldn’t see him with her Sight.

Kriska growled under her breath. It wasn’t like they were going to get caught! “The Conclave won’t ever know.”

He didn’t move. “That’s not the point.”

Kriska sighed. “Look, darling. Stop waiting for the mercs and start moving. You’d think you’d never killed a body before—” She stopped, then looked from him to the unconscious guard laying crumpled on the red-streaked white of the bloodstained eternacrete. “Have you ever killed anyone before?”

He shook his head.

Somehow, with his aura—the one she couldn’t see, that was—it wasn’t too surprising. “No wonder you were looking for a Lone Wolf to do your dirty work.”

If he was that opposed to execution jobs, then why had he taken this one? Why not let some other, random Bounty Hunter do it?

John stared at her as she grabbed the dead body and dragged it out of the way. There wasn’t really much she could do about the bloodstains.

When she returned for the unconscious one, John was looking down at the blood drying on the eternacrete. The other merc was gone. John must have gotten over himself enough to hide him. Good. No one should have to wake up both with a headache and to the fact that their duty-partner was dead. Kriska was callous, but she wasn't cruel.

John was looking a little better. There was still accusation in those eyes and, for some reason, it made Kriska shrink a little bit inside.

She clenched her teeth and drew herself up, eyes flashing. He had no right to judge her. He had no idea what it was like. "Darling, I didn't have a pampered childhood. I've seen what people like that do to the people they encounter. Am I happy with murder? No. I had to watch Monsters claw their way from the other side of the Fabric of Life and steal that guard's soul, all because I shot him. But that was infinitely better than watching him do the same to the next ten people he came across."

He met her eyes, lips pressed into a line. "You might be alright with watching those Monsters tear a soul away from a body, but that's not something I crave."

A feeling like ice washed over her. "You can see it, too?"

John's eyes were dark. "Not the way you do." A pause—only a fraction of a second, but the moment felt interminable. "Maybe we shouldn't be doing this."

Kriska quirked an eyebrow. Second thoughts. Now? While they were in the middle of the compound? "We've already taken the bounty. We can't back out without paying a ten percent penalty fee. I don't know about you, but I don't have that kind of cash on me." Or anywhere else, really. She'd have been close before the apartment blew up, but now?

John's eyes focused on a point far away. His fingers curled into fists. "No." The words were uncharacteristically hard. "No, he can't get away with what he did. We're so close. We finish the job." John's jaw muscles worked like he wanted to say something else, but he only said, "you go on ahead."

Kriska shook her head. "Not without more details." The naked hate in his words twisted her stomach. This was personal for him. Gramps always said never to take jobs which were personal,

## DEATH WEAVER

and getting in bed with someone else who had taken a personal job was yet another recipe for disaster.

Except she'd already gotten in bed with him.

John stared at her, intransigence written on his face.

She grabbed him by the arm, jumped, and heaved. A moment later, both of them were on top of the roof of the nearest building, crouched low. She'd taken John's weight on the landing, muffling the sound of their feet hitting the rooftop. Below, the guards walked past, oblivious.

Kriska glared at John. "You didn't say anything about *what he did* when we were planning. Spill."

John looked like he was going to spit, but he didn't. "What does it matter?" Emotion made it hard to hear his Hunter whisper, but Kriska still caught the words.

"It matters because you *never* get emotionally involved in an execution job."

John snorted. "Like you said. We don't have the cash for a ten percent refund."

Kriska's hand on his arm tightened, vice-like. "I never said we were going to drop the gig—" although if she had the money, she would have, "—but you're obviously an emotional wreck. I need to know what your blind spots are so I can cover them—or we could both die."

This. This *right here* was why she always worked alone. Inevitably, she ended up covering for some idiot Guild Monkey's weaknesses.

John growled. "Fine. He killed my sister. Supplied the weapons for it, at least. Watched while she got shot. Fractured my family. Got me marooned on this irradiated planet. Now can we go?"

Kriska blinked. That was a lot to unpack. But she let go of his arm and nodded. "You're not going to go Maverik and try to kill him by yourself, are you?"

That was the biggest blind spot she could think of, anyway.

"No," he said, exasperation eclipsing anger. "That's why you're here."

"Good." That division of labor, she could work with.

With that, she left him to his job—at least he'd picked the one that left him less emotionally compromised—and leaped on top of the next building. John's newly acquired internal conflict put him even farther onto the not-gonna-touch-with-a-ten-foot-pole list, but it was too late. Best to do this job fast, then go galactic and get as far away from him and his family trauma as she could.

It didn't take long to find her sniper spot. Whatever idiot owned this place had put a bell tower in the center of the compound. Raven was loaded with steelshot, which would hardly be enough to actually take someone out after it had made its hole in the eternacrete, but Kriska could stack bullets, so the second shot would use the hole the first one had made. That wasn't an ability most Hunters had, which was probably why Jimmy Comhen felt safe enough to put something like that where she could see and target every single aura on the property. She started climbing—which was easy enough, except she couldn't leave any traces of her passing.

John's voice on the com. "It looks like the guards are out of position."

Lovely. "Is there an E-Sports game on?" Security types loved their games.

A snort from John. "We can hope. Otherwise, our information is even more wrong than we already knew it was."

Kriska finished the climb to the top, then looked down to survey her handiwork. She couldn't spot anything clinging to the hand-holds she'd used, and she'd been careful not to actually dig into the stone. She pulled Raven from her back and started setting up. "Find our target so we can get out of here." The guards being out of position tingled her spidey sense.

What she remembered of Jimmy Comhen wasn't much. He hadn't seemed particularly smart but, then, she had only seen a glimpse of his face. If he'd survived working with her mother for this long, then perhaps he was smarter than she gave him credit for. Perhaps something else was going on.

She waited in her sniper's perch, Raven laid out in front of her, in silence. It felt like an eternity, but her watch said it had only been two minutes.

## DEATH WEAVER

“I’m in the security room.” John’s voice was edged. “I’ll have a location for you in a moment.”

“Any sign of the missing guards?” Kriska asked.

“No.” The sound of an impact. An elbow being smashed into the side of a head, if she heard it right. “Only one guard in here, too.”

Kriska grit her teeth. This compound was supposed to be heavily guarded. One guard in the camera room *wasn’t* heavily guarded.

“Well, let me know if a pansy like you needs help taking out one guard,” she sniped. There were plenty of Bounty Hunters who didn’t kill, but it wasn’t nearly as efficient.

“He’ll wake up with a headache. Now, mind your own business,” John growled. Then, half to himself, “what I wouldn’t give for a trailing team of mercs.”

Kriska’s eyes widened. “Wait, you’re *actually* used to working with mercs?” When she’d said that before, it had definitely been sarcastic.

Lone Wolves and Earth-based Guild Monkeys didn’t work with mercs. The Earth guilds who did have mercs were limited to a contingent of ten or so. Ten mercenaries couldn’t do much, so most guilds didn’t bother. There were only three who did: all of them Galactic guilds who had only a token Hunter force on Earth.

“Twenty seconds East, second floor. What’s in that room?” John asked.

Kriska grinned and changed the topic back. “Are you a top three Hunter?”

“What?”

The room he’d indicated was crowded with figures who seemed to have orange as their resting aura—ready to raise a fist, but not quite ready to kill. Six auras that she could see, and plenty of time to take a shot on any one of them. They were arrayed like ducks trapped in an ash slide.

It wouldn’t take much to off the target. The job was as good as done. This was the best chance she would get to squeeze John for information. “Darkbane, SpecCon, or Warbane? Any of those ring a bell?”

There was a pause, and a mutter that might have been a swear, or might have been John dealing with another guard. “Do you have the room, or not?”

Kriska laughed. “That’s not even a question. There are six little criminals lined up in a row. Now, which guild?”

“What does it matter?”

Kriska shrugged. It didn’t really. Any one of the top three had enough Conclave oversight to make her skin crawl. But the question got under John’s skin. John, who had pulled her into an intensely personal bounty without telling her.

“Humor me,” Kriska said brightly.

“No. Our target is in the east corner. Let’s go, already!”

Kriska could see the aura backing away from some of the others. His body was outlined in red, so she could see his hands raised to either side as if to say *who, me? I’m not a threat*. His aura fluctuated between yellow with a flash of blue, and killing red, indecisive.

Any thought of playing *Guess the Guild* with John vanished as two of the other figures in the room went red and drew weapons.

If she wanted to make good on her bounty, she’d have to act quickly before whoever was in the room with Jimmy could take their shot.

“Uh, John, things just got dicey in there. Our target’s in trouble with some of his buddies.”

“Just take the shot.” John’s voice had an edge. Desperation. Revenge. He wanted Jimmy Comhen dead.

And, personal or not, that’s what they were being paid for.

Kriska pulled the trigger and watched as the first round punched through the armored eternacrete. The second round pierced Jimmy Comhen’s heart. She felt it as he fell to the ground, and his life seeped into the air. Violet Monster claws ripped through the Fabric of Life and tore his soul from his collapsed body. The Fabric of Life convulsed closed, shutting the Monster back out. As quickly as it had begun, the target was dead.

Kriska jumped to her feet.

“No, wait,” John said. “We can’t kill him.”

## DEATH WEAVER

Kriska blinked, shock warring with confusion. *Now he wanted to back out?* Just what was with this person? “Now you tell me? The target has been eliminated, John, you’re too late.”

There was stunned silence on the other side of the line. “Oh, Verdell’s gonna kill me.”

“Who’s Verdell?” Kriska’s tone dropped low. Dangerous.

Below the tower, there was a flash of golden light in her Sight. Now, what did that mean?

She slung Raven over her shoulder and prepared to make the jump down. Four stories—it was a neat little drop. Whatever complications John was busy figuring out, none of it changed the fact that she had to leave. Now. Before anyone figured out that the bell tower was a perfect sniper’s perch.

If Mother Dearest’s associates—several of whom were probably in the compound with Comhen’s corpse—found out that she was here, life would only get more complicated.

She dropped, rolled, and came to her feet in front of a woman who hadn’t been there two seconds ago.

Out-of-reason tall. Broad shouldered. Golden hair braided into a rope. Brown eyes. No weapons. Black Hunter jacket with the silver shield of Warbane on the shoulder.

“Verdell is my sister,” John said, his voice heavy.

The woman gave Kriska a nasty grin, and gold flashed in Kriska’s Sight. One moment, the woman was unarmed. The next, she leveled a rifle with the same golden aura as Raven at Kriska’s middle.

This woman was a Summoner.

“Kriska Duanti, you’re under arrest for aiding the Dark guild Death’s Companion and the Duanti Crime Family.”

Kriska’s eyes widened. “The who-now?” Duanti Crime Family was plain enough, but where did she get her theory about a dark guild?

The com in her ear fizzled. Kriska snatched it out of her ear before it could actually catch flames. A voice, flattened by a speaker, issued from the woman’s direction. “Communications are dealt with.”

The woman’s expression gained a bit of annoyance. “You’d better not be on-site, Eric.”

The speaker-flattened voice said, “well, duh. I’m not stupid. But Carol’s group is coming to back you up.”

Those were either mercenaries—Warbane was one of the few guilds with even a handful of those—or another group of Hunters. Either would be disastrous. Warbane wasn’t playing around. If she didn’t get out of there fast, she wouldn’t survive this encounter—not with her freedom intact, anyway, and possibly not with her life.

Kriska dodged sideways, trying to follow her initial escape plan.

The Warbane woman moved like a blur, as fast as Gramps, and just as deadly. Kriska spun away from the growing purple spot where a Monster was trying to get through. A bullet whizzed over her head, and the Warbane woman still closed.

Fingers bled red—crippling, not killing—and Kriska intercepted the spear-like hand with her wrist, redirecting the blow to the side, even as she responded with an elbow.

The Warbane woman wasn’t there.

A golden knife appeared in a shower of sparks, and the world gained an imperceptibly more purple tint. Kriska focused as the knife came in, spun, and opened the distance with a heel to the woman’s midsection.

For a wonder, the strike actually hit. Most would have gone flying. Kriska hit hard, fast, and she was not pulling anything. That strike should have given Kriska the distance she needed to escape from this disaster.

The woman bent her knees, leaned into the strike, and slid back maybe an inch.

Sweat trickled down Kriska’s neck. This woman was just as good as Gramps, and Kriska hadn’t trained with him in years. Perhaps once Kriska could have beaten her, but now? People like that didn’t hang around on street corners looking for other Bounty Hunters to fight. Kriska was out of practice, and that thought only made the adrenaline surge harder.

As though that was a cue, the echo of almost a dozen boots on tarmac echoed around her. A downward flick of the eyelid showed ten auras surrounding her, all armed like mercenaries.

Kriska’s jaw tightened. She scanned her Sight for a way out. Nowhere easy, but—*right there!*

## DEATH WEAVER

Kriska spun north, lunging toward the opening. The Warbane woman was faster. The weapon in her hand darkened, starting to flare purple. Kriska dove out of the bullet's way, rolled, came up, darted to the side.

The ring of mercenaries was closing fast. A flood of black mercenary uniforms, all marked as Warbane, surrounded her.

A dozen weapons with the promise of death imbued in their magazines. To move would be to die.

Kriska froze.

The golden-haired Warbane woman grinned. "Best to put down your weapons." Then her eyes focused on Raven, and her expression soured. "Now. Gently."

Kriska almost snorted. As though she would drop her friends to the ground.

Very, very slowly, she unslung Raven and lowered her to the ground. Roma followed suit.

"Back away from your weapons," the Warbane woman said. Better than kicking them away.

Kriska obeyed.

# CHAPTER FOUR

A fist slammed down on the table in front of her, but Kriska didn't so much as blink.

"You're lying to me. I can feel it in your emotions."

The man across the table had introduced himself as Councilman Thaddeus and, from what Kriska could tell, he was an empath. Or, as Gramps would have said, a Mind Weaver. A Mind Weaver absolutely convinced of his own moral rectitude.

That was the problem with that particular Sight; knowing what others felt inevitably led them to thinking they knew everything.

Kriska blinked once, slow and methodical. The threads bowed by the Councilman's weight were dyed an orange so dark it was an instant from red. A hair's breadth away from violence, and why? He was convinced that she was working for Mother Dearest.

He adjusted the light hanging from the ceiling by a single flimsy chain. It speared into her eyes—but Kriska was a Hunter. Intimidation tactics like that didn't do much.

The light bounced off the four eternacrete walls closing in around her and reflected off the metallic table. Other than that, it did nothing.

"Tell me again. Why were you in that tower?"

Kriska sighed. "I've explained it six or seven times already. I was on a legitimate bounty."

"A legitimate bounty offered by an unknown client."

Kriska blinked with exaggerated slowness. "Yes. The client was listed as private. What right do you have to drag me in here and yell at me like this? I'm a free Hunter. I haven't broken any laws."

Well, not any laws that they would care about. There was that one teensy tiny murder John had yelled at her about earlier, but

## DEATH WEAVER

that was—mostly—it. She certainly had never willingly cooperated with a Dark guild. In fact, she'd taken out bounty after bounty to kill them, to keep them from murdering innocents.

Thaddeus brought his nose closer to hers, staring her down with yellow-green eyes that glinted like a cat playing with its prey. "You had another motivation for taking this bounty, right?"

"You already know this," Kriska said.

Thaddeus just plowed on as if she hadn't spoken. "You make your money tying up the Duanti Crime family's loose ends. You didn't take that bounty because of some moral crusade, you did it for loyalty to your family."

Kriska gritted her teeth. The thought of working for Mother Dearest made her sick. "I have no loyalty to that woman or her organization."

"You do," Thaddeus snapped. "You're a Death Weaver—one who has been a pain our side for too long."

"What does my Sight have to do with anything?" Her mother had never known what her abilities were—she'd gone to great lengths to keep it that way.

"Everything!" The sudden shout would have made a civilian flinch, but Kriska had grown up with Mother Dearest. Shouting no longer made her cringe.

Confusion warred with anger. "You've got the wrong person." She'd said it three times already, but he wouldn't believe her. Her Sight was rare on Earth, but all Sights were rare on Earth. Gramps had always said that the Wall of Death was the closest Wall to their plane and, therefore, one of the more common Sights. The reason she hadn't met more Death Weavers was just because she was stuck on the most barren planet in the galaxy. While she'd never really understood the theory behind Sights, Gramps was rarely wrong. She tried again, straining to hold onto fraying calm. "I'm not the only Death Weaver in the galaxy."

"But you are the only one who is affiliated with Death's Companion. You're the only one who disrupted an operation to gain more information on Death's Companion. You're the only one running around tying up your gun-running family's loose ends."

Kriska slapped her hand down on the table. “Stop saying that! I *am not* tying up my mother’s loose ends.”

“Then what was that, earlier today?”

“A bounty!”

Thaddeus snorted with derision. “Let me tell you what that was. That was Warbane *extracting* Jimmy Comhen, protecting him from the Duanti Crime Family so that he could tell us everything he knew about Death’s Companion and where they got their illegal weapons. That was you *killing* him before we could get to him. That was Celeste Duanti’s way of keeping her gun-running operation secure, and you pulled the trigger!”

Kriska sat back, eyes wide. *That* was why the guards had been out of position. It all made sense. The lighter security on the cameras. The conflict in the inner room just before she took the shot. The Summoner showing up out of nowhere.

Her stomach twisted. Had her mother been in that room? Had more of her mother’s associates? Had they really been trying to kill Comhen before she took the shot?

The memory of red auras lighting up like a Christmas tree replayed in her memory. They hadn’t been killing purple. Not yet. So, her mother hadn’t been trying to kill him. But her mother didn’t like to just kill people. No, Mother Dearest took them back to the warehouse across from the street where Kriska grew up and beat them into a pulp to prove a point before she shot them. And with every strike, every slash, every drop of blood she spilled, the Monsters gathered in her victim’s shadow and slashed at the Fabric of Life until they could finally cut through and drag their victim’s soul from their body.

Kriska shivered, then looked back up at Thaddeus. “Perhaps *Mother Dearest*,” she stressed the sarcasm in that name, “was there, but I wasn’t working for her. I would never.”

Thaddeus tossed a tablet onto the table. Holographs spilled from it, lighting up the space between them with images of corpses. Vinnie Gestalt, Renold Demond, Caera Lisburg, Lina Verisbald—the pictures kept coming. All corpses she recognized. All people she’d killed. All names and faces she remembered from childhood. All deserving death.

## DEATH WEAVER

“Your bounty board says you killed all these people,” Thaddeus said softly. He padded around the table and leaned over her shoulder. “Did you?”

“I did.” Kriska’s voice didn’t waver. She remembered every one. They’d all been quick and clean. Nothing like what her mother did. “They were all legitimate bounties.”

“And,” Thaddeus purred, “they were all out of favor with your mother.”

Kriska took a long breath. “Prove it.”

The tablet flickered. One document. Caera Lisburg’s signature at the bottom. She had been about to testify in the Establishment about Mother Dearest’s activities.

Kriska shrugged. “That’s one instance. I’ve killed sixteen heads of sixteen different branches of the Duanti Crime Family’s associates.” That one person had been on her mother’s hit list wasn’t surprising. Like Comhen’s predecessor, Mother Dearest’s associates didn’t always live long.

Thaddeus flicked a finger toward the tablet. The hologram changed again. Jimmy Comhen.

Kriska didn’t grace that with a response. She only arched her eyebrows at Thaddeus.

He had to know, just as she did, that two out of sixteen was hardly significant. Crime had a lot of turnover, especially on Earth.

The intensity of his eyes boring into hers increased as the silence stretched taut.

Pressure built in Kriska’s brain. She ignored it.

Low and quiet, Thaddeus’s whisper broke the silence. “What will it take for you to admit what you did?”

Kriska shrugged. “I took a legitimate bounty.”

“You’re a Dark Hunter!”

The pressure in her brain built faster until she grabbed at her forehead, only to be stopped by the chains tying her to the table. Those eyes. Those smug, superior, terrible eyes drilled into her head.

Gramps had told her of powers like this. He’d also told her that the Conclave would come down like a hammer on any Mind Weaver who misused their powers like that. “Mindkilling is illegals—”

The pressure stopped. Thaddeus put his nose next to Kriska's cheek. "I am no mindkiller, you murderer. But if you continue to lie to me, I will dig every secret out of your brain. Every lie, every murder, every evasion of the law will be laid *bare*."

Kriska grew cold, and the dark walls closing in on her didn't help the feeling. Words spilled out of her mouth. A futile defense. "Empaths are tightly regulated by the Conclave. You can't do that without oversight." She didn't know a lot about Hunting off Earth, but Gramps had told her that much. The Conclave was very particular about what Second Sights like the councilman's was used for. Killing was strictly forbidden.

In her mind, she could see every execution she'd done without a bounty. Individually, the Conclave wouldn't care about any of them. They were all murderers—an unacceptable strain on the Fabric of Life. However, the only thing the Conclave hated more than criminals and murderers were uncontrolled Bounty Hunters. If the Conclave found out about her activities, then it wouldn't matter how pure her intentions were. They wouldn't care that the galaxy was better off without the people she'd killed, they would just see her misusing her abilities.

Bounty Hunters who could not be regulated were killed or imprisoned.

Thaddeus grabbed her hair in one hand, the short brown threads twisted around his fingers, and he jerked her head back, forcing her to meet his eyes again. "I don't need to have oversight to feel your surface emotions, and you are terrified by the thought of going before the Conclave. Why be terrified if you have nothing to hide?"

Kriska clenched her jaw and met his cold brown stare. "Everyone has something to hide. That doesn't mean I'm part of a Dark guild."

"You are the only daughter of Celeste Duanti and heir to the Duanti Crime Family. Isn't that right, Miss Duanti?"

Anger surged, and Kriska's hands jerked against the handcuffs that held her to the table. She tried to shake off the Councilman's iron grip on her head but struggling did nothing.

Thaddeus smiled.

## DEATH WEAVER

“Don’t call me that,” Kriska spat. “I rejected that name a long time ago.”

“And yet, it is still the name on your file.”

Kriska ground her teeth. “I was going to change it, but—” But Gramps wouldn’t tell her his last name, or even his first. She deflated a little, and her voice went soft. “I didn’t know what to change it to.”

When she had asked, he had just smiled that little grin of his and told her to keep the name. It would remind her of the path she hadn’t taken and lend her courage when she needed it most.

This wasn’t courage. This was a lead chain, and it was dragging her into the black depths of Earth’s irradiated oceans.

“Your mentor didn’t want you taking his last name. Is that it?”

“Get out of my head. That’s none of your business.” Kriska’s words were low and dull with the promise of pain. He could say she was a member of a Dark guild all he wanted, but Gramps was off limits! “When I found out what my mother was doing, I ran away from home and became a Bounty Hunter. If I’ve spent a disproportionate amount of time Hunting her associates, it’s because I want to destroy that filthy business!”

“You’re their pet Death Weaver. They would sacrifice a few pawns in order to make you seem more palatable. They want us to swallow you whole so you can kill us from the inside out. Well, that won’t happen. Not again. We don’t need Ozaki, we don’t need Malcom, and we *don’t need you!*”

Kriska’s lips curled into a snarl. “I don’t know who Ozaki and Malcom are, and I don’t care. I don’t want to be swallowed by anyone, I just want to go home.” To her burned out apartment, to her weapons caches, and to the Patronage. Forget the payday. Forget getting off the planet. She could play hide-and-seek with Mother Dearest if it came to that, but this Warbane idiocy had to end. She was done breathing canned air pumped into this eternacrete box.

He shook a finger at her. “You took down the three most powerful councilors of Warbane in one blow, and you think we’re going to make the same mistake again? You killed the guild’s darling, and we are coming for you.”

“I’ve never even met anyone from Warbane before.” Well, besides the ticked-off Hunter who had dragged her into this mess. “You’ve got the wrong person.”

Thaddeus smacked the table. “You’re a liar! Painted pretty to lure in the next generation of Warbane Hunters just like Ozaki seduced me. Your record is lily white, but I can see the violence in your heart. You’re a monster.”

The pressure started to build in her mind again. Kriska jerked against the chains that bound her to the table as Thaddeus’s aura brightened from orange to red and Monsters began to gather around his shadow, drawn by the meal he promised.

The pain echoed like a rusty nail driven into her brain. Kriska clenched her jaw and started to thrash, trying to break either the chains or his grip on her. His fingers tightened, closing toward a fist. Pinpricks of pain started in her scalp—drowned out by the rising agony in her head.

“You can’t—” Kriska gasped. “The Conclave will—”

“The Conclave didn’t care when I was falsely accused of working with my wife to disable Warbane. The Conclave only saw that I am a Mind Weaver—that I should have known she was a traitor—and lumped me in with that manipulative wench. If you had anything to do with it—anything at all, then I will find it!”

The pressure in her head increased. Rushing filled her ears as she tried to resist the councilman’s questing power. Her vision faded to grey. The spike he drove through her brain heated until it was red hot.

A hollow explosion echoed through her ears.

“Councilman Thaddeus! Stop!”

Even with her eyes closed, Kriska couldn’t see who the new voice belonged to. She fisted her hands and pulled at the chains that held her. The bar the chains were attached to bent, but it did not break. An inch of extra room didn’t stop the spike in her head from rooting deeper and deeper.

“She wouldn’t want this. What about Kieko? You can’t disobey the Conclave again, Councilman. You can’t!”

The temperature in the room cooled by ten degrees, and rage—not hers—stampeded through her brain.

## DEATH WEAVER

*You will not get away with this.* Thaddeus's promise was unmistakable in her mind, and it held an edge of death.

Kriska shivered.

The pressure stopped and Kriska's head lolled forward. She caught herself on her forearms before her head smashed into the table.

Cold hands worked at the cuffs around her wrist. Kriska closed her eyes. She could feel Councilman Thaddeus rigid as a statue behind her, his aura cooled back to orange. The person attached to the hands that freed her from the table, though—he was invisible.

"You should go." The voice was cold.

Slowly, reluctantly, Kriska could see the orange outline of Councilman Thaddeus retreat, leaving Kriska all alone in the room with the ghost she couldn't see.

"Oh relax, Kriska."

Kriska peeled her eyes open as she finally recognized the voice. John Fitzgerald held the handcuffs—reinforced, for work with Bounty Hunters—in one hand. The bar the handcuffs had been looped through was bent in the center, and one of the bolts on the side was starting to show some wear.

*If they want it to confine another Hunter, they will need to replace it.* That thought was only in passing as memory of the pain weighed her down.

John followed Kriska's gaze to the distorted metal bar that had held her to the table. He shrugged. "Sorry about the Councilman. He's a little intense."

John was dressed just like Kriska had seen him last, except the patch on his jacket was back. Warbane.

Well, she'd assumed that much when that Warbane woman had shown up to take her in.

Kriska opened her mouth and then closed it. Her head still held an echo of pain from Thaddeus's interrogation. Then anger flared, quick and hot. They'd agreed to one job, but he had dragged her along behind him, into whatever issues he had. "That was quick, Dearest. They didn't have you locked up in interrogation?" She didn't quite manage to leach the venom from her voice.

John frowned as he moved farther into the room. "No."

*They believed him.*

Kriska shrugged. The realization that he was one of them and she was an outsider should have made her angrier, but it didn't. She was a Lone Wolf. This was the life she'd chosen. Now she was going to go back to her life as a Lone Wolf, and this would all eventually be a funny story. *Remember that time when I took a stupid job with an angry Warbane Hunter and nearly got killed by an insane Mind Weaver.* She snorted. The story wasn't funny yet.

John searched her face, like he was looking for more of a reaction. When there wasn't one, he said, "I'm sorry for getting us into that mess."

This time, Kriska did glare at him. "Us? I didn't see you in here." She spread her arms to indicate the interrogation room.

John gave an awkward smile. "Yeah, sorry about that, too. In my defense, my mother did just read me the riot act, and I'm pretty sure I'm going to be stuck here until I'm thirty. Imagine it, will you? Ten more years on this radioactive rock? I've already been here for two."

Kriska glared harder.

His laughing tone died.

She'd been stuck on this radioactive rock her entire life, and now it was sixes whether she'd ever be able to get off of it.

"To be fair," John said more soberly, "I didn't know that your arsonist family was the Duanti Crime Family. If I had—" He shrugged.

"If I'd known you were a hereditary member of Warbane, I would have steered clear, too." Kriska couldn't hide the acid in her voice.

John winced.

Kriska looked back to the chains John held. "So, do you think I'm a Dark guild crony, John?"

"Your criminal mother blew up your house and your record is filled with the names of dead arms dealers and Dark Hunters. I might not be able to See you with my Sight, but I'm not stupid. Just because you're a Death Weaver doesn't make you evil."

"What about him?" Kriska pointed at the doorway through which the Mind Weaver had just left.

## DEATH WEAVER

John shook his head. “That’s Councilman Jere Thaddeus. Don’t expect him to be singing your praises anytime soon. He’s got his own issues. If I hadn’t stepped in, you would probably be on your way to our main operating base on the moon of Io for questioning before the Warbane Council and the Conclave.”

Kriska shuddered, remembering John’s fear after she’d executed the guard back at Jimmy Comhen’s compound.

John nodded knowingly. “I couldn’t persuade Councilman Thaddeus to release you. He’d already used his influence to report you to Earth authorities and get your job board locked.”

Kriska’s breath hissed in through her teeth. Locked job board; no jobs. No jobs; no money. More, any payments—like the one from the Comhen job—which hadn’t already gone through would be frozen until the investigation finished and her job board got unlocked.

Equal parts anger and fear mixed with the dregs of adrenaline to make her shake. She met John’s eyes. “Without my job board, I have *nothing*. Please tell me you can get someone to unlock it.” If Mother Dearest had already gotten to her weapons caches, she would be penniless. No jobs. No weapons. Forget Mars and freedom, Mother Dearest would *find* her, and then she would learn exactly how Mother Dearest intended to make her follow the family traditions.

One ray of hope still stood. If John could keep her from getting shipped to Io, then maybe—

John shook his head. “Councilman Thaddeus won’t consent to that and only a full councilperson can withdraw the inquiry.”

So, there it was. The dream payment which would have gotten her out of her mother’s reach was hanging in limbo, which meant her only resources were in caches of equipment around the Establishment—caches Mother Dearest might’ve already found.

No job. No home. Hunted, with no way off the planet.

Her instincts had been right. Working with John had been a mistake.

Kriska squared her shoulders and turned to face John. Time to go. “Well, at least you kept me out of the Conclave’s hands. Thanks for that much.” Her tone was abrupt, and she knew it. She didn’t care. She was trapped with that lead weight wrapped

around her waist, and it was up to her to figure out her next steps. And she would, but first she needed to get *away* from this madhouse.

“Hold up,” John said. “I’m not done.”

Kriska tilted her head at him.

“You’re on the run and this leaves you with nothing. I couldn’t convince the Councilman to withdraw the inquiry, but I could convince him to give you a job.”

Kriska scoffed. “I don’t have a board. He can’t give me a job until his little investigation has run its course and found nothing.”

“Not on an individual board, no. But *every guild member* of Warbane draws a small stipend. We provide room and board, as well as weaponry and rounds from the armory.”

It took a moment to process. When he’d said every guild member, it sounded a lot like he was including her in that bucket. “You want me to be a Guild Monkey.” Her voice was flat.

John lifted his eyebrows. “I took the liberty of agreeing to the Councilman’s terms on your behalf.”

In other words, he didn’t just *want* her to be a Guild Monkey, he’d already signed the contract. She already was a member of Warbane.

Another voice butted in before Kriska could get over her initial shock.

“That’s not exactly what I remember happening.” The voice was familiar, and the orange aura was even more so. Verdell, the Hunter who had kidnapped her—the one with Summoner Sight. “My brother likes to put the best possible spin on things. Makes him great at convincing people.” She stepped through the doorway and leaned against the metal trim, her arms folded stand-offishly. “What actually happened is that he convinced the Councilman not to send you to the moon of Io on the condition that you stick around as a Warbane member assigned to Earth. That way, you aren’t loose causing issues while the investigation is ongoing. Councilman Thaddeus controls your guild board—which means you won’t be taking any extra jobs—and access to the shuttle craft, so you won’t be escaping off-planet. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, right? In essence, you

## DEATH WEAVER

either accept the job offer or you get shipped back to Io on the next shuttle.”

Kriska’s throat tightened. She could almost feel the weight of the chain wrapping around her midsection and drawing her toward the ground. “I’m not a Guild Monkey and I’m not a team player. Give me my job board back and let me go.”

Verdell examined her fingernails. “The Councilman isn’t going to go for that. Haven’t you wondered why he was in here yelling at you if we’d already made that deal on your behalf?”

Kriska grit her teeth. “Why?”

“Because I had to get on the com with my mother—Councilwoman Fitzgerald, to you—and get her to give an official directive. In other words, Councilman Thaddeus had to be brow-beaten into it by my mother, and because he managed to delay things until she gave the official order, he was able to get in here to do his worst until the hammer could come down from on high.”

In other words, this was the very best they could do.

Her jaw hurt from the tension between her teeth. She made herself relax. “I’m not a team player,” she said calmly. “I don’t like guilds, I don’t want to be part of a guild, and I don’t trust you guys to not stab me in the back the moment you get a better offer.”

There, the words were out in the air.

Verdell stiffened in offense, but John only looked at her with pity in his eyes. “It’s hard to get used to working with a team, but you’ll get there.”

“I don’t *want* to get there.” Kriska heard the embarrassing note of complaint in her voice and concealed a wince. She was eighteen years old—and that whine made her sound like the six-year-old Gramps had found wandering the streets of her old home.

John put a hand on Kriska’s shoulder. “You worked well with me, earlier.”

“Plus,” Verdell added, “you don’t have a choice.”

Kriska wanted to fling John’s arm away and take that opportunity to slam her knuckles into the bridge of his nose, but she settled for shoving it away.

She crossed her arms in a mirror of Verdell's pose but couldn't think of anything else defiant to say without sounding like a petulant child.

In her mind's eye, she could still see the moment she realized Gramps had left. The pain hadn't dulled, even after all these years.

If she worked with teammates, they would inevitably betray her. Gramps had taught her that.

If she worked with teammates, they would trap her here where Mother Dearest would find her, and even if they didn't, this *wasn't* freedom. This wasn't Mars.

For one infinitesimal moment, she considered fighting. It would be easy, if only she would release her own inhibitions. Pull on the Fabric of Life. Thin the threads. Call the Monsters. John and Verdell would be dead, but she would have her freedom back.

Her gut twisted and she shoved that thought aside. Protecting the Fabric of Life came first. It always did.

And that fact trapped her just as surely as Warbane and the Conclave had.

John led her into a short building—he called it the barracks—and into a small room that was barely more than a bed with a wooden table and chair stuffed into one corner. There was just enough room between the wall and the bed to walk, and just enough room behind the chair for a slender Hunter to sit down.

“Great quarters,” Kriska said sarcastically.

John shrugged. “At least it's not plastic.”

Which was true. Kriska frowned. Where had they even gotten the wood? “They have forests on Mars now, don't they? And the sky is blue like Earth's used to be?”

John nodded. “If the sands weren't red, you would mistake it for pre-Split Earth.” He turned to leave. “I really do hope you get to see it one day, Kriska.”

And then he was gone, leaving her alone and unguarded in the middle of Warbane's compound.

Well, if she'd had any questions about whether or not John actually trusted her, she didn't have them anymore. If he thought

## DEATH WEAVER

she was a threat, there would at least be a guard at the door. But the absence of guards didn't help her feel any less trapped. No. It only highlighted the sheer unfairness of it all.

Rather than throwing something at the closed door, Kriska took a deep breath. All her thoughts were cluttered up in her head, spinning around in useless angry circles. She grabbed her hair and stifled a scream. How could John be so calm about this? He *knew* she wasn't a Dark Hunter. He knew she was innocent of everything they were accusing her of, and he still had that infuriating calm draped all around him, showing her around this place, giving her this room like she would be living here. It was like he'd shot his shot at convincing that paranoid, out-of-control councilor, and now this was it. She didn't want to live here. She didn't want to be a guild Hunter—not for Warbane, not for anyone. She wanted to jump over rooftops, get drunk and brawl in a Hunter bar, spend the afternoon icing bruises, then top it all off with a shooting session at whatever range was open in this irradiated Establishment after midnight. She wanted *freedom*.

Instead, she got Warbane.

Her grip tightened on her hair, and pain started in her scalp, triggering memories that added to the cacophony of thoughts. *Why wouldn't it all just be quiet!*

*"Kriska,"* Gramp's voice said in memory. *"Take a deep breath. Don't worry about the other things, just breathe."*

Standing there in one square foot of clear floor in her new prison, Kriska followed his instructions. In, out. In, out.

*"Good,"* the memory said. *"Now count. Seven in, eleven out. One...two..."*

Kriska obeyed until the cacophony of thoughts retreated and she lost herself in the memory. Gramp's kindly face looked at her with those silver eyes.

*"Hunting is an overwhelming job sometimes, but it will never get to be too much so long as you remember this. It's called a reset and all Hunters do it. We have to, or the stress will break us. Now sit down. Relax. Breathe. When you find the trance, remember, and then go to sleep."*

She didn't know how long it took for the thoughts to stop beating at her and for her to slip fully into the trance of *reset*, but it felt like it took an eternity. When she finally achieved it,

she watched herself—everything she'd done since her last reset nearly a month ago.

The memories played, and she watched her form as she shot Roma at the range. She graded her reactions during brawls and, later, during the mission with John and the fight with Verdell. The mistakes she'd made sank into her skin, and she knew she wouldn't make those mistakes again. She knew she wouldn't berate herself for taking the job with John, or for not being quite quick enough to escape Verdell. The past was past. Time to start again.

# CHAPTER FIVE

Morning came slowly, like it always did after a *reset*. Kriska peeled her eyes open to find herself lying on top of the covers of the bed with no memory of how she'd gotten there from the floor. The room's small size no longer bothered her. These weren't quarters for living, they were quarters for sleeping. Somewhere around here would be a common area or a bar of some kind where she could get something to eat and plan her escape—if escape was possible. But, for the time being, Warbane wasn't an immediate threat. If she could avoid ticking people off—not a strong suit of hers—then they might just release her board and let her take jobs again. That would relieve some of the inevitable tedium and get her one step closer to freedom. After few successful jobs she would earn their crazy empath's trust, they'd kick her out, and she'd be a Lone Wolf again. She just had to keep from getting any more involved in their problems.

That decided, Kriska closed her eyes to do another quick check for Roma—and froze. Two auras rested right outside her door.

Kriska tore her door open and looked down at the eternacrete floor. Laying there where the floor met the wall were Roma and Raven.

How had John managed that?

Kriska grinned. It didn't matter. She snatched them up with a laugh. "There you are! I've missed you!"

Through closed eyes, she could feel the welcoming pulses from their auras. There was a sort of edge to Raven's welcome, though, almost like she was nervous about something.

"Verdell is here, and she's not very happy with you," Kriska said.

Raven dulled. Yup. That's what she was nervous about.

Kriska patted Raven's casing. "Don't you worry about it, Raven. You've got me—and Verdell will eventually get over whatever happened."

Raven's outline brightened again, and Kriska smiled. "That's the spirit! Now that we're together again, no one can stop us."

Except Warbane.

Kriska shook that thought off, holstered Roma, slung Raven over her back, and went in search of food.

She found food, John, and Verdell all in the same place, surrounded by a bunch of rowdy mercs digging into steak slices and eggs heaped on top of dark buttered toast. At her questioning look, John pointed toward the back of the room where there was a table laid out with all the pieces parts in heating trays. She grabbed her food—although she elected for a few pieces of sausage alongside her steak—and slid it onto the table where Verdell and John were chatting over empty plates.

John looked at the pile of food she'd stacked on and laughed. "I can tell you're a working Hunter."

Kriska shrugged. Incredible physical feats like jumping twenty feet straight into the air and running as fast as the new helium cars required an incredible amount of fuel. She took a bite and groaned.

"Not up to your standards, huh, newbie?" Verdell asked, and not even Kriska could miss the acid in her voice.

"Best thing I've put in my mouth since Friday."

"Friday?" They both asked.

"My taste buds only remember about five days back."

Most places couldn't keep an egg decently runny in one of those heater things. She would ask how they did it, except Kriska didn't cook. She either ate out or she ate emergency rations from her kit. One of those bars could keep a Hunter in fighting shape for a week, but they tasted like dirt.

John smiled while Verdell stewed in stony silence. "Mom sent us down with Sarron, her head chef at the Io base. He hasn't touched a vat-grown anything in his whole life. You won't find reconstituted meats, eggs, veggies, or otherwise here—not unless we come under siege and his grocery supply gets interrupted. He could make even a Hunter get fat on his cooking."

## DEATH WEAVER

In a few moments, Kriska's plate was just as empty as the other two and she was actually smiling just a bit.

"See?" John said. "Warbane isn't so bad."

Kriska's smile vanished. "Just because I like the food doesn't mean I like being locked up here." But her voice didn't have the bitterness from last night. She was trapped here, but not forever. She would find a way out, and right now her best shot was trying to get along with these people. The Reset had instilled that much sense in her, at least.

John noticed it too and shook his head with a wry smile. "At least you're not ready to murder everyone you come across anymore." He stood and grabbed his plate. "Dishes go over here and whoever's on cleanup duty in the mercs gets to deal with them. Most of our other bases have a dedicated cleaning staff, but this is more of an outpost than an actual base."

Kriska left her plate in the pile and followed John out the door.

"Last night, I promised you an introduction to everybody. Do you think you're going to try and throttle anyone if we do it now?"

Kriska shook her head. It didn't mean she wouldn't want to, but she could see now that it wouldn't help her case. Roma flashed in agreement, and Kriska stroked her handle. At least she had a few friends here.

John led her to a dimly lit room full of computers daisy-chained into a string on the ceiling like little square beads. There was a couch and a desk piled high with empty soda cans in the middle of the room, and the whole far wall had been converted into a sectioned screen. The room stunk of sweat and caffeine.

"Eric," John called, "we're coming in. If you're with Kieko—"

"She's out on a mission." The voice blared over a speaker behind them, and Kriska jumped. A lump on the couch moved, and then Kriska could hear him laughing. "It works every time."

The lump on the couch resolved itself into a Hunter who looked just younger than John. He was sitting under a gray blanket, and his hair was an uncontrolled blonde mess.

"Were you asleep?" Kriska asked.

Eric shook his head. "Working. Unlike these useless Hunters, my job board's unlocked for anything that doesn't require me to

leave the base.” His eyebrows narrowed. “Hey wait. Aren’t you that Death’s Companion Hunter who gave Verdell a run for her money?”

He sounded familiar. Twig arms, computers everywhere, that belligerent note in his voice. This was the one who’d fried her comms when Verdell’d shown up out of nowhere to kidnap her. He looked like he couldn’t carry a rifle for more than an hour—and no wonder, with him spending all day under a pile of fuzzy blankets.

Kriska made a face. “That was me, but I’m not a Dark Hunter.”

Some of the humor bled out of Eric’s voice. “I thought Verdell was going to have a fit. The mission was going so well, and then Comhen just keeled over. The fact that Death’s Companion managed to get there before us? You should’ve heard her trying not to curse.”

Kriska grit her teeth. “I’m not Death’s Companion, and I wouldn’t be here if Verdell hadn’t gotten in my way.” Even then, she’d really had a chance of getting away until the mercenaries had jumped right in the middle of things.

Eric shrugged. “No hard feelings, but you looked like you were going to murder Verdell. I’ve got enough flak from the other Councilors already. If Marie Fitzgerald gets mad because I let you hurt her daughter, I’m totally screwed.”

“But you’re still allowed to take jobs?”

Eric shrugged. “Only because Councilor Fitzgerald stepped in.”

“It helps that Eric’s a technopath and can take information jobs,” John said, “and he’s not a bad shot either.”

Eric laughed. “Yeah, but I’m about as tough as a toothpick. I’d rather fight with this,” he rapped his knuckles on his head, “than with, well, everything else. I’m more of a mage than a tank.” Then he looked at John, eyebrows narrowing with suspicion. “Hey, wait a second. Aren’t you supposed to be cleaning and reorganizing everything in the armory?”

John gave a nervous chuckle and looked around the room as Eric tried to pin him down with his eyes. “So...where’s Kieko?”

“Don’t try to avoid the question,” Eric said with mock severity. Then his voice got a bit more serious. “You did screw up, John. I get wanting revenge on everyone involved with Nilsa’s

## DEATH WEAVER

death, but he was going to be a *lead*. And now he's gone. If I'd known you were going to kill him—"

Something else clicked in Kriska's mind. John had needed help to wipe his bounty board, and Eric must've been the Tech Weaver he'd conned into doing it for him.

John put his hand on the back of the couch and leaned forward over Eric. "You know why I did it. Mom sent us out here so we'd be out of the way, so we couldn't screw anything else up. But he was *right there*."

"I know," Eric said soberly. "And if I'd been thinking straight either, I wouldn't have unlocked your board."

John straightened and gave Eric a grin. "So, you're going to help me clean the armory?"

Eric looked up at John, then looked at the wall of screens in front of him. The screens went black, then a person sitting in a rolling chair appeared on the screen. It looked like he was screaming, but there was no audio.

Kriska blinked, confused.

Bold, white letters slid onto the bottom of the screen. *No, no, noooooo!!!* Then the words were obliterated by a low resolution explosion.

John barked a laugh. "Thanks for the support, buddy."

Kriska shook her head. What was that, and why couldn't Eric have just *told* John that instead of pulling up some out-of-date image with words? Not even a voiceover, but *type*.

John looked back at her with a grin, then jerked a thumb at Eric. "Don't mind him. He's still stuck in pre-Split Earth culture. Something about Eight Bites Screen Games."

"8-bit, not eight *bites*. And they're good. You haven't lived until you've played the original Pac-Man."

John rolled his eyes. "See what I have to put up with every day?" Then he looked back at Eric. "But back to Kieko. For real, where is she? She's not a solo Hunter."

Eric shrugged. "I know, but she's getting better at handling herself in a fight. She said she felt something outside the compound and wanted to check it out, so I doctored her account just in case she needed to take a job." He gave Kriska a sly glance. "You won't tell, will you?"

Somehow, the conspiratorial way in which he said it made her irritation drain away. He was a bit of a clown, but the kind who meant well.

“If she does, then helping me clean the armory will be the least of your worries,” John said.

Eric shrugged. “What are they going to do? Hate me more? Better that they look at me than at Kieko. At least all I can do is mess with their computers.”

At Kriska’s puzzled look, John said, “Kieko’s a Mind Weaver, and not a weak one. She has a tough time when there’s a lot of negative energy running around, but she can do all sorts of things only the mythical old fiction empaths are supposed to do. You know, the stuff the Conclave locks you up for even thinking about? Messing with memories, controlling people, faking up hallucinations, and making your brain leak out your ears. The Conclave is always nervous around Hunters that can manipulate the behavior of other Hunters, and her mother is thought to be actively working for Death’s Companion, just like Eric’s father.”

And she’d thought Gramps’s disappearance had been ugly. This was one messed up guild.

“Your parents are the Ozi—Mal—” She tried to remember their full names, but she hadn’t really been worried about remembering what had sounded like random names at the time. “—those people Thaddeus was screaming at me about, earlier?” Kriska asked.

“Ozaki Thaddeus and Malcom Sexton. They used to be Warbane Councilors,” John said softly.

Eric winced. “Yeah. They’re powerful, and they hurt us bad when they left. And Kieko got the worst of it.” He laughed bitterly. “The worst part about it is Ozaki didn’t even tamper with anyone’s head, that we can find, anyway. But she *could have*. And now all the Conclave can see is that Kieko could do the same thing.”

“And Thaddeus, too,” John added. “But it’s worse than that because he should have seen it coming. Two Mind Weavers in love shouldn’t be able to keep secrets from one another, but it happened. So now Thaddeus is safely here on Earth where he can’t break anything important if he *does* turn out to be a traitor.”

## DEATH WEAVER

Kriska shook her head. Even the thought of all this backstabbing was going to give her a headache. “I don’t know how I got dragged into this mess.” Except that she’d taken a job she shouldn’t have. “I should be in the Patronage right now.” She could feel her chances of convincing Thaddeus slipping away. He’d already been betrayed once, and he didn’t care one whit about her.

Eric grabbed something off his lap—one of the mess of blankets, maybe—and balled it loosely in his hand. “Hey, we’re not all crazy. In fact, I think John is widely regarded as a very sane person.” He threw the blanket at John and stared as it unraveled from the ball Eric had stuffed it into. It flopped halfway between the couch and John.

Definitely a fuzzy blanket. And it was imprinted with who-knew-what. A video game character, probably. Although, what that mottled-green rectangular thing was, Kriska had no idea—it looked to be in various stages of a blocky explosion.

There was a moment of quiet as Eric stared mournfully at the blanket and John refused to acknowledge it at all. Then John started to snicker, and a moment later both Hunters were laughing.

Kriska couldn’t help but chuckle. Not at the blanket—but at the way they could still laugh even after they’d been so badly betrayed. Maybe there was some hope in the world, after all. “So, you’re all here because Earth is Warbane’s dumping ground for untrustworthy Hunters and the kids of all their councilors?”

John sobered. “Not all the kids of its councilors. Councilor Bunnel’s kid Clarence is getting along supremely with some of the council, the entire Conclave, and as many bootlickers as we haven’t managed to kick out yet. He helps run Warbane’s internal security.” His tone was not complementary.

“They kicked out all the decent Hunters and kept the jerk?”

“The jerk with connections to internal security and the Conclave,” Eric corrected. “And his dad is happily married to a non-Hunter who’s never gone to the dark side and tried to destroy Warbane.”

Kriska shook her head. Politics were another reason she swore never to join a guild. The only thing that made her feel a tiny bit better was the fact that Warbane wasn’t just throwing her into

this trash-heap outpost with a locked board. They'd done it to their kids, too.

Kriska cocked her head at John. "If this outpost is for all the untrustworthy Hunters, then what are you and Verdell doing here? Did your dad run off too?"

John was the most objectively trustworthy Hunter Kriska had ever seen. He sensed a web of innocence and peace and wouldn't kill. What idiot thought he was going to be stabbing them in the back?

"Nope," John bent down to pick up the blanket and, when he threw it back at Eric, it actually made it all the way. "My dad's a Merc commander on Io and as solid as they come. Verdell's here to help Carol keep an eye on things, and I'm here because I led a collectively stupid, unsanctioned raid against Death's Companion."

His voice didn't waver when he said it and Kriska still couldn't see his aura, but there was a clenching in his jaw and shoulder muscles that told her that the raid had been bad. Or maybe what had preceded the raid had been bad.

Kriska finished making her way over to them and sat on the arm of the couch. "Ok, I'll bite. What was so *collectively stupid* about the raid?"

John's eyes dulled. He looked toward the screens embedded in the wall, but his eyes saw farther than that.

Whoops. Innocent question. Long, deep, painful answer.

Kriska almost stood up, turned around, and left. She was here to serve her penance to whatever deity she'd managed to tick off, get Warbane out of her life, and leave. Not to investigate their issues.

*Wait.* It wasn't quite a word from Raven—more distinct than a feeling, but not quite a word—but it was clear.

Kriska shook her head. If Raven wanted her to wait—well, she knew these crazies better than Kriska did. No harm in listening, right?

John took a deep breath. "None of the others trust Kieko, Thaddeus, or Eric—for obvious reasons. They got sent here. My mother wanted Verdell and I out of the line of fire, so she banished us here, too."

## DEATH WEAVER

Kriska started nodding. Nodding was a good way to show someone she was listening, right? And then she stopped. “Wait, what obvious reasons?” Eric said something about his parents earlier, but that had nothing to do with him. Just because his dad was a traitor didn’t mean that he was.

John looked back at her, his head tilted just a little.

Eric gave a bitter laugh. “Remember what I said about my father and Kieko’s mother? Well, my father stole a bunch of info before he destroyed every Warbane computer on Io. He fed that info to Death’s Companion.”

Kriska arched her eyebrows. “The guild everyone seems to think I’m part of.”

“I was just a kid,” Eric said as if Kriska had never spoken. “I found it, but no one listens to a five year old whose father just disappeared and destroyed the guild’s computer’s on his way out. I tried to tell them the team was in trouble, but they told me it was just a bad dream.”

A glance at John showed that his face was frozen into a stone mask. His eyes were hard. His lips pressed together into a line.

Eric continued, his voice barely a whisper. “When he found out, Councilman Xi tried to get them—to get her—out of there. He cut orders for them to retreat just as soon as I told him—” Eric’s voice died. His face was pale, and his brilliant green eyes sagged in his face.

The silence stretched thin. Kriska opened her mouth.

*Wait*, Raven said again, and the word was clearer this time.

Kriska closed her mouth.

John’s voice came out of the silence. He stared at his feet. “Five minutes after Eric found Councilman Xi—maybe not even that—we got a transmission from our orbital station on Titan. Nilsa and her team walked into an ambush set by Death’s Companion. There were no survivors.”

That wasn’t the first time Nilsa had been mentioned. “Who was she?” Kriska asked.

“Our older sister.” John’s voice sounded dead. “My older sister.”

“She was the most brilliant Hunter we’d ever seen,” Eric said. “The rules say you can’t get your independent Hunter license before fourteen, but she was born for it. Mrs. Fitzgerald hated

that...and loved it. Nilsa took down her first bounty when she was six. A guy on Io tried to kidnap her. So, what did she do? Set her guild tracking beacon, sent an SOS, and went along with him. Turned herself into bait. Half an hour later, a Hunter team picked him up. Turns out, there was a bounty on his head. At eight years old, she had a miniature tactical board and was helping Councilor Fitzgerald run entire war containment situations. To hear Mrs. Fitzgerald talk about it, well—”

John stood up and stalked over to the wall of screens.

Eric shook his head. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. The short version is that John got a lead and the three of us busted up a club on Titan looking for answers. All we got was the name of the weapons supplier.”

“Jimmy Comhen,” Kriska said.

“Bingo,” Eric said.

John turned around, his eyes hard and cold—it was the same expression he’d worn when he’d convinced her to take the job with him. “But we couldn’t do anything about it because we were all shipped to Earth. Until I found out that he was already here.”

Some of the pieces clicked together and Kriska nodded. “Which was why you had Eric doctor your board and why you came to find me.” It was all starting to make sense. It didn’t make Warbane’s mess any less crazy. The guild who was supposed to stop all war had essentially declared a blood war against a dark guild, and Kriska was caught right in the middle of it.

John nodded.

There was only one thing Kriska didn’t quite understand. “If you’ve taken out Jimmy, then why has Kieko gone off on her own?”

That brought a different kind of worry to his face. “I don’t know. As far as we know, he was the only one from Earth who was involved.” He looked over at Eric.

Eric shook his head. “She wouldn’t tell me. All we can do is cover for her and hope she doesn’t land us in even more trouble than we’re already in.”

John took a sharp breath in and released it in a slow hiss. At the end of the breath, he forced a small smile onto his face. “Maybe we’ll get lucky, and it’ll be completely unrelated.”

## DEATH WEAVER

Somehow, that seemed unlikely.

A few hours later, Kriska had managed to shake John, and she was just sitting in the cafeteria. Not much else to do but eat. Lunch had been divine—roast beef sandwiches that tasted like the beef had been mooing a few hours ago—but she was stuffed. Had been for half an hour. Going to sleep was against the grain, but she'd already spent a few hours at the range and beat up three mercenaries under the pretense of sparring. What else was there to do?

Verdell stomped into the cafeteria and any sleepiness vanished. “You.” Verdell stabbed a finger at Kriska. “We need to chat.”

The few mercenaries in the room cleared out in a hurry. Kriska braced herself for a fight.

Verdell held out a hand. “Raven, come here.”

Eyelids halfway down, Kriska could feel Raven's aura brighten—not a happy kind of bright. That was as close to a *no* as Kriska had ever seen from the rifle.

Kriska shook her head. “She doesn't want to.”

Verdell's lips tightened. “Screw her. She's my gun, and she comes when I call.”

“It doesn't work like that.”

Verdell snorted. “John stole her from me. Mom said she might just need a second to cool down, so I gave her until John came back. Put her back in the armory, and the next time I looked, she'd disappeared. Then, what do the mercs tell me? You stole her and put several hundred rounds through her at the range. Do you even know how to take care of a gun like that?”

Kriska cocked her head. The way Verdell was talking, it almost sounded like she didn't believe that Raven was a sentient being. “Do *you* know how to take care of her?”

Verdell clenched her jaw and stared at Kriska as if the force of her glare would make Kriska start talking. Kriska only folded her arms. If Verdell wanted to play like that, Kriska could play like that. Gramps had a better death glare and could go an entire day without speaking in order to make his point. Verdell had nothing on him.

“You don’t even know what she is,” Verdell finally said—and losing the battle of silence did nothing to improve her temper.

Kriska took a deep breath to remind herself that this wasn’t an argument to be *won* so much as *survived*. If she ticked Verdell off, things would only be worse in the long run. “Raven is an Angel,” Kriska said evenly.

Verdell’s eyes widened. “How did you—”

She knew because Gramps had waxed eloquent on the subject. Angels were beings which could bleed through from other dimensions. They had their own values, agendas, and powers. They picked people they wanted to work with, interposed themselves on a weapon, and bled through into this reality. But Kriska wasn’t about to tell *her* that. Instead, she brushed a stray hair away from her cheek. “It doesn’t matter. Raven wants to be with me, which is great. If she wanted to be with you, then I certainly wouldn’t get in her way. She’s my friend, not my *gun*.” Kriska hit that last word with a little more emphasis, as though that would drive the message home.

For a second, Kriska thought Verdell was going to get even angrier. Then her aura dulled, and she relaxed. “Raven was given to me by my mother, just like Elroy. John had no right to take her. Now, it’s time for her to come back.”

Kriska nodded. Elroy must have been the golden gun who’d appeared in Verdell’s hands back at the Comhen compound—but that didn’t matter right now. Verdell was *not* getting Raven. Not if Raven didn’t want to go. “If I had to guess, John didn’t *steal* her to begin with. Raven chose to go, or John wouldn’t have been able to take her. If Raven didn’t want to be with me, then she wouldn’t be. When she wants to go back, she’ll go.”

It was a little like how Roma jumped a few feet into Kriska’s hand when Kriska needed her to. Angels chose who used them. Gramps had been more than clear on that point.

Verdell gave Raven another long look, and then turned on her heel to leave. As she reached the doors to the cafeteria, she looked over her shoulder. “You sound like someone—” She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter.”

And then she was gone.

# CHAPTER SIX

Kriska sat in an overstuffed chair in the lounge with Raven on her lap and Roma in her holster. Her head lolled to the side, teeth clenched. She'd been sitting here for almost fifteen minutes staring at a screen that said basically nothing. Weather reports recommended masks during all outside activities because there was an ash storm moving in and cautioned that there may be network disruptions as far east as the Chicago coastline.

Great.

Good.

Whatever.

Kriska couldn't sit any longer. She jumped to her feet in an explosion of movement that made the two mercs she shared the lobby with give her strange looks. She ignored them.

Three days of puttering around the facility, using up half a thousand creds in practice ammo, sparring with random mercs, chatting with Eric and John, avoiding Councilor Thaddeus, who would probably try to kill her—it had to end.

Kriska pushed Raven back behind her so she hung in a more comfortable position and headed out toward the tarmac between the bunk building and Merc Headquarters—which was really just everybody headquarters because there were exactly five Hunters on base and that counted Kieko, whom no one had seen since Eric doctored her board and sent her out to investigate whatever strange thing she'd felt.

It was kind of funny to watch John stressing, not about the fact that Kieko was still gone, but how to hide that fact from their watchdogs, Mercenary Commander Carol and Verdell. It seemed like the answer they'd stumbled on was to give Carol and Verdell

fake locations of where Kieko was and keep them running around the facility until they gave up. It was actually the most entertaining thing that had happened since she'd come to this compound, but even that was starting to get boring.

Out on the randomly painted eternacrete, she found John, Eric, and Verdell all doing something with a ball.

"Green!" Verdell called as all three jumped into the air. Verdell had the ball, which was only about the size of her fist. She chucked it at John, who called, "Yellow."

Eric cursed and twisted midair, but he didn't make it to wherever he was trying to go.

"Out," Verdell said.

John and Verdell landed about the same time—on yellow lines painted on the eternacrete.

Kriska looked at Eric's feet, but he wasn't on any of the lines.

John and Verdell caught sight of her at the same time. "Want to play?" John asked.

It was play the stupid game or die of boredom.

"Sure."

"Cool. The last Hunter standing wins. The goal is to only stand on the color that's been called." He pointed at the mess of colored lines on the tarmac. "The person with the ball calls the color. You have to throw it to someone else at least once per jump. The ball is only in play while everyone's in the air. Got it?"

Kriska shrugged. It didn't seem too hard, and it wasn't when everyone jumped, John threw the ball to Eric, who called a color, and everyone adjusted their falling trajectory to land on the color. Unfortunately, that was just the demonstration. The problem came when the ball was moving at a speed only Hunters could throw it, and six colors were called before they finally landed. Eric was out after the first few rounds, then John tapped out fifteen or twenty rounds later, and Kriska missed a jump just a bit after that. She and Verdell were both breathing hard when the game finally ended.

"You're good at that for your first time playing," Eric said.

Kriska frowned. The movements reminded her of the jumping numbers game she'd played as a child. Gramps called it Hunter

## DEATH WEAVER

Hopscotch, and it was how she'd learned to jump like a Hunter and control herself in the air.

"What's the game called?" she asked.

"Hunter Hopscotch," Verdell said. "But not the children's game. There are tournaments in this crap whenever guilds get together for conventions and stuff."

Kriska nodded. "I guess I've played the child's version, then. That's the one with the numbers, right?"

Verdell squinted at her. "That's not one most Earth-bred Hunters play." Then she shrugged. "But I guess most Earth Hunters don't start training until they're teens. Kids games require kids, right?"

"Something like that," John said. Then, turning to Kriska, "We usually play a few times a day. The only way to stave off cabin fever. That, and sparring."

They had all turned to go back into headquarters, which had the padded exercise ballroom in it, when Carol hurried up.

Kriska took the opportunity to study her. The last time she'd caught more than a glance of the mercenary commander was when John had sent her scurrying off to find the nonexistent Kieko. She was short for a Merc, and doubly so for a Hunter, with black hair shaved on the sides and combed over her head. Her chin was squarish, and the fact that her jaw was clenched didn't help the matter.

"You two," she barked, and her finger indicated John and Eric. They stopped. John, at least, couldn't hide the guilt in his expression. Eric looked fairly belligerent, and Kriska smiled with approval. "Where is Kieko, and don't give me that crap about her quarters, or the ballroom, or the cafeteria."

They exchanged looks.

"The shooting range," John said.

"The showers," Eric said at the same time.

They blinked at each other, and it was painfully clear that whatever telepathy they'd been using to coordinate their earlier defense had broken down.

Eric gave a nervous laugh as Carol tapped her toes impatiently.

“What we mean is, John saw her at the shooting range, but she’d probably be in the showers washing all that blowback off by now. If you want to find her, I’d check there.”

Carol didn’t move except to keep tapping her toes as she stared at them.

Verdell cocked her head. “You haven’t seen Kieko recently, have you?”

“What? Sure!” Eric said.

John just shook his head. At least he could tell when surrender was the best option.

“I thought so,” Verdell said. “So where is she that has you two jumping to cover for her?”

Eric gave that nervous laugh again and pulled out a small tablet—studiously not looking at either the Merc captain or Verdell, and leaving John to answer for all of it.

John glared at Eric but answered. “She said something wasn’t right outside and left. We’re expecting her back soon.”

“And how long has she been away?”

“Three days,” John said.

Kriska had to cover her mouth to conceal her grin. It was a miracle that those two had avoided this conversation for so long.

The only thing that would make this better is if she had some popcorn and a nice cushy seat to sit on while she watched the show.

Verdell stepped up into Eric’s personal space and looked down on him with all the intimidation she could muster. At seven feet tall to Eric’s six? That was a lot of intimidation. Verdell’s looming might have been effective against Eric, but Kriska flicked her eyes down, just enough to see that Verdell’s outline was still at that resting yellow-orange that was really as calm as Hunters ever got.

Physical threat?

Nope.

But she might make life very difficult for Bonnie and Clyde over there.

“If I were to pull up Kieko’s board right now, would she be listed as a Lone Wolf?” Verdell asked mildly—a steep contrast to her attempt at physical intimidation.

## DEATH WEAVER

For a moment Kriska thought Eric was going to try and keep ignoring her, but then he looked away from whatever he'd been doing on his tablet. "Yes."

Verdell looked back at Carol. "We need to go after her. She's capable, but she's not a solo Hunter."

Carol shrugged. "You're the subcouncilwoman. I certainly can't overrule you, but your mother's going to be livid when she finds out."

"And she's not already?"

That earned another shrug. "Just make sure you all come back in one piece."

Verdell nodded and, just like that, the decision was made. "Go gear up, boys. We're going to bring Kieko back. Eric, I assume you have some sort of a tracker on her?"

"That my father could use if he was around? Forget it."

Verdell sighed. "Irradiated Sextons."

John grabbed a tablet from Eric without asking and pulled something up. He turned the tablet around and Kriska could see Kieko's job board. It looked like John's had when he'd shown her only a few days ago. Tier One Hunter. No history. One active job with the Establishment Law Regulation Force. It didn't say what she was doing, but it did list a location.

Verdell only nodded. "Let's go, folks."

Kriska made an inventory of her equipment, but she hadn't left much in her room. Emergency rations in her belt pack, extra ammunition in there too. Three full magazines for Roma and for Raven clipped on—she was ready to go. John evidently felt the same way because he just stood there while Eric ran off. Kriska didn't see any weapons on Verdell, but as a Summoner, she was probably the best armed out of all of them. Even if she lost one weapon, she could Summon another.

A few minutes later, Eric appeared in some sort of harness with what might have been a robotic arm strapped to him. He wore two tablets the size of Kriska's palm strapped to either hip and one puny little gun on each side beside them.

As if Eric could feel her incredulity, he frowned. "Not every Hunter uses exclusively bullets."

John gave a low laugh. “They do on Earth. Most Hunters here don’t even have Kriska’s limited Sight.”

Kriska growled at that. “Calling my Sight limited. All you can see is civilians.”

John ignored her. “Warbane takes all kinds of Hunters. Not just those who can jump thirty feet and still hit a bullseye—although most of us can do that too.”

Through everything, Verdell hadn’t moved an inch. Her arms were still folded, and she glared out at everyone. “Are you done?”

Everyone fell silent.

“Good. The job doesn’t give a specific location, only an incident location. When we get there, we’ll split up. Eric, you’ll stick with me, or you’ll stay outside the incident perimeter. Big as you talk, you’re no solo Hunter either. When you find Kieko, you’re to bring her back by whatever methods are necessary. I don’t care if her job is complete or not. She’s not acting as a Warbane Hunter in this, so our reputation won’t be tarnished in any way. Besides that, Warbane does not operate on Earth. If any of the ELRF stop you, then this is a job offered by the Warbane Council and only involves Earth on the periphery. If they give you any more trouble than that, call in and I’ll deal with them. Got it?”

Kriska nodded, and Verdell’s eyes snagged the motion.

“Not you,” Verdell said. “You aren’t leaving this compound, and I can’t unlock your board enough to let you take this job anyway. Warbane does not allow its members to operate illegally.”

Kriska smiled, which seemed to take Verdell back a bit.

“What?” she snapped.

“You’re great at playing general, but did I just hear that Warbane doesn’t operate on Earth?”

Verdell’s eyebrows narrowed.

“That’s right,” Kriska said smugly. “You operate in places where houses can still be made of wood because they won’t spontaneously burst into flames and every single shot isn’t guaranteed to ricochet. And what about the ash storm coming in? Besides the fact that I’m the only one—except maybe John dearest here—who has ever done a thing on Earth, you seem to think that you can keep me from leaving the compound. If you all are going on an adventure, you’d better bet I’m going to tag along. Roma’s

## DEATH WEAVER

getting itchy, I'm even itchier, and we're both envying Raven's patience." Which was the nice way of saying that if she didn't get out of this compound soon, she might spontaneously resolve her little moral issues about killing non-murderers. She'd been on her own, doing whatever she wanted, since Gramps disappeared four years ago. Four years of freedom with *this* as a capstone? It was a wonder she hadn't done anything she'd regret yet.

"Patience?" she heard Carol mutter. "It's only *been* three days."

Kriska ignored her. "You seem to be concerned about people not being able to go solo and, as much as you said you'd all split up, I only see two groups: You with Eric, and John. If you want to find Kieko, you need a third independent gun."

"And if you're with Death's Companion, you'll take the opportunity to kill Kieko before we can get there," Verdell said with a sideways glance at Carol. It sounded more like she was reciting the party line than saying something she believed in.

"Hate to break it to you honey, but if I was Death's Companion, I would be gone already." She jerked her thumb at the twenty foot wall that surrounded the compound, the impeccable grey eterna-crete visible through the window created by Merc headquarters, and the bunk building. "Did you think your impressive little wall was going to keep me in? Nope. That's the fact that you locked my job board. Can't take a job without my board unlocked, which isn't going to happen if I skip out and you all report me to the Conclave as a Dark Hunter. Unfortunately, I have no interest in going dark, and I'm not looking into a career change, so I would really like to have an unfettered board."

"And it has nothing to do with the fact that you'd have the entirety of Warbane after you if you left," Carol asked.

Kriska turned to the merc commander. "I've already got the Duanti Crime Family and half a dozen Dark guilds after me. What's one more guild? No, it seems to me like Dark Hunters can still buy cabanas and sip Muy Thais on the shore of Mars's Arabian Ocean. They have to be a little more discrete, but I'm a Hunter. I know how to stay off an unfriendly's radar. And, if I really wanted to go to ground, deal with Mother Dearest, and turn Earth into my own little stomping ground—well, you said it yourself. Warbane doesn't operate on Earth."

John shook his head. “Carol, will you at least try to listen to her? Raven likes her. What does that tell you?”

Carol looked from John, to Verdell, to the gun slung over Kriska’s shoulder. “Fine. I’ll run interference with Thaddeus, but only this once. Understand?”

“Thank you.” The murmur from John was so quiet that Kriska had to question whether she’d heard it.

Carol was already shaking her head. “Councilman Thaddeus is going to string me up for this. You’ll see. He’s been breathing down my neck about getting you out of here, and this is only going to set him off more. I’ll be the first to admit that he’s not being fair—but he is cautious.”

Kriska frowned. There was going to be trouble with the councilman, no matter how hard everyone else tried to keep them apart. That was the nature of these things. It was just another reason why she’d never wanted to be involved with whatever Warbane was struggling with. At this point, though, there was no help for it. She was in it up to her neck, no matter what she did. Might as well have some fun before the rising tide drowned her.

“Alright,” Verdell snapped. “Let’s go. Carol, you’re holding down the fort. We’ll see you when we get back.”

# CHAPTER SEVEN

The ash storm the weather had predicted was overhead, although it hadn't started descending yet—mostly because the hurricane-force winds that buffeted them were keeping the ash above head height.

"It's like being on Titan," Verdell said and, even with her Hunter hearing, the com in her ear was the only reason Kriska heard it over the wind's terrible howling.

She wasn't sure what storms on Titan were like, but they couldn't be worse than this. "It's one of the bigger ones. Probably going to blow for a week. The citizenry's going to be sheltering in place until the Establishment can clear the ash from the roads."

"It's a good thing everything's made of eternacrete." Eric was in the middle of the pack with Verdell and John in front, moving into the teeth of the wind to break what force they could.

Kriska had the line attached to her harness in one hand, prepared to grapple herself to a surface in case she suddenly became airborne.

"That's by design," John said. "Earth is so crowded that they don't have the luxury of keeping the citizenry out of storm areas."

The ash started falling—blowing, rather—from the sky and landing like black snow all around them as the wind lessened just a bit.

"Whatever you do, stay on top of the ash," Kriska said. "It will bury you."

"Yes, Mom," Eric quipped back.

Verdell growled. "We've been in storms before. Keep quiet unless you're needed—or do us all a favor and split already."

Kriska only laughed at the acid in Verdell's voice. "And miss showing you up on the shooting range?" They were *not* going to drive her away and stick her on the Conclave's list of Dark Hunters. Besides, after this mission went much more smoothly because she was there to cover their Guild Monkey deficiencies, they would beg to take her on more missions. Bye-bye, boredom. Hello, freedom.

Verdell didn't respond. The ash was up to Kriska's calf—one of the reasons she always wore all black, regardless of the fact that Hunters were allowed to wear other colors when they weren't on a job. Ash was a pain to get out of anything else. At least no one would care if her boots were stained more black than they had been when she'd grabbed them from the Hunter Supply store five years ago.

Ahead of them were flashing lights—green and yellow, which were the colors assigned to Establishment Law Regulation Force vehicles. Kriska smothered a frown. That was the same address the job was cited at. What was ELRF doing in a situation that merited Hunters? They'd just get themselves killed.

She waded through the ash until they were close enough that the storm allowed them a good look at the scene.

Upon first impression, there didn't seem to be anything wrong with the building itself. Then she saw the person-sized hole in the wall, made by blasting the eternacrete out of the way.

There were two vehicles outside, hovering at the level of the second floor in front of a hole in the eternacrete. Had the cops made the hole as an entry point? Or was someone else running around with high grade explosives? Neither situation was good. ELRF would just get in the way, and explosives that would blow through eternacrete could wreak mass havoc in a populated area.

One of the ELRF officers sitting in the car spotted them. He jumped out of the car which was hovering at the hole in the second floor and, for a moment, Kriska wondered if he was trying to break his legs. Then she saw the anti-grav cannon—clunky when compared to John's boot covers, but effective—in his boots. He slowed just before he hit the cement, then cut power and landed as seamlessly as Kriska had ever seen an ELRF officer do anything.

## DEATH WEAVER

This guy had some training, and that meant that whatever was going on in the building wasn't great.

Sometimes the Establishment sent specially trained officers to contain a scene so that whatever was going on in there didn't impact the rest of the citizenry. This guy was specially trained, which meant the Establishment was worried. Usually, they sent glorified paperpushers to sign the paperwork after the incident was done.

Kriska closed her eyes to try and get a better read on the situation as Verdell strode up to the officer.

The officer's scowl was visible through the mask strapped to his face. "More Hunters? What are you doing here?"

Specially trained, he might be, but apparently the officer wasn't too bright. Kriska tuned him out in favor of watching the situation inside.

There were four outlines inside the building, each red and occasionally flaring purple as they traded fire. It looked to be three against one.

"Verdell, I've got camera cooperation," Eric said.

"Is Kieko in there?" John asked.

"I don't know, but there are plenty of bullets flying."

"Yes," Kriska said. "One woman—" She could tell that much from the outline, even this far away. "—small, armed with dual handguns, different calibers. The higher caliber is empty, and she's got six rounds left in the other."

"How do you know?" Verdell asked.

Kriska ignored her. If she couldn't tell that Kriska was using her Sight, then she obviously hadn't been paying attention. "Three combatants. One's moving like he's hurt. Leg shot; limited mobility. Other two appear to be fine."

"Weaponry?" John asked.

"Does it matter? Kieko's in trouble." Eric's outline next to her had gone from yellow-orange to full orange.

Verdell grabbed Eric before he could make the leap into the hole that led into the building. She was still talking to the cop, but Kriska couldn't care less about what she was saying. All her attention had been captured by the appearance of a fifth figure in the building.

The Fabric of Life groaned, and his mere presence began to unravel the threads, unable to support the weight of someone steeped in that much death. His outline was the purple color the Monsters made when they ripped through the Fabric of Life to claim a soul, and the color a weapon made when they killed. He held a knife the size of a short sword. It glowed the same evil, bloodthirsty color as its master.

How had he just appeared there? Was this newcomer like John—invisible to her Sight? Except John hid from her simply because even when he was violent, John would never kill. He was connected to a web of innocence and peace the same way Kriska was connected to a web of violence and death. This newcomer was nothing like John, so why hadn't she seen him in her initial scan?

"There is a fourth attacker," Kriska said. Her throat was suddenly dry, like looking at this newcomer through her senses had sucked all the moisture out of her mouth. "He's bad news. He's going to kill her." She didn't know how she knew—other than the evidence that he'd killed plenty of times before.

"You just said there were three," Verdell snapped.

"And now there's another one. We need to get in there."

"Teleport," Eric said.

"Short range?" Verdell asked.

"Yes."

Teleports? "You extra planetary people have teleports?" Kriska asked. "There's a teleport in there?"

Verdell ignored her. "Eric, can you convince the teleport to stop working? We don't need him dragging Kieko through to whatever is waiting on the other side."

"I can try."

"See that you succeed." Verdell turned to Kriska. "John and I will go around the back, and you will take the front. You don't have a guild patch and you still act like an uppity Lone Wolf. If they see you first, they won't expect John and me."

Krista's estimation of the other Hunter went up a few notches.

"Ok, fine."

## DEATH WEAVER

Verdell nodded at her. Kriska nodded back, then jumped into the second story hole in the wall, leaving the others to ash and wind.

*Priority one: Survive.*

*Priority Two: Eliminate the enemy.*

*Priority Three: Save Kieko.*

The building was empty except for the combatants—that, or any civilians were too terrified for her to sense them. Between gunshots that echoed down the hall and the storm outside, Kriska wouldn't have blamed them for their fear.

Finding the conflict wasn't difficult. She pressed her back up against the wall next to the room where all the shooting was taking place. Verdell and John were still creeping around the back. *Slowpokes.*

Depending on the arrangement of hallways and rooms, it could take them up to a few minutes to reach her—more than that if Verdell and John hung her out to dry.

That thought was fast and bitter, brown from too many years of distrust, and she knew it. Gramps would be disappointed.

Roma flashed from her place in her holster, and Kriska grinned. Roma was right. She was a Lone Wolf for a reason.

Raven was excited too, although less than Roma. Kriska took Raven, checked her configuration, and stepped around the corner—into a warzone. Overturned crates served as the primary cover, but the irregular shape of the room meant walls were also available to stop bloodthirsty bullets.

“Hiya, people,” she yelled at the top of her lungs. It didn't add much to the cacophony of shots, grunts, or the whine of electricity underneath everything else, but it did make two of the bad guys hesitate and look her way. They were taking cover behind overturned desks, and then they weren't anymore as the person Kriska assumed was Kieko used her last two rounds to account for one, and Raven accounted for the other.

The third attacker was also male. He was bleeding from the hip—a recent development—and had taken cover in a corner outside of Kieko's range.

Kieko had herself pinned behind a pile of medium-sized plas-sheet mail robocrates. Blow up the human race, send them

almost back to the Stone Age on a radioactive planet that had more volcanoes than trees, but people still wanted to open physical mail. In this case, it was helpful. Those crates were almost indestructible, and even if a bullet could punch through one side, it then had to get through stacks of plas and out the other side.

The attacker in the corner cut-out stayed under cover, and the threads of his aura remained the steady red of someone trying their best to kill and not quite succeeding.

Kriska dashed behind Kieko's crates, eyes already closed to search for the one person she had yet to see—the one wreathed in purple black, whose presence put so much strain on the Fabric of Life that Kriska could imagine the Monsters gathering in his footsteps, waiting for their feast.

“Who are you?” The words were mild, but Kieko's aura was not.

“I'm with John and Verdell.”

Kriska did a quick and dirty evaluation of the Hunter she was here to save. Brown eyes—worried—in an angled face reminiscent of Councilor Thaddeus. She had his relative lack of height, too, but the resemblance stopped there. Kieko was beautiful—high cheeks, complementary to the angled planes of her face, elegant eyebrows, lips lined in white, although the lipstick had smudged toward the outside of her mouth. She had none of the gun callouses or battle scars Kriska had come to expect from Hunters. What was a delicate, graceful person like this doing in a firefight?

Even as Kriska wondered that, she noted the definite lack of a weapon in the graceful Hunter's hand. Where had the weapons she'd seen earlier gone?

There, on the 'crete floor, empty of bullets. It looked as if she'd attempted to conk somebody on the head with the gun itself, after finding it empty. It seemed Kieko's arm was about as good as Eric's had been when he'd thrown his blanket at John.

With a gun, she might be at least some help. Without one, she was useless. Kriska made a decision even as she found that purple-black Monster making his way toward them.

Eyes open. He stood in a room behind the wall where the last of the three bravos was making his stand. Or his limp, anyway.

## DEATH WEAVER

Kriska was pretty sure that was the same one Kieko had tagged on the leg.

Kriska flicked a look at Kieko. "You ever used Raven before?"

A half second of confusion, then understanding, as Kieko saw the gun Kriska shoved toward her.

"I'll figure it out," Kieko said.

Roma was already in Kriska's hand. She surveyed the room, found the angle that was going to get a bullet where the bravo was hiding, and grinned. "Ready for a ricochet, Roma?"

The gun flashed once, dark red, and then a second time, purple. The second flash was accompanied by a bullet which skidded off the ceiling. The bravo's aura gained a purple spot in his chest that grew as the Monsters ripped him away from his body. Then his aura vanished, and his body collapsed to the ground.

"There is still the angry one," Kieko said. Her words were barely a Hunter whisper. "He may try to run, but he should not get away."

"Eric is dealing with the teleport," Kriska said.

Kieko went still. "Eric is here?"

"Outside."

She slumped a little, and her aura dimmed from red to orange. "I should have told him about her before I left. It may be too late now." She turned her nose as if to look through the crates and walls to the purple figure in the other room. "That one walks in more anger than I have ever seen."

Death, too, but Kriska didn't say that part. No need to freak the other Hunter out more than necessary.

"Is there any cover in that room?" Kriska pointed to the door that most-likely led into where the purple-black walking death had stopped.

Kieko shrugged. "Maybe more crates? Those have been in every room so far."

Kriska's lips tightened. They couldn't move on a maybe. They were up against a killer. If he got a semi-clear shot, they would be dead. The Fabric of Life was already straining, and the Monsters would take any sign of weakness to claim them.

Kriska shuddered at the thought. She'd watched the Monsters come for hundreds of people and she refused to let them take her.

“We stay here,” she decided. She closed her eyes again. Where were Verdell and John? She found their auras back at the rear entrance, making their way through the building at a snail’s pace.

*What is taking them so long?*

The walking death swung open the door between them and his footsteps echoed loud. Louder than that was his laugh, which was lined with a cruelty that sent shivers down Kriska’s spine. She’d heard laughs like that before, from people who had worked with her mother when she was a child.

“Hiding there like frightened bugs?” He laughed a second time and swung his blade absently. “I can see you. Hiding won’t help.”

Kriska thought she had a clear shot. Her hand darted out from cover, Roma fired, and then they were both back behind the crates. Kriska watched the bullet’s path through closed eyes. The purpleness of the bullet bled off into the strings around it, until it merely had killing *intent* instead of the certainty of death Kriska and Roma had imbued it with. It smashed into the wall just beside the man’s ear.

He laughed again. There was a click, and then humming filled the room. Kriska grew cold as she recognized the sound. The long knife in the Hunter’s hand was a buzz knife, named for the sound it made when active. It was illegal to make, illegal to sell, and illegal to own. A weapon designed for Dark guilds.

The Duanti family sign sat in the center of the hilt, there for all to see.

Kriska ignored that fact. Her mother had been making, moving, and selling illegal weapons since before Kriska had been born. It was just one more reason why Kriska had abandoned the family business.

At her side, Kieko stiffened in shock and her aura vanished in blue sparks. Kriska clenched her jaw. Kieko wasn’t going to be much help if she was so afraid that she’d vanished from the web.

Buzz knives were high-tech weapons, although they looked like a throwback to the Middle Ages. The whine they made was a warning that the knife was actively scanning blood it found on its blade and analyzing it. Once the blood was analyzed, all it took was another wound—deep, like a thrust through the shoulder or leg, where the first one could be shallow—and it selectively

## DEATH WEAVER

burnt out whatever nerves it had been programmed to burn out. It could paralyze someone, leave them brain dead, stop intestinal functioning so they starved to death, destroy their voice, keep them from swallowing—the possibilities for torture were endless, and its effectiveness as a weapon of death was certain.

Kriska shoved away her fear and stood to face the Dark Hunter. His eyebrows rose as he saw her, but she wasn't worried. He had a knife, she had a gun. Even with the death that surrounded him, it was more than a fair fight. Besides, cowering under cover wasn't going to do anything.

He stopped advancing and cocked his head. Kriska could see his short, spiked hair shot through with red. Absently, she wondered if he had used blood to color it—but that was nonsense, really. It just seemed like a thing his kind would do.

“Who are you?” Kriska asked.

The Dark Hunter's lips turned upward into something that was more of a sneer than a smile. “Death.”

Kriska wasn't impressed. “I can see that, but what's your name?”

He was still advancing. Kriska gave ground. Not a lot, but enough to keep the range comparatively longer.

“Asa.”

Still huddled behind the boxes, Kieko gasped. Kriska fired again. The bullet was momentarily purple, but the color faded as the bullet shifted its path and completely missed Asa.

He was a Death Weaver.

He shrugged. “I've bent better bullets than that.” He kicked at a lone robocrate. It spun toward Kriska, and she stepped out of its way. When she looked up, Asa stood an arm's length away, his inhuman eyes glinting violet in the harsh artificial light. If Kriska had ever put a face to the Monsters who claimed souls in death, it would be his face. He bared his teeth in a gloating smile and swung the buzz knife.

Kriska leaped backward. She saw Kieko over Asa's shoulder. She was still huddled with Raven clutched close. The cover she had been using wouldn't do much now that both Kriska and Asa were behind the stack of robocrates, but she didn't make any

attempt to find a safer position. Her aura was still gone, which meant fear still controlled her. Kriska was on her own.

*Where is John?*

She wished she could take a moment to locate him and his sister with her Sight, but even a moment of inattention would kill her.

The very edge of the buzz knife flared to a darker purple—the change so subtle that Kriska almost missed it. Asa swung again, and this time the blade was so close it caught the fabric of her jacket. Kriska looked hard at the blade. No blood.

This wasn't working. Asa moved like a blur, and the color change on the edge of that death blade was so slight that she had barely any warning at all when Asa decided to swing it. More, the ghosts of Asa's movements weren't fading. They lingered like specters, filling the blackness of her Sight with purple shadows, obscuring her vision, and demanding her death. If this kept up, she'd get caught by the knife.

Kriska focused what attention she could on Roma and tried to wordlessly convey her plan. Roma's red darkened in tacit agreement.

Asa's blade whistled over her head, and Kriska had the feeling she was going to have to even out her haircut if she got out of this alive. Kriska went forward, not back, as far inside the range of his long knife as she could, until she could smell the peppery stink of Asa's cologne and feel the unraveling of the Fabric of Life around her. She pulled Roma's trigger, but there was some sort of block. Through half-closed eyelids, she could see a purple film over Roma's muzzle, invading the gold-lined red of her aura. Kriska bared her teeth and swung Roma with abandon. The butt of the gun collided with the back of Asa's head. The result was a satisfying thunk. The film, or whatever it was, fell from Kriska's trigger. She fired as Asa stumbled back, his free hand clutching at his head.

Through closed eyes, she watched the result. The bullets stayed purple, stayed purple—Kriska fired again, not trusting that a head-injury would be enough to let a man so acquainted with death forget his own mortality. The second bullet was a ricochet, not steeped in purple but in red. The third was a ricochet

## DEATH WEAVER

as well but purple all the way through. Kriska emptied the clip in the space of a second and a half.

The first bullet curved unnaturally around Asa and bled red in the process. It smashed into a robocrate a foot from Kieko's head.

Kriska clenched her jaw. With Asa's ability to bend even the fastest bullets, Kieko was now in range—and not present enough to defend herself.

The second bullet curved around the other way and wasted itself on the back wall. The third bled to red and hit its target, Asa's leg. He grunted as he went down, neatly avoiding the third and fourth bullets—but the bullets stayed purple.

Kriska didn't have time to curse as she realized what he'd done. The bullets had bent away from Asa, directly toward Kieko, who was still frozen, pressed against the crates with tears in her eyes.

Kriska focused on the purple bullets charging toward Kieko. She grabbed the first bullet in mental fingers and jerked it away. It didn't move. She pulled harder, bending it until it cooled to red and sweat ran in rivers off her forehead and down her back. She grabbed the second and started to pull, but it wouldn't move fast enough. She forged a link to the bullet and impressed a will to live as it punctured skin and bone.

Kieko didn't scream when the bullet smashed into her shoulder. The sound was more like a whimper. Kriska cursed the fact that she couldn't see Kieko in her Sight, and then discarded the thought as she noticed Asa limping away, back toward the room that most likely held the teleport. He looked over his shoulder with a grin, as though he could sense her looking at him through closed eyes.

She opened her eyes, and his grin gained the garishness of a demon gloating.

"Best take care of your friend there, Death Weaver," he said.

"Kieko!" Verdell's voice pierced Kriska to the core. Where had she been during the fight? Why had it taken her so long to get here? She risked a glance over her shoulder to see if John was with his sister in the doorway. He was. When she looked back at where Asa had been standing, he was gone.

Fear, like an icy core in her heart. He couldn't get away. The death that crowded around him, unleashed on civilians? He was

the kind of Dark guild Hunter who would kill a thousand people and dance through the graveyard of their broken bodies, laughing as the Monsters feasted.

If he got away, if he killed more people, it would be her fault. The damage to the Fabric of Life would be on *her* shoulders.

“What happened?” Verdell demanded. She was at Kieko’s side, trying to staunch the bleeding. Then, “John, I need your help.”

Neither of them were paying any attention to her, or to the fact that they’d distracted her into losing sight of the most dangerous man on the planet. Kriska ignored them—they’d help Kieko—and hurried after Asa. He was bent over something in the other room. Fiddling with the teleport?

A few more seconds, and she could re-engage him—distract him from his escape.

She reached the doorway as something in Asa’s fingers flared red in a tear of color. She threw open the door that separated them and watched Asa waggle his fingers at her.

Rage flushed her cheeks. Kriska lunged for Asa as he and the black teleport pad on which he stood disappeared into a shower of sparks.

Kriska stood there, stunned, looking at the place he’d just been. What happened to Eric? Wasn’t he supposed to be convincing the teleport pad not to let anyone through? Asa was supposed to be trapped here, but now he was out in the world causing more damage to the Fabric of Life. That bullet in his leg wasn’t going to stop him for more than an hour—not if he had access to ‘bots, and not if he healed anywhere as quickly as she did.

An outline in red Kriska identified as Verdell approached her from behind. “What the split was that?” she asked. “You shot Kieko!”

Kriska turned. The adrenaline was starting to fade, and it left behind a pounding headache from her feeble attempts to turn the bullets meant for Kieko.

She pointed at where Asa and the teleport pad had just been. “The guy you just let get away bends bullets. She was paralyzed by fear in the corner. I tried to take him out, but he twisted my bullets so they tried to hit her. I dealt with the one headed for her forehead, and twisted the second one so it got her shoulder, not

## DEATH WEAVER

her heart.” Or, that was what she’d tried to do, anyway. “What more did you want me to do?”

“I don’t know, maybe not shoot Kieko?” Verdell said. She wasn’t yelling, but somehow the edge in her voice told Kriska that she might as well have been.

Kriska folded her arms to match Verdell’s posture. “Well, I didn’t see you in here conducting a grand rescue. It’s a good thing I can hold my own, or we’d all be dead right now.”

A shower of sparks in Verdell’s hand, and then she was armed.

Kriska rolled her eyes. “Don’t threaten me unless you mean it.”

Verdell snarled, and it was then that Kriska realized the other woman was coated in a pale blue, semi-transparent goo.

Kriska covered a chuckle with one hand. So *that’s* why they’d been so late to the party. “You got caught in a transpera-glue trap?” There was an official name for the substance, but everyone Kriska had ever met called it transpera-glue. A basically invisible liquid until it was hit with UV and hardened to something that could stop even a Hunter in her tracks.

Verdell’s expression soured even further but Elroy vanished from her hands. “We are *not* going to talk about it.”

Kriska swallowed her humor and dropped the subject. She’d been caught in something similar during her training days. Having every inch of her skin coated with that stuff was demeaning, and the feeling of being locked inside a transparent shell under a UV light, helpless and completely reliant on her partner to get her out? Laughing aloud would probably get her shot.

Kriska looked past Verdell, and into the room where Kieko lay against the robocrates, John working over her. Red dripped from her shoulder, onto the floor.

“Hold on,” John’s whisper was urgent, and soft.

Kriska took a step toward John, but Verdell grabbed her elbow. “Don’t.”

“But—”

“—John is the best healer I’ve ever met. Kieko will pull through.”

But despite her words, Verdell’s eyes still held distrust.

Looking at John laboring over Kieko, Kriska wondered if, just maybe, Verdell’s distrust was justified.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

Kriska was back in the same interrogation room, handcuffed to the same table as before. They hadn't changed the metal bar she'd dented earlier, which was how she knew. Maybe they only had the one room.

She'd thought things had turned out well enough when John, exhausted but functional, had gotten Kieko moving under her own power. Then they'd passed through the front gate of the Warbane compound, and everything had flipped on its head. Their welcome party had been one Councilor Thaddeus and all nine Warbane mercs. Carol would have made ten, but she was nowhere to be seen.

The only improvement was the lack of an angry councilmember yelling at her, although the fact that he was taking this long to show up was starting to strain her nerves. She remembered the aftermath of the fight—seeing John slumped on the ground next to Kieko, and Eric slumped over his computer. All three were alive, but waking them and getting them all back to base through the storm had been a heroic feat. In the end, Verdell had tied them all together.

When Kriska asked what was wrong with John, Verdell had only glared at her. But the bleeding in Kieko's shoulder had stopped, and she looked better than John did, so Kriska's guess was that his Sight helped him with first aid, and that caring for Kieko took a lot out of him.

After Verdell woke him up, Eric seemed fine except for a headache. Nobody could figure out what happened to him, or how he'd lost control of the teleport which had allowed Asa to escape. Kriska had a theory, but she was keeping that to herself until she

## DEATH WEAVER

could figure out whether or not she was being shipped off to Io as a criminal. Asa had flashed red right before he used the teleport, and Eric had reacted as if he'd been knocked out through a blow to the skull. If Asa wasn't behind it somehow, Kriska would eat her jacket.

Anyway, they'd all trooped back to Warbane through the middle of an ash storm, and she'd thought that would be that. John, Eric, and Kieko had all earned a severe talking-to, but Verdell was in a rush to get the goop off of her, and none of them were in good enough shape to actually *listen*. When they'd finally made it to Warbane's front gate, Kriska had thought the whole thing was over. She could go shower and take a nap.

Then their welcome party had shown up.

Thaddeus had taken one look at his injured daughter, his face had screwed into an expression of murderous rage, and then everything had gone dark.

Now she sat in the interrogation room with a blinding headache and an itch between her shoulder blades.

Would John be able to talk him down this time?

Kriska tipped the stool onto its back two legs, then shook her head and let it crash back down onto all four. The least they could do was give her an actual chair instead of a stool before they locked her in a tiny, dark room for hours on end.

Just then, the door handle twisted, and Kriska could see a thin veneer of rage, like a web pressed against someone's skull. Someone's otherwise invisible skull.

She wasn't surprised when John opened the door, but she was surprised to see the gun in his hand.

"John—"

"Look at me." His voice was hard.

Kriska looked away from the gun and met his cold brown eyes.

"You lied to me."

Kriska blinked at him. Sure, she'd never told him everything, but she hadn't lied to him. Not that she could recall, anyway. So, she didn't say anything, just stared at him and fought the adrenaline that told her to rip the cuffs out of the table, take him down, and leave this whole radioactive mess with Warbane behind her.

John's face twisted into an ugly picture of fury, his aura rising to a just visible yellow before he got himself under control again. He took three long steps forward to stand directly across from her. "You lied to me," he said again.

Kriska laughed. The sound was short and forced. "You're lying to yourself, maybe. What could I have possibly lied to you about?"

John slapped his hand down on the table, but Kriska didn't flinch away, only listened as the echo of his fury ricocheted around the tiny room.

"I told Warbane I trusted you. I let you into my home. I protected you from my sister, my mother, and the other councilors, but you've been with them this whole time."

Kriska's eyebrows went up. "You can't be serious."

Councilman Thaddeus was touchy enough to jump to conclusions—like how Kriska's returning with his injured daughter meant she was part of Death's Companion—and emotions earlier had been high, what with Kieko getting shot, John exhausting himself trying to heal her, and Eric getting knocked out as Asa's parting gift. Kriska had assumed that people would be calmer by now. And John? She'd thought he had at least half a brain.

Him standing there, gun in hand, red veneer over his head in place of an actual aura made her shiver. Had someone just destroyed John's life view enough for him to come unhinged? Unlike her, he was hardly the type of person that would stoop to unnecessary violence, and he certainly wasn't the type of person who would kill just because he was mad. She remembered the sick look on his face when he saw the guard she'd killed at the Comhen compound.

Something was definitely wrong with John.

The light from the hallway streamed over his shoulder, into the darkness of the interrogation room. His shadowed face looked dead. His eyes, once bright, were pits of darkness. "You were never a Lone Wolf, were you? And the apartment? That was a signal from your mother telling you to take the job. Your real guild wanted you to kill our target before we could take him into custody. Then, you kept up your lie so you could get into Warbane and sabotage us from the inside."

## DEATH WEAVER

What? No. John's theory was absolute lunacy. The timeline didn't even work! Kriska leaned her arms against the edge of the table and met his eyes. "Remember the whole me-demanding-to-get-kicked-out-of-Warbane thing? And the job that you didn't even *offer* until after the explosion was an—and maybe I'm remembering this wrong—execution job? If you didn't want the guy dead, then maybe you shouldn't have taken an *execution job!* And then, maybe *you* shouldn't have told *me* to take the shot." She slapped her hands down on the cold, metal table. "And don't you dare talk about my mother, Dearest, like you have any idea what she's like. I dedicated my childhood to killing her business associates, and you think we're working together? I knew you were daft but not quite that daft."

"I'm not your dearest." John's voice was flat. He stepped inside the room deliberately, every muscle rigid with rage.

"Well of course you aren't!" That was what he remembered out of her rant? What was *wrong* with him? "You're just the guy they got mad enough that you would come in here and shoot me because there isn't a single sane person in this entire building!"

John blinked. Behind closed eyes, Kriska could see the red net around John's head flash brighter, urging him to do—well, something violent. He stopped at the other side of the interrogation table, which was now entirely too narrow for comfort.

Only an arm's length away from her, John's finger caressed the trigger.

Kriska cocked her head. Perhaps it was just the impression the flash of red had given her, or perhaps it was reality, but it certainly didn't look like John was angry. His voice sounded bleached; his muscles, fighting every move he made. Every motion screamed of rage—every muscle protesting. So why was his aura still invisible? If he was angry enough to kill, then why couldn't she see it? And why, even though his aura was invisible, could she see that furious net hooked into John's brain like a parasite?

"You ran into anybody who is angrier at me than you are right now?" She tried to make the question sound innocent, but she'd never been great at faking innocence.

"Only Councilman Thaddeus." His voice was flat.

Kriska blinked. That ought to have been a giveaway for John, who certainly knew the councilman's abilities far better than she did.

She waited for three heartbeats. John still just stared at her.

"The Mind Weaver?" Kriska said, incredulous. "The one you've been trying to keep away from me because he has a habit of passing final judgment on anyone suspected to be part of a dark guild? The one whose daughter has one of my bullets in her shoulder?" Yeah, this was starting to stink more and more of Warbane politics.

In the shadow of John's nonexistent aura, Kriska could feel the Monsters waiting. She had to snap him out of whatever this was before he did something he was going to regret—and that she wouldn't have time to regret.

She gathered all her strength and pulled at the metal bar that secured the handcuffs to the table. The spot that had bent earlier snapped. Then, slowly, she leaned all the way over the table until her forehead met the barrel of the gun in his hand. The metal was cold, but it warmed as she stayed there, looking down at the metal table bolted to the floor.

Abruptly, his body language changed. "Kriska, what are you—"

"Isn't this what Councilman Thaddeus sent you to do? Eliminate me for Warbane? And they're the greatest light of truth right, Dearest? Anything Warbane wants is what's best for the galaxy, and you're the obedient little unthinking soldier."

The web of red strings over his head tightened down, like the strings were burrowing further into his brain.

He reaffirmed his grip on the handgun. "You should have picked a different side, Kriska."

Fear flashed inside her at the finality of his tone. Head against the gun—she thought that would be enough to snap him out of whatever trance he was in. She didn't really want to die—not for Warbane, not for John, and certainly not for Councilman Thaddeus.

Fighting wouldn't help her situation, and that left talking.

"Is Kieko alright?"

John stiffened. "Yes."

"I'm glad."

## DEATH WEAVER

She didn't know what else to say. Begging for her life would be pointless. John wasn't in his right mind. She could fight her way out, but not without proving to the whole world that she was evil. Not without destroying the Fabric of Life bit by bit. Not without killing John.

The metal eased away from her forehead, and John looked at her, frowning. "What did you say about Kieko?" He blinked, confusion clear in his eyes.

"I wanted to make sure she was alright."

He looked at her—really looked, for the first time since he entered the room. "She's fine. A little sore, but she'll be good as new in a few days." John's gun pointed at the ground. He shook his head, like he was shaking off a fly. Then he looked at the gun and froze. There was silence for one heartbeat, and then two. He looked at Kriska. "Are you alright?"

No.

Kriska shrugged and lied through her teeth. "Yeah, fine. What about *you*." Her heart was still racing a thousand miles an hour, and she watched John carefully. The red aura coating his head faded to a head-splitting green color, and then faded completely away.

"Good—now, anyway. That was very, very weird." John turned to look over his shoulder at the cracked door. "I wonder if there's anyone out there watching to see if I come out alone or not."

Kriska closed her eyes and examined the web of violence. The hallway was empty. "If you can't see anyone, and I can't see anyone, there's probably no one there." She held out her wrists. Running around in handcuffs wasn't her idea of fun.

John unlocked them without a word and left them in a pile on the table. "You know, Councilman Thaddeus may be a councilman in disgrace, but he's still a councilman. One call from him, and the entire guild could come after us."

"Why is that?" So far, no one had said a single good word about the guy, and he'd shown a disturbing penchant for navigating around the law.

"Anti-Emphath discrimination laws. Plus, he's useful."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

John and Kriska looked at each other for a moment in awkward silence.

Then John shrugged. "So... Sorry for trying to kill you. It wasn't personal."

"Yeah, I noticed."

"Good."

They looked at each other again. An itch of frustration started working its way up from Kriska's chest and into her throat. "Can we stop staring at each other and just go?"

John jumped. "Um, sure. Yeah, and sorry about trying to kill you again." He didn't move toward the door, though, he just stood there like a lump with big brown puppy eyes that looked anywhere but at Kriska.

"Let's go?" Kriska's tone was pointed.

He jumped again, then turned and opened the door to let her through. "And again, I am really, really—"

"Yeah. Sorry about trying to kill me. I think I figured that out already. The better question is, how are we going to keep the dearest Councilman from trying again? Maybe think about that one instead of repeating the same apology over and over?"

John looked at the ground. "Sorry."

Kriska stopped, her shoulders tense as she spun around on her heel and pointed a finger at him. "If I hear that word one more time, I'm going to scream, and then we'll be in real trouble, won't we?"

"Oh, right. Sor—I mean, so we should probably go to the mess and see if we can find Verdell."

Kriska nodded and headed down the hallway, one eye closed to look for any mercenaries that might not have gotten the memo that she wasn't to blame for what happened to Kieko. She couldn't help but ask, "Is Verdell going to try to kill me, too?"

"I don't think she's been in a room with Councilman Thaddeus lately, but that's not necessarily a guarantee."

So, it was just another day inside the Warbane outpost. Great.

# CHAPTER NINE

Verdell and Eric were already in the mess hall, digging into a sweet-bean chili that looked like it was to die for. Kriska headed straight for the serving pot instead of for Verdell as her stomach reminded her that she hadn't eaten since before that ill-fated mission to go get Kieko. If Councilor Thaddeus showed up to kill her, at least she'd have a full stomach.

John stopped off to talk to Verdell. Maybe he'd already eaten, or maybe not, but Kriska didn't care. The chili was a little bowl of heaven, especially after she drowned it in cheese. She stood next to the serving table and shoveled it down.

Verdell's aura was as subdued as Kriska had ever seen her, which was a good sign. John started talking to her, and it didn't even brighten. Great. Wonderful. Hooray. Neither of the Fitzgerald kids were going to kill her today.

She finished her chili, then looked at the serving pot again. She could get another bowl—but now that she was pretty sure she'd live to see the next few minutes, she probably should go talk to the other three Hunters.

Kriska approached slowly and made sure to step as loudly as she could. The three Hunters looked at her.

"We aren't wild animals, you know," Verdell said crossly.

"Wild animals?" Eric asked.

Kriska understood the reference, though. "To jump up and attack me if you're surprised." She shrugged. "Gramps taught me never to sneak up on a Hunter, especially if you aren't sure how they are going to react to you. Well, not unless they are your target, then sneaking is preferred."

John wore an easy grin. “I think I like this Gramps guy. He’s the one who trained you, right?”

Kriska nodded.

John looked sideways at his sister. “Trained by an extra planetary Hunter, probably, and you don’t know if she can handle Titan?”

Verdell’s lips tightened. “There’s a learning curve.”

“She spotted Councilman Thaddeus’s tampering before John did,” Eric pointed out helpfully.

“I was the one being tampered with!” John’s protest drew eyes from the few mercenaries just finishing up lunch, and John had the good grace to at least blush.

“Oh, just be quiet,” Verdell said. “Anyway, I didn’t say we shouldn’t do it. It’s that or let the Councilman get her, which would land Thaddeus in almost as much trouble as Kriska—he’s already in enough trouble—and probably catch all of us in the crossfire. Besides that, we need to investigate what Kieko felt. Eric says the coordinates are on Titan, so we go to Titan.”

Kriska coughed. “Hello, there. I’m missing info? What coordinates?”

Verdell glared at her. “Wait for the briefing.”

John stepped up to Kriska’s side and threw an arm over her shoulder. “I think she can handle it, and Eric can handle her board.”

“Already done,” Eric said helpfully.

“The only problem is whether or not she can follow orders and refrain from shooting us. If she can’t do that, then she can’t come,” Verdell continued.

Kriska picked John’s arm off her shoulder. While the expression of camaraderie wasn’t—bad—he was limiting her ability to maneuver. “What coordinates?”

“We think we know where the teleport pad leads,” Eric whispered.

Kriska froze as Verdell and John continued to argue around her. They were going after that walking hole in the Fabric of Life, and they going to leave her trapped here while *they* tried to stop him? They weren’t the ones who had made protecting the Fabric of Life their life’s mission—that was her. She *needed* to be the one

## DEATH WEAVER

who put him in the ground. More, it took a Death Weaver like her to kill a Death Weaver like him.

“Hold up,” Kriska said. “If you’re going after Asa, then I am definitely going with you.”

John and Verdell stared at her.

“You’re passionate, all of the sudden,” Verdell said.

Kriska bared her teeth. “I need payback.”

Verdell was unimpressed.

Kriska patted Roma lovingly. “Besides, he’d probably kill all of you with a look. What defense do you have against a Hunter who can bend bullets?”

Verdell shrugged. “We have John. Plus, that’s not the issue here. I’ve fought tougher opponents and won. The problem is whether or not you can actually function as part of a team. Do you even know what that word means?”

An image rose in her mind, and Kriska dismissed it with a savage swipe of her hand. The image was Gramps’s face, his silver eyes laughing as they ran rooftops together on Kriska’s very first job as a Hunter in training. “I know what it means,” she growled. It was everyone else who seemed to be missing the point.

“And Kieko?” John asked. “I sped the healing a lot, but there’s only so much I can do.”

“I got her some ‘bots already. She’ll be ready by the time we hit Titan,” Eric said.

‘Bots were self-replicating robots used to treat most wounds. Enough of them could bring a person back from the dead. They could also create a zombie race and try to take over the world—an incident which resulted in the Tech Accords of 3428, before the crazies set off the world-cracker and started the Split. Now, all ‘bots had limiters on them. No more resurrecting from the dead, but no more zombies either. Even with most of their utility curtailed, the microscopic machines could heal a lot of damage before they got saturated. If Verdell had given Kieko a dose of the ‘bots, then she would already be walking around.

Sure enough, the door to the mess opened and Kieko entered. There was a lump on her shoulder beneath the shim armor shirt and Warbane jacket, which was probably the dressing for her bullet-wound, but she was up and moving. Her eyes stayed low

to the ground, but she still made her way straight to the group of Hunters.

Verdell nodded. "We're all here. Good."

"Perhaps," Kieko said.

Kriska looked around to see some of the mercenaries covertly watching them as they pretended to eat their chili—which was a shame. The chili deserved more attention than that. "Are we going to have a problem with the mercenary corps?"

Everyone looked at Kieko.

"Believe it or not," she said softly, "I am not a telepath."

"Are they reporting to Carol?" Verdell asked.

Kieko nodded.

Kriska arched her eyebrows. If Kieko wasn't a telepath, then how had she known what the mercenaries were thinking?

Verdell crossed her arms. "Then we've got to hurry. Carol ran interference for us when we went out to get you, and we might even convince her to send Thaddeus back to Io after what he just did, but she's never going to allow us off-planet. We're here so they can keep us from interfering, not so we can find leads and chase bad guys."

Kieko turned to Kriska, although she still didn't meet Kriska's eyes. "We never were properly introduced. I am Keiko Thaddeus, the councilman's daughter. Hold it against me as you will."

Kriska frowned. "Don't mess with my mind and we won't have a problem."

The last thing she needed was one of those parasitic webs attached to her head, manipulating her emotions the same way the Councilman had done to John.

"That sort of manipulation is illegal," Kieko said serenely. "I look forward to working with you."

"Yes, well," Verdell said. "No one is going to be working with anyone if we don't get out of here before Carol gets wind of this."

"Oh, she already knows," Kieko said with that same dreamy tone. She stared off into nowhere with a lazy smile on her lips.

"Of course she does," John muttered. "Do you know where she is?"

## DEATH WEAVER

Kieko shrugged—a smooth ripple of the shoulder so small Kriska wondered if she'd actually seen it. “My Sight doesn't work like that, you know.”

“Where are we going, and how are we going to get there?” Kriska asked as she tried to beat back the thrill of the hunt. “Isn't everyone here confined to the outpost?”

“According to who?” Eric asked. He pulled out a tablet and displayed a screen that listed a Warbane Bounty Hunter team with five active members. Verdell was point, with John as secondary, and then Eric, Kieko, and Kriska.

“Good,” Verdell said. “John will pilot. Let's go—and try to be subtle about it.”

Kriska glared at them all. “I'm not going without Raven and Roma.”

Verdell tilted her head. “Of course you're not. John?”

“Meet you all later,” he called over his shoulder as he left.

Kriska looked around at the rest of the group. “So where, exactly, are we going?”

Verdell sighed. “Do you really want to know what you're signing up for, or would you rather have the deniability you get from just climbing on the ship?”

“I want to know what I'm getting into!” If they were going off-world, that was very different from going to an obscure place on Earth.

Verdell shook her head. “We're going to Titan, Saturn's largest moon. That guy who took out Kieko and Eric has been a pain in our side for too long. He doesn't get to shoot one of my teammates and get away with it.”

# CHAPTER TEN

Kriska followed Kieko and Verdell to what they insisted was the spaceship. Kriska sheltered her own private doubts, because she'd been all over the compound during her three days of incarceration, and she'd never once seen anything resembling a spaceship. Besides that, they were guiding her through the headquarters building. What kind of person kept a spaceship in a building?

Or maybe that was where everyone kept their spaceships. Kriska was willing to admit that she had absolutely no experience with space travel.

Kieko and Eric walked hand in hand while Kriska lagged behind, feeling a little like a third wheel. Eric was laughing, and Kieko laid her head on his shoulder as they walked.

Kriska tried to shrug off her envy, and focused on staying far enough back that she couldn't hear their lovey-dovey talk without trying, and close enough that they wouldn't lose her if there was a quick turn or something.

As she walked, she couldn't help but wonder what Titan was going to be like. It wasn't the first destination on her extra planetary travel list, but it wasn't Io, either. Of course, the main reason she'd decided not to go to Io was that Warbane had their main base there, and apparently there was an active war going on. The fact that their mission was taking them to Titan meant it probably wasn't going to be much better.

Kriska almost didn't notice when Eric and Kieko stopped, rigid, in the hallway. Carol stood in front of them, hands on hips and eyes glaring.

"Headed to Titan?" she asked.

## DEATH WEAVER

Eric and Keiko looked at each other.

“Um,” Eric said.

“Save the excuses; I don’t care. John and Verdell are already loaded up, and you can go too just as soon as I’m done with you.”

“That’s very kind,” Kieko said.

Carol shook her head. “Thank me when your parents get ahold of you after this mess. Nobody authorized this excursion and, as far as I’m concerned, you were all very sneaky and vanished before my very eyes.”

“But why?” Eric asked.

Carol looked at them. “Every single one of your pinky fingers is more capable than I am in a fight, and Verdell will keep you in line. That means you’re sneaking off for a good reason. Besides that, Thaddeus is livid. I’m taking him back to Io to keep him out of that one’s,” she shook a finger at Kriska, “orbit, but there’s no guarantee he won’t try something else in the meantime. We won’t be able to keep this from the Conclave if anything *permanent* happens and, unlike most, I remember the chaos of twelve years ago. I would rather avoid a repeat. So go take out your quarry and then come back in one piece.”

Eric stiffened to attention, while Kieko waved a finger in the general direction of her forehead. “Yes, Ma’am.”

Carol moved out of the way, allowing Kieko and Eric past, but she stepped back into the path before Kriska could join them. Eric looked over his shoulder with worry.

Carol lifted a hand. “You two go on. I’ll show her the ship when I’m done.”

Apparently they believed her, because they continued down the hall, leaving Kriska to stare down Carol, who had her hands on her hips.

“What?” Kriska asked.

Carol’s lips tightened. “If you hurt any of those kids, I will hunt you to the farthest reaches of the galaxy.”

Somehow, Kriska had been expecting the threat. She shrugged. “I don’t have a problem with them.” Which wasn’t the same as not hurting them, but it was the closest she could get to a promise.

“I know that. If I didn’t, then you wouldn’t be going—even with Councilman Thaddeus after you. But listen close, girl. You’re a team player now, so you’d better get used to it. Teams make their decisions together. They rely on each other.”

Kriska clenched her teeth. Teams disappeared in the middle of the night without a word.

Carol must have seen some of her thoughts on her face, because she frowned. “I get it. You aren’t used to playing nice, and you’ve probably run into some really rotten luck. Warbane is family, though. So, you chill out, talk it out, and do things as a team. That doesn’t mean people won’t get mad at you, or that you won’t fight. When it comes down to it, though, you fight for Warbane, and for the people in Warbane. Got it?”

Kriska stared. Had Carol forgotten that she’d been pressed into joining Warbane? She didn’t even want to be here, and now Carol was giving speeches about how the people who had forced her into their guild were family now? Carol obviously didn’t know a thing about what “family” meant to Kriska—that was for absolute sure.

Still, she nodded. “Got it.” That was the only way to get out of this conversation.

Carol frowned a little. “You’re young, but you’ll learn.” She jerked her head down the hallway. “Alright, follow me.”

The spaceship was a tiny, dinky little thing parked in a row with a bunch of other ships the same size. It was maybe a little bigger than an eight-person helium car, covered in silver plating.

Kriska stopped in the doorway of the hanger. “We’re going to space in that?”

“What did you expect?”

There were videos of ships from before the Split that were the size of buildings, with giant rockets on the bottom and fins on the side, and segments that had to drop away in order for the actual ship to get into orbit. This was. . . an egg. A big, silver, shiny egg.

A panel on the side of the egg slid away to reveal John. He motioned to her, and Kriska approached the egg with caution. “How does this thing work?”

## DEATH WEAVER

John shrugged. “I’m a pilot, not a mechanic. All I know is that it takes advantage of some of the holes the Split blew in the laws of physics—you know, the things that let you jump over a thirty meter wall and see violence when you blink.”

Kriska still couldn’t believe her eyes. “We’re going to space in an egg.”

“It’s better that way,” came Verdell’s voice from the inside. “It’s a fully-equipped Warbane Hunter transport ship, which means that the only information it transmits when queried is its guild association. This thing will get us landfall on any colonized planet with no questions asked, and the Council unaware of where, exactly, we are.”

John stepped aside to let Kriska in the ship. She had to jump a little to make the entrance, which was about five feet up. John frowned as she landed. “Oh, right. There’s a button for stairs here somewhere, but only the mercs use that.” He frowned at a touchpad built into the wall, then touched a button and, sure enough a ramp shot out of the base of the opening, then stairs popped out with a click. John shrugged and touched the button again. The stairs disappeared as quickly as they’d come. “There are several entrances like these, for anything from emergency escape, to drop-and-run deployments, you name it. These panels are everywhere.”

Kriska waved a hand. She didn’t care what the ship could do, just so long as it could actually get her off this nuclear waste dump of a planet. “So where are we going and why?”

“First...” John hit a button to close the entrance panel and held out a hand to show Kriska the rest of the ship. There were seats anchored to the walls, and a big lump in the center that was covered by that same silvery stuff. “Storage,” he said. “Same principle as the outside shell.” Then he held out a familiar form, and Kriska grinned.

“Roma!” She took her friend and put her back in the holster. “Hey, it’s good to see you!”

Roma’s aura brightened in agreement, and then it dulled again.

“I know, twice in one week. They won’t be taking you away from me again, though. I won’t let them.”

There was a cough from the front section, which was black instead of the silver-gray color of the rest of the inside. Verdell sat in a chair facing black panels—the control panels, probably.

“Just don’t give us a reason to take them,” she said.

Kriska closed her eyes to scan for Raven, but she wasn’t there. Kriska folded her arms. “I’m not leaving without Raven,” she said. “She’s just as much my family as Roma is, and certainly closer than all of you.”

Verdell lifted an eyebrow. “Is she?” Raven appeared in a flash of golden sparks, and Verdell held her out. “There you go.”

Kriska grabbed her friend in a hug. “Now we’re all back together.” Two competent friends at her side. If only she hadn’t been eaten by Warbane, it would be a perfect day. But, then, she was finally getting off Earth, so life was still pretty good.

John dropped into the seat beside Verdell and placed a hand on the glass. “Alright, everyone. Buckle in. I’m putting us on a standard Hunter approach to the launcher, so it’ll be a second until we get there. Plenty of time for a briefing.”

He tapped a few things on the wall, and then the egg started moving up.

“How do you steer that thing if you can’t see?” Kriska asked.

John tapped a button, and suddenly the whole shell turned colors, like the ship was plated in windows instead of whatever metal was going to keep them from exploding when they got to space. Kriska watched as the egg rose from the ground, and one wall of the hangar room sank into the floor. They moved out of the hanger, slow and steady.

Some people would have gone jelly-kneed and weak at the sight of nothing except air between them and the ground. Kriska only grinned. “Nice.”

John clicked the button again, and the egg was back to being a dark, cramped, silver, weirdly oval-shaped room. “You might want to hold on to something.”

The egg gave a lurch, and only Hunter reflexes saved Kriska from being chucked across the ship like a rag doll. She snagged a chair as she flew past and wrestled herself into it. The harness set-up was the same as any fast transport vehicle, and she’d been in enough of those during the journey between the Patronage

## DEATH WEAVER

and the Establishment that securing herself in the seat was a matter of muscle-memory. Kriska gave a low chuckle as the ship's vicious turn pressed her into the seat.

Now this was what she'd been expecting from a spaceship.

"Alright, people," Verdell said. She was in the seat closest to the cockpit that didn't actually have a piece of that black screen within arm's reach. "Most of you have a decent grasp of what's happening, but going in with partial information is how an operation falls apart, so listen up. We're headed off-planet to Titan to follow up on something Kieko was investigating on her own. That's the investigation that led to that unfortunate encounter yesterday." Verdell nodded at Kieko.

Kieko was frowning, eyes low to the ground. "A little less than a week ago, I felt a presence I hadn't felt since I was a little girl. My mother, Ozaki."

In the seat beside her, Eric's lips were tight. "I doctored Kieko's board so she could place herself on a detached information-gathering mission for Warbane, which would give her the access she needed to figure out where her mother was, and what she was doing," Eric said.

Kieko's frown deepened. "There was nothing there." Her words were so quiet that Kriska wouldn't have been able to hear her without Hunter ears. "I found the echo of my mother's mind in a building, but nothing else. I watched the building to see if anyone would show up. For a long time, no one did. Then, without seeing anyone enter the building, there were people inside it. I had missed the fact that they'd moved a teleport in there."

Kriska couldn't blame her. Who on Earth actually had access to that level of Galactic tech? Even rumors of that sort of thing were illegal, let alone possession. Earth governments would move the moon to try and keep long range teleports out of civilian—or even Hunter—hands.

Kieko kept talking. "I went in to investigate, but the whole thing was a trap. Kriska came in time to save me, or I probably would have died. There was so much anger—" her voice choked off.

Eric patted her arm. "Hey, you did ok."

Kriska snorted, drawing annoyed looks from all over the ship. She shrugged. Kieko had been about as useful as a lump. Less, actually. She'd made herself into a target.

Verdell met Kriska's eyes. Her voice was frozen. "You can judge her when you've had to deal with the full weight of her abilities."

For some reason, that seemed exactly like what Gramps would say. Kriska just sat back in her chair and folded her arms.

Kieko continued, her voice quiet. "I'm convinced that the angry one was working with my mother. I felt echoes of her mind around his."

Eric took up the narrative. "I got the coordinates that teleport was aimed at." He grinned. "This wasn't a short-range teleport, it was a big one, like the bridge between Mars and Venus. It acted as a short-range catch-pad to receive local teleports from a few miles away, but the teleport itself was long-range and aimed at a catch-pad on Titan. In other words, it is one way only: built to receive teleports from Earth and send them to Titan."

Kriska digested that information quickly. It was a brilliant set-up. They probably had teleports near all the arms manufacturing areas which could link into that pad. Most of them probably belonged to Mother Dearest. Then they could use that room to ship goods to Titan, where that sort of teleportation tech wasn't nearly as limited.

Eric rubbed his temples. "My guess is that Death's Companion was using that teleport as their way to get back to Titan without having to pass any Darkbane or Warbane checkpoints. They can shuttle weapons and supplies without anyone knowing."

"Our objective," Verdell said, "is to discover where the Death's Companion base is or, failing that, locate the whereabouts of Ozaki Thaddeus. We will not be engaging directly with her, this Asa fellow, or anyone else from that guild—we don't have enough resources. So instead, we locate them and keep them under surveillance until Warbane can send us backup. We will be working in conjunction with our base on the lens array, although I'm sure they won't know it until we deliberately contact them.

"We're operating in the gray, people. We'll do our best to make sure that no one—even Warbane—knows anything more than there is a Warbane team in the area. If the Council ever finds

## DEATH WEAVER

out *we're* the team on Titan, we can expect a lovely little ride home to Io in a security shuttle, and Kriska can probably expect worse than that. On that front, it's probably not great that Io's a three-hour hop from Titan. On the reinforcement front, that's probably the best thing we could hope for. If the team is in danger, then screw the consequences. We get on the horn and *yell*. Death's Companion isn't some dinky little dark guild. They've got Warbane traitors working with them and a full Death Weaver. Does everyone understand the stakes?"

Kriska nodded. She was neck-deep in this Warbane stuff and there was no way out. She was going to be chasing traitors from some Warbane disaster that happened twelve years ago—but she would finally be off-planet.

Roma changed color slightly, and Kriska managed a small smile. Roma was right. These Death's Companion people were going to be entertaining to run down, and she'd managed to win the trust of half the Council's children, which meant she had the biggest shield she could hope for between her and Warbane. She probably couldn't trust them to do more than not shoot her, but they were still a pretty good ticket off planet, and it looked like they were just as committed to finding Asa and killing him.

Then another thought, slightly foreign and flavored with cherry blossoms, drifted through her mind. Actually, thinking about it, this was probably the best case scenario for her. She was finally claiming her dream of exploring other planets, and she was doing it with people she could trust. What was better than that?

Kriska's lips tightened at the thoughts, and she looked up to find Kieko staring at her with soft golden eyes. There was a sort of calmness that radiated from her—a calmness Kriska wanted to take and hold on to with both hands, but she didn't.

"Stay out of my head," Kriska said.

Kieko frowned and leaned back in her chair, eyes on the curved ceiling of the ship. "You are worried. I gave you peace."

"Worry keeps me sharp," Kriska snapped back. "And if I have too much worry to focus, I know how to deal with that myself, thanks."

*Best case scenario? Trust?* That was some nuclear waste Kieko had planted in her head. She couldn't trust anyone on the team farther than she could throw them. Well—except John, maybe.

Then an image of him with a gun in his hand, the muzzle pointed at her forehead while she was chained to a table imprinted itself on the back of her eyeballs. She pursed her lips. John was just as untrustworthy as the rest of them.

Worse than that, Kieko had just tried to force her to trust them. Kriska still wasn't sure whether or not they were going to turn around and shoot her because they secretly believed she really was either working for her mother or a Dark guild.

Eric looked between them and opened his mouth to say something. A look from Kriska warned him not to get involved. He shut his mouth.

Just then, the ship lurched upward, like it had been grabbed and yanked toward the sky.

“What was that?” Kriska asked.

“Launcher,” Verdell said. “This ship has enough power to get off of most planets by itself, but Earth isn't one of them. Too much atmosphere, or something like that. Earth keeps launchers at several locations. It loads us up, and spits us out at high speeds, like a rifle for spaceships. Our engines kick in halfway through the climb, and we burn hydrogen until we hit space.”

As her explanation finished, Kriska was pressed against the back side of her seat, limbs growing heavy like she'd just tried for a thirty meter jump. The ship-rifle-thing had just spat them out. The world grew a little dim as pressure increased. Kriska focused on her breathing. This wasn't even comparable to the worst pressure she'd ever been under—Thaddeus's brain-twisting attempt at an interrogation came to mind—but it sure wasn't comfortable.

If they'd been normal humans, the pressure might've made their brains mushy. That blip in physics which had made them Hunters meant that, for whatever reason, it wasn't quite as easy to liquify their brains. It was a good thing, too. If Kriska had been forced to stand around in a shuttle port line in order to board one of those new ships with the high grade inertial dampers, she probably would have tried to punch someone. Uncomfortable though this ride was, it was *far* less boring.

## DEATH WEAVER

After a few minutes, the pressure eased off. Kriska heard Eric sigh in relief.

John touched the screen that wrapped across the front of the egg-ship. "We have achieved orbit. Next stop, Titan."



**PART  
TWO**

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

Titan was not what Kriska had been expecting. It was supposed to be a cold moon with light gravity, but Kriska followed the other Hunters off the ship and into an Earth-like environment. Or, as Earth-like as a planet could be if the sky was blue instead of always covered in ash. She bounced experimentally on the black tarmac. The gravity was maybe a little lighter, but it wouldn't have been noticeable if she hadn't been looking for it. The temperature felt like a springtime morning, with fresh cold air that gusted past to cut through the warmth given by the sun.

"How is this possible?" Kriska asked. She didn't have a big head for science, but Titan was a long way from the sun.

Eric laughed and pointed at the sky. "Orbital lenses to intensify the light and provide heat. Periodic gravity manipulators buried under the foundation to make the gravity more palatable. Occasionally, you'll find an area where one has failed, and you'll be able to tell."

Kriska frowned. "The entire settlement is on one foundation?"

"Yup, floating on the now-liquified crust. Most of the rocks native to Titan were ice. Raise the temperature of an area, and now you have an interesting problem. Humankind got really good at creating our own tectonic plates when we decided to colonize the rest of the solar system—and a good thing, too, because we decided to set off a planet cracker on our home planet a decade or so later."

Kriska shook her head, looking at the tarmac with new respect. Somehow, her visions of other planets hadn't involved giant boats and gravity manipulators, only blue skies and occasional trees.

Verdell held a fist sized metal cube out to Kriska. “Personal heater and pressure-stabilizer.”

Verdell had another in her other hand, which she held up to her collar. When she pressed the button in the center, it latched onto her jacket, but didn’t do much else. Kriska did the same but didn’t feel any different.

Seeing her confused face as everyone else streamed toward a bunch of colorful buildings at the edge of the landing pad, John dropped back to walk with her.

After a moment of walking in silence, she touched the two inch brick clipped to her jacket. “What’s with the personal thermostat?”

“They’re for any situation where we might have to go to an area that’s not being heated by an orbital lens—or where a section of the lens array has failed.”

Kriska winced. “That would be ugly.”

“This far from the sun? Absolutely. We’re in charge of guarding the lens array, so we also tend to understand that things can go catastrophically wrong. The brick isn’t perfect, but it’s better than dying in temperatures that will freeze your blood.”

Kriska shivered and made a mental note to grab an extra brick if the opportunity ever presented itself, then focused on taking in her surroundings. This was her first time off Earth, and she was going to make it count.

Short, squat buildings lined each side of the road they walked down. On the street side, colorful leaves, petals, and vines woven into fences served as a definite boundary between public and private.

Plants? Fences?

After a moment, Kriska nearly slapped herself upside the head. The short, squat buildings were houses, and the areas around them were yards. She’d seen them around some rich Patronage houses before, but she hadn’t expected to see them around every house here.

And she hadn’t expected to get to living spaces without at least some official *something*. Nobody’d even checked her Hunting license. “No customs?”

“Nope,” John said, then tapped the patch on his jacket. “Our ship’s transponder is tagged with all of Warbane’s codes. The

## DEATH WEAVER

only people who can question where we're going or why is the Conclave—and they've got much bigger things to worry about."

Kriska shook her head with amazement tinged by fractional fear. "You'd never get away with this kind of thing on Earth." If the cost of this freedom was the Conclave, she'd rather go through customs.

John only shrugged.

"Stop gawking, and come on," Verdell called.

Kriska shrugged at John, and they both hurried to keep up.

They were entering an area where small houses gave way to three or four story buildings. Viewscreen tiles covered the outside, turning every inch of the surface—even doors—into signs which blared the need for new shoes, gaming consoles, loans, food, alcohol, and more. Other people walked around on these streets, clothed in greens, yellows, purples, blues—every color, really, except Hunter black. If they had been in the Establishment, every citizen and building owner would have been fined for color pollution. The cacophony of colors made Kriska grin, though. It reminded her of growing up in the Patronage, where officials cared more about plagiarism than...well, anything else on the planet. The rest of it was what Bounty Hunters were for.

"What's the crime rate like? Is there such a thing as local law enforcement? Like the ELRF or University Police?" Kriska asked.

John grinned. "Oh, that's right. This is your first trip off Earth."

There was a piece of faded green fabric stretched low across the street. He stopped to bend under it. Kriska was short enough she didn't bother, and only continued down the street, waiting for her answer. When it didn't come, she flicked him in the shoulder. Hard.

"Ow, what was that for?" John rubbed where Kriska had flicked him.

"For being a patronizing jerk. Now what's the deal with local LEOs?"

John grinned, raising his hands in surrender. "Alright, alright. There are some places which are under Establishment or Patronage control—refineries and government towns for those who work those refineries, mostly. The rest of the galaxy is pretty much protected and regulated by Hunters or mercs. The Conclave sets

down the rules for guilds that take on a law-enforcement role. The short version is, don't get involved with anything unless you have a bounty or unless there's active violence against civilians."

Kriska reviewed that picture for a moment, lips spread wide. "Let me get this straight. You're telling me that there is no government here and that Bounty Hunters maintain the peace?"

Who needed heaven when they had Titan? Kriska couldn't help her grin. A slew of bounties, and no pesky LEOs trying to deal with her same quarry and leave her completely unpaid. This really was going to be better than she had ever imagined. Once she managed to free herself of Warbane, that was.

"That's the simple version. In reality, there are a bunch of Hunter guilds that have now branched out into things like running healing clinics, sponsoring hospitals, welfare—stuff like that's still important, and we've got the Sight to deal with it. Life Weavers heal, Tech Weavers help keep things like the lens array intact. Mind Weavers run clinics and provide psychological support, and Hunters without any special Sight use their still-significant physical abilities for everything from construction to entertainment; circuses and the like. mercs do patrols, Hunters deal with the big fish, and everyone mostly gets along."

Kriska shook her head. "I can't believe this system works." On Earth, there were barely enough un-sighted Hunters to stay on top of crime and Sighted Hunters were unicorns. Those who could, left. Perhaps that was why there was such an imbalance of Hunters between Earth and the Galactics. "Actually, I can believe it. I just can't believe the Patronage and Establishment haven't made land-grabs already."

"That's the thing about it," John said. "The civilians won't stand for rule by either of them—not after they've already destroyed one planet. Even if they were to shuttle all the Earth Hunters up here on dropships to try and take the planet, the Conclave would step in to stop them..."

John kept talking, but Kriska pushed him to the back of her mind as she felt a growing purpleness swell around them, muted, like it was possibility instead of fact. She closed her eyes as she walked, sifting through colors. Verdell, Kieko, and Eric were all wreathed in the bright colors of violent potential that Kriska was

## DEATH WEAVER

used to sensing. Civilians everywhere were still colors all along the spectrum, just like normal. Below all of it, though, was a sense of impending death. The black void that usually made up the background of her sight was tinted purple, and growing larger and brighter gradually, illuminating the possibility of mass death. The purple threads writhed, waiting to expand and claim souls.

Death was coming for all of them.

Kriska slowed as the colors covered more of her awareness. Could that actually be what she sensed? Was this real? That much death, all over Titan?

The colors were so fused together, it was hard to tell what was what. She needed to see more clearly. “There’s something badly, badly wrong here.”

“Wrong how?” John asked from beside her.

“I don’t know.” Kriska reached for Roma, and her friend finished the jump to her hand as if they were already one.

Kriska reached out mentally and forged the bond the way Gramps had shown her so long ago. Her special connection with the Angels. This wasn’t always safe. It deprived her of normal sight as shades of colors she couldn’t normally sense overlaid her world, damped the pain she felt, and sank her into a world where the Fabric of Life was the only thing that mattered.

Roma rose in her mind, immediately available as they fused. Kriska donned Roma’s metal skin as Roma donned her skin of flesh. They became one being—in mind, if not in the more physical sense. Gramps said that she never looked different, but the transformation stole her sight, so she’d never been able to see for herself.

With this new depth of perception, Kriska looked at the colors overlaying the world. The red danger color of pain covered everything like a film; a thin barrier keeping the Monsters on their side of the Fabric of Life. The colors sharpened as she focused her attention on a figure of headsplitting neutral colors who hurried across the street. Above the green and blue which signaled their tangential attachment to violence was a pulsing purple. Monsters waited in that civilian’s shadow.

Kriska's stomach twisted as she scanned for some cause of this threatening death. Was there a bomb? A serial killer with some other sort of massively destructive weapon? *Asa?*

She couldn't tell.

She turned to Eric, then stopped. There was red in his outline, but no purple. Whatever lurked, ready to destroy the people on this moon, it would not kill Eric.

She swept her gaze across the others in her team. No Monsters lurked behind the Fabric of Life, waiting to tear their souls from their bodies. They might get hurt, but they would not die.

The growing shadow of death grabbed her attention, pulling her mind with it as her bond with Roma dragged her deeper into the Wall of Life's plight. Gritting her teeth, Kriska shoved Roma back into the holster and broke the bond.

Normal vision came flooding back.

John was staring at her, worry evident. "What was that?"

"A Death Weaver thing," Kriska snapped. "It's not important. Something is threatening this entire settlement. Perhaps this entire moon. I don't know why, I don't know how, but the Monsters are gathering for a feast."

While she'd examined her Sight, the others had closed in around her. They stood, fingers on weapons that couldn't fight death. Verdell met her eyes. "Where? This street? Is there a civilian marked for death? You've got to give us more to go on."

Kriska flicked one eye closed, like she was in a combat zone. Half her vision lit up with the colors of the Fabric of Life. The red grew in every direction until it permeated everything Kriska could see. "The entire settlement."

Instantly, Verdell's demeanor changed. She drew herself up, and Kriska realized that Verdell was the tallest of all of them—taller than even John. "The lens array. If a Dark guild wanted to kill the entire settlement, that is how they would do it. Take out the lens, and anyone who is outdoors without a heater dies."

Kriska considered that in a flash. Civilians without heaters had Monsters in their shadows. Hunters with heaters would be injured, but fine. It tracked.

Verdell wasn't done giving orders. "Eric, can you check in with our base on the lens array? Tell them an attack might be

## DEATH WEAVER

incoming. Kieko, and John, I need you to get everyone you can inside their homes or businesses. Kriska, do you know how long we've got?"

Kriska shrugged and the colors continued to grow brighter behind her closed eye. "The Monsters are gathering," she said. "They, at least, think it'll happen soon."

Verdell spun on her heel, spearing Eric with her gaze. "Contact the base." Then she stabbed a button on her collar. A helmet snapped over her head, lights projecting on the transparent surface. "Lens array, this is Subcouncilwoman Fitzgerald. Please respond."

Eric shook his head. "Nothing on my end either."

Verdell cursed, then met John and Kieko's eyes. "Commandeer a ship when you're done and join us at the array."

They triggered similar helmets and sprinted away at a full Hunter run.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

They were back at the ship in under a minute. Verdell threw herself into the pilot seat and lit up the screen. “Strap in!”

Kriska didn’t need to be told. She’d already grabbed the straps of the nearest seat and shoved its buckles together.

“Liftoff in three,” Verdell said.

“Strapped in.” That was from Eric. Kriska belatedly echoed his call, and the ship lifted without waiting for the rest of the count. It jerked up from the surface like a mad thing, spinning as it climbed.

“Live com channel,” Verdell warned, then touched a button on her screen. “This is Verdell Fitzgerald. This is an emergency. Give me a priority lane to Warbane Base and clear everyone out from around the lens array.”

“Are you crazy?” The voice, probably whoever was in charge of what passed for flight control, came over the speakers. “We’ve got a mining vessel climbing past the lane you’ve chosen. You’re going to wreck the traffic pattern for days.”

“This is a Warbane emergency. I’m climbing in the priority lane. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll get everyone out of my way. Fitzgerald out.”

A burst of static, then, “This is the Tower to all ships in Titan orbit. Warbane has declared an emergency. All ships within a hundred mile radius, clear the lens array. Mining vessel Starset, adjust orbit to 6-14-226. I repeat, this is a Warbane emergency...”

An alarm sounded on her screen as Verdell touched a button to shunt the tower’s warning—on repeat—and the protestations now coming over the radio, to an ignorable volume. The screen flashed red. Verdell stabbed another button, and a control stick

## DEATH WEAVER

slid out of the floor. She grabbed hold of it. “Eric, what do you have from Warbane Base? Have they begun their sweep of the array? Have they found the threat?”

The alarm sounded again, grating on the ears, and Verdell jerked the stick to the side. The ship rolled, and Kriska began to regret her bowl of chili.

“What was that?” Kriska asked.

“Proximity alarm.” Verdell stabbed yet another button. The hull went transparent.

Kriska could see the ship which had triggered the alarm—a hunk of metal bigger than Kriska could see as the tiny egg ship skipped around the edge of the hull. Suddenly, Kriska felt like an ant in an eggshell, driving in space. They were all going to die.

“Eric?” Verdell prompted again.

“Sorry,” Eric muttered. “Security’s clamped down. They probably know something’s up, but I can’t—” He stopped for a moment, narrowed his eyes, then whooped, “I’m in!”

“Great. Now what’s going on in there?”

Eric closed his eyes like Kriska did to use her Sight, and his grin faded as quickly as it had come.

“All electronic records are shattered.”

“How do you shatter electronic records?” Kriska asked.

“Quiet,” Verdell snapped. The ship careened to the side again, spinning past a smaller vessel. Curses over the radio. Verdell didn’t seem to hear them. “Eric, can you make anything out of it?”

“Not before we get there—oh, son of a motherless ship. It’s the Sexton protocol.”

Verdell stiffened. “You’re sure?”

Kriska leaned into the straps as the ship kept jerking around. Sexton protocol? Wasn’t Sexton Eric’s last name? Why would they have a defensive protocol with Eric’s name on it?

Eric kept talking. “Everything in the system is shattered beyond the phonemic level. Name another protocol that would do that. My father tried to attack this base, and now every scrap of information I should be able to get from the system is utterly useless.”

*That’s* why they had a defensive protocol with Eric’s name on it. His father probably had the same level of Sight as Eric, if not more.

“Surely you can find something,” Kriska said. She remembered what they’d said about his father—that he was a traitor working for Death’s Companion. If he was on the array, they needed information worse than ever.

“You’re kidding, right?” Eric spat. “This thing was built to keep my father out, and my abilities don’t hold a candle to his. Even if I could manipulate the computers that far, it wouldn’t do one whit of good. To make any sense out of everything, you have to find two or three parts of the specific piece of information and then put them together in the right order. Besides that, there’s so much useless information in there that looking for the pieces you need to even make up an approximate phoneme is like looking for a needle in a haystack. This is impossible.”

“Then we’re going in blind,” Verdell said. It wasn’t a grim statement, just a fact. “Weapons hot. Report contacts before engaging, but don’t risk yourself. Eric, you can still run comms, so I expect you to be focused on your job. Got it?”

Eric clenched his fist. “If he’s there—”

A giant metal platform eclipsed the black of space beneath the ship. They started to descend.

“Then you will do nothing,” Verdell snapped. “Our first priority is making sure nobody takes out the lens array. Civilians are in danger. I don’t care what ghosts of your past are in there, you follow orders and focus on the main objective.”

The ship slowed abruptly, and Kriska braced herself against the side of her chair. This was going to bruise.

Then the ship landed on a platform that was, as far as Kriska could tell, open to space and lit only by the green lights that lined the outer edge of the platform.

Eric tossed something at her, and Kriska reached out to grab a set of clear glasses.

“What?”

“Put them on,” Verdell said. The lights on her helmet were shifting. “You don’t have to do anything—Eric will control your display. We’re going to have to split up. Eric will go with me, so you just follow the route he sends you. We don’t know what’s going on in there. It could be anything, from haywire electronics from Malcom Sexton’s attack to Dark guild Hunters. We haven’t

## DEATH WEAVER

been able to contact anyone to clarify the situation. Hopefully, we'll breach and find that the only problems are electronic."

Kriska almost snorted. In space, electronics were the only thing keeping everyone alive. If that was the best case scenario, then what was the worst?

She put the glasses on, and a schematic of the base appeared in her vision. She could look past it without a problem, but when she focused closer to her own nose, the schematic sharpened.

It was going to take a second to get used to balancing this new information with what her own Sight gave her.

Verdell hadn't stopped talking. "Our priority is to find out what has compromised the array and is impacting Titan. To that end, we'll start by clearing the facility. If we don't know what's going on, we can't fix it."

Verdell looked at Kriska. "Do you understand the mission parameters?"

Kriska nodded.

Verdell gave a slight smile, gone before Kriska was even sure it was there. "Good. If you encounter something, describe it over comms. Eric will grab a visual if it's available. If it's something you can't handle, I'll be there as quick as I can, and I expect you to do the same. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am." Kriska wasn't usually one for honorifics, but that one seemed to fit. She grinned and jumped out of the eggship when Verdell opened a hole in the side.

For a moment, she forgot about the whole in-space thing, and then her feet hit the grey eternacrete flooring. Her eyes bugged wide. No atmosphere, no building, no anything, and yet she did not float away or start gasping for air. Almost, she turned to ask Verdell about it, but there was a growing red spot on Titan, spinning below them, that made her close her mouth and focus on following the path displayed on the glasses Eric had given her. One eye closed to look out for danger, Kriska sprinted down the tarmac until she came to a building. The door had a red light glaring at her from eye level.

"Locked door, anybody?"

"Rip it off its hinges," Verdell said.

Kriska shrugged. The other Hunter made it sound so easy. She grabbed the handle and jerked. The handle came out, but not much else changed. Kriska pursed her lips, grabbed the new hole in the door, and pulled, tearing two inch thick metal from the door and bending it back on itself. Her hand stung by the time she was done, but she'd opened a hole big enough for her to enter. Through all that, the hinges hadn't shifted.

"You're funny," Kriska said into the mike, voice dry.

"Remind me to give you a course on breaching orbital installations." Verdell did not sound amused.

"A pack of explosives would help," Kriska said.

"In space? No thanks." Her disgust was clear. "Now cut the chatter."

The building was completely empty of the yellow-orange aura Hunters radiated, and Kriska wished that John was there to check for anyone she couldn't sense—but that was really a futile wish, and she dismissed it. She knew enough already. According to Verdell, this place usually crawled with Hunters. Now it was as dark to her Sight as if it were uninhabited, which meant that either all the Hunters were gone, were dead, or were so terrified that they'd vanished off the web of violence and death that Kriska was so intimately connected to. The only thing John would be able to tell her was which of the three situations she'd managed to get herself tangled up in. At the end of the day, something terrible had happened here. John's presence wouldn't change that.

The hallway beyond the shredded door echoed with Kriska's footsteps. Empty. She passed offices, recreation rooms, even a place with enough monitors to watch the whole facility and an armory behind the desk that screamed *security office*. Empty, with cameras offline. Kriska moved on.

The armory had a single wimpy handgun still locked up. Someone had spilled a box of Merc rounds across one of the metal prep tables and never bothered to clean up.

"This place is deserted," Verdell breathed into the mic. "Even the scientist staff are gone."

Kriska nodded even though she knew Verdell couldn't see her. "Same here. Where are the controls to destroy the array? If someone is here, that's where they'll be."

## DEATH WEAVER

A cough from Eric. “We aren’t stupid enough to have controls that will destroy the array. You would have to destroy it from outside, by shooting at it. But in order to stay in range long enough without being destroyed, they would have to take out all the turrets and missile tubes that discourage unfriendly visitors from space.”

“Or detonate one of our missiles in its tube,” Kriska said. The resulting explosion would bypass any armor on the array and destroy a sizable chunk in the process.

Silence from Eric. “Oh.”

“Kriska, you go check the munitions room. What you just described would be suicidal for the person that detonated the missile unless they have a short-range teleport on the facility already, and that would be difficult to smuggle in.”

Kriska had her doubts. Anyone who could make everyone on an orbital installment like this disappear probably wouldn’t have any difficulty smuggling in a teleport. Especially if this was Death’s Companion. They’d managed to get a long range teleport onto Earth, after all.

“Still,” Verdell said, as though reading Kriska’s mind. “I’m not putting anything past whoever this is. Not when they’ve already made everyone assigned to the Titan base disappear.”

Kriska nodded to herself and adjusted her path to the new route displayed on her glasses.

Verdell continued, “Eric, you’re going to the control room. The array has thrusters in place for emergency maneuvers and adjustments in case of drift or solar wind, which they might be able to find a way to turn against us. While you’re there, make sure we don’t have any hostile ships approaching. I’ll go see if I can salvage anything from the system to figure out how this happened. If either of you two see anything, then get on comms and yell.”

The green pathway displayed on the clear goggles Kriska wore changed to curve around to the right and move even deeper into the heart of the lens array. She followed it, moving at an easy lope. There was no purple of impending death in the facility itself, and the purple on the planet below had begun to fade.

Something about them being on the array was decreasing the chance of death below. The Monsters were starting to disperse.

A curse from Eric crackled through the com in Kriska's ear. "They have half the failsafes disabled. They aren't going to attack it. They're just going to turn the thing off!"

A surge of adrenaline spiked Kriska's system. She started to turn, but this was an electronics system. There wasn't anything she could do anyway. She turned back to her assigned path, moving faster than before.

"Can you fix it?" Verdell asked.

"It's really fried, but—yes! I'm into the main system. Hold the com, everyone, the wizard is about to work his ma—"

A blip of purple flashed behind Kriska's eyes as she turned the corner to the munition's room. Something inside went from completely inactive, to deadly in an instant. The imprint of the moon below grew brighter as the Monsters started to gather once again.

Kriska ran toward the munitions room as the entire array began to shake. "Eric, that doesn't sound good."

"Um, it's fine. I'm handling it?" And the upward lilt to his tone didn't make her feel any better.

Kriska tore into the munitions room, one eye closed to find the sudden threat. The back corner. The casing on one of the missiles had slid back. She didn't know anything about missile technology, let alone *Galactic* missile technology. "Eric, I've got a live missile. Can you handle whatever that is and this at the same time?"

"Sure." And his voice only sounded a little strangled. "Tapping into your glasses now."

A green circle showed up on Kriska's display. She ripped the panel off without waiting for his instructions as he muttered something unintelligible under his breath.

Somehow, Kriska had always imagined that missiles would run on wires, but there were no wires under the plating. Instead, it was a whirl of rotating metallic spheres and glowing blue light. "What now?"

"...no you don't, you little—don't make me fireball you!"

## DEATH WEAVER

“Eric!” Kriska said again. The purple mass writhing under the Fabric of Life was only growing, and the black threads which made up the Fabric of Life were already unusually thin—which bothered her, but she shoved that oddness to the side in favor of immediate concerns. If this missile detonated, the consequences could be worse than just killing everyone on Titan. That much death in that small a space, in this place where the Fabric of Life was already starting to thin?

The Monsters had always wanted to fully cross into this world, but the Fabric of Life kept them out. If the Fabric of Life took that much damage, though? It could be like the Split all over again, except it wouldn’t be Physics taking the impact. No, it would be the concepts of life and death. The Monsters could pour through the fissure and devour anyone they could find. Forget Asa’s melodrama, Death really would walk among them.

“Sorry,” Eric said. Another green spot lit up on her glasses. “See that sphere?”

Kriska reached toward it. The green highlighting turned red.

“Don’t touch that sphere.”

Kriska snatched her hand back. “*Start* with that!”

“One sec, I’ve got to deal with an orc.”

“A what?” Kriska didn’t bother to hide her annoyance. “You’re playing fantasy games while we’re trying to save a planet?”

“No, but you wouldn’t understand if I told you I had to reroute the hyperferin conduit’s flow to circumnavigate a Verros microchip someone has hardwired to skew every incoming input by—you know what, doesn’t matter. I killed the orc. Great for me. Stick something pointy right there.”

A new green dot appeared on the glasses, and Kriska pulled a knife from her belt. She jammed it between two of the spinning spheres. Screeching filled the air as the array lurched again. Sparks flew from the missile. Kriska grabbed onto a nearby shelf full of grenades to steady herself and looked down at the missile, which was no longer glowing red.

Her closed eyelid showed the entire room bathed in purple. “That made it worse!”

There was no convenient timer on the missile, but the shade of purple behind her eyes said she only had a few seconds.

“One sec, I—”

“—I don’t have a sec!” Kriska closed both eyes and reached down to Roma. She pulled the golden threads around Roma into the threads that made up her own aura, forging the bond. In an instant, the mass of purple sharpened into separate threads, each fighting their own battle against the Monsters.

She opened her eyes. The Fabric of Life covered everything in a detail she could never have seen without her bond to Roma. She stared at the missile, watching neutral colors and deadly colors converge at a single point within the missile. What the actual missile looked like right there, she had no idea, but that was where life turned into death. *That* was where she needed to strike.

She pointed Roma at the confluence and pulled the trigger.

“What are you—” but Eric’s protest came too late.

A whine split the air as the neutral colors and deadly colors battled with the bullet at that confluence. Kriska grabbed the purple threads where the Monsters gathered and wrenched them away as the Monsters started to tear through. The threads broke, but she grabbed their tattered ends and held them together.

And then the whine stopped.

A golden thread spun from Roma wrapped around the torn threads, stitching them back together.

The missile’s colors lightened back to a head splitting green color.

Kriska released the bond and staggered to the ground.

The missile had nearly exploded. She had almost died.

Roma warmed in her hand, comforting. *But we didn’t. We worked together.*

Kriska nodded jerkily and opened her eyes to see the missile in front of her. The front of the silver casing had distorted, looking like the door she’d torn her way through at the entrance of the array, except the tips of the jagged metal had turned black.

Two voices over the com.

Eric: “What was *that*? Are you alright?”

Verdell: “Status report!”

Kriska let out a sigh. “The missile has been neutralized and I’m fine.” Well, exhausted, but fine. The bond was a way to supplement her normal Sight, but fusing her essence with Roma

## DEATH WEAVER

took energy from them both. That fusion came with benefits: increased Sight, immunity to pain, access to Roma's greater Angelic Weaver abilities. But blindness to anything she couldn't See wasn't the only drawback. The longer she stayed fused, the worse the energetic toll became. Luckily, she'd only been bonded for a little while. Unluckily, that was the second time she'd bonded with Roma today, and it was starting to take its toll.

She pushed herself back to her feet and checked the map. She still had some area to search. Better get going. "What about Eric? Have you—uh, killed all the orcs?"

Eric snorted. "I would have, but *someone* decided to bring a necromancer to the party. Luckily, zombified orcs are easier than regular orcs, and I have all the keys to the castle. Well, some of the keys to the castle? The info isn't as shattered in here because our necromancer's been busy, and I'm kind of piggy-backing off of their resurrection work."

"Mixing metaphors, much?" Verdell asked dryly.

"Yeah, well, give me five minutes and I'll have the reaction thrusters under control, so we don't crash into that little moon." The moon in question being Titan. Wonderful.

As if on cue, the array shuddered again.

"Eric!" Verdell and Kriska said again.

"Hey, that one wasn't me. Well, some of the stabilization's still offline, so the fact that we *felt it* was kind of me, but that was just a docking tremor."

Verdell's voice grew grim. "Dark guild Hunters?"

Her question was answered by John's cheerful voice on comms. "All the civilians should be safely in their homes. What's the situation up here?"

Kriska released a heavy breath. Not Dark Hunters come to make sure the array died, only John and Kieko. Which meant the moon below should be safe.

Kriska tuned out the chatter as she scanned the planet below yet again. The purple had faded to almost nothing, but something still ate at her. It was something she'd noticed before, but merely accepted—there hadn't been time to puzzle about it, then. Now, there was time, and she twirled the ends of her hair

between her fingers as she tried to remember just what had bothered her, before.

Then it hit her. The Fabric of Life felt wrong. It was too thin, and that had nearly killed *everyone*.

Sure, this was a space station, and the Fabric of Life wasn't as thick in places where there weren't a lot of biological creatures, but this was *too* thin. This felt almost like Mother Dearest's workshop after she'd executed an entire subordinate crime family for embezzlement. Thirty people, all dead in one little room across the street.

And she hadn't felt a single person on this array.

Not a single person out of over two thousand.

Verdell was saying something else, but Kriska overrode her. "John, can you sense anyone here? Anyone at all?"

"Nope," John said. "But this is a Hunter facility, and even the scientists are mostly mercs." So he wouldn't be able to see them, but she should be able to.

That sinking feeling in Kriska's gut began to twist. "I haven't seen as much as a merc's outline since we got here. The facility is completely empty of life except for us five."

"Empty of life? Kieko, do you have a confirm?" Verdell asked.

"I can't sense anyone," came Kieko's eternally serene voice.

"They're either all gone, or they're dead," Kriska said. The sinking feeling in her gut was back.

"Impossible," Eric said. "There are over two-thousand people in this facility."

"Were." Kriska's voice was grim. "They're all gone now." Or dead, but she didn't say it.

"Gone where?" John's voice had the beginning of a tremor in it.

Kriska glanced around the rooms as she passed, but they were all still empty. No blood. No signs of spent brass or energy cartridges. No sign of bullet impact. Whatever happened, no one fought it.

"I want a full sweep of the facility," Verdell ordered. "Room-by-room. Split up to cover more ground."

It took almost three-quarters of an hour to look through every nook and cranny of the station, and it felt like she got closer to

## DEATH WEAVER

the source of the fabric's frayed strings with every step, until she was afraid to breathe too hard, for fear of splitting it.

Then, approaching the final section of the search grid Eric had painted on her glasses display, the stench of rotting bodies hit her over the back of the head, and she stumbled.

"I found it," she said over comms, before she could ask herself what made her so certain. The Fabric of Life twisted with every step of the living, and the scent of death was hot in her nostrils.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Hold on, we’re coming to you,” Verdell said.

But Kriska couldn’t stop her feet moving woodenly toward a door at the end of the hallway in the residential section of the station. The plaque next to the door declared that it was a lounge. The door was genuine polished oak, like the rest of the doors she’d seen, and shut snugly against the frame.

She grasped the handle, moving mechanically, and then pulled the door open, expecting—well, she wasn’t entirely sure. Blood, certainly, and perhaps two-thousand corpses stacked in like corkwood.

The room contained none of that.

Behind her, Kriska could hear four sets of footsteps moving fast toward her.

“Do you smell that?” John asked.

“Smell what?” Verdell’s footsteps didn’t slow. “You’re imagining things.”

Kriska already had one hand clapped over her nose, the stench was so overpowering. How could Verdell not smell that? It was like day old meat left out in the hot sun with worms already wriggling inside. The scent of pure evil filled the entire hallway, making Kriska force down her churning stomach.

Verdell stopped beside Kriska at the entrance. When she saw what was inside, she froze, hands fisted at her side. “What could do this?”

People lined the room, sitting on couches, on the floor, watching the television—muted—that played a children’s cartoon, except their eyes held no light, and their jaws were open in the

## DEATH WEAVER

slackness of death, a perpetual yawn that fell short of mimicking the maw of death that had enveloped them.

There were two Hunters dead on their feet, still standing. One woman still had a glass of something in her hand. If the room hadn't been so cold and the Fabric of Life so threadbare, Kriska could have thought they were still alive.

"Where are the rest?" Kieko whispered, breaking the stillness.

She was right. The room was big, and between everyone who was sitting on the floor, the seats, and the area around the bar at the back of the room, there may have been two hundred people, but there certainly weren't two thousand.

It was like no one else heard Kieko's question, though. They just stared, frozen like the dead.

"How?" John breathed.

"Who?" There was an edge in Verdell's voice, and it wasn't shock. Her fists, clenched at her side, began to shake, and Kriska could see her aura rise from perpetual yellow to orange so bright that looking at her hurt. The Fabric of Life twisted under the possibility of violence.

With the snap of a spell shattering, Verdell whipped around, locked her eyes on Kriska and took a single step forward, into Kriska's personal space. "You." The word was dull, like the strike of a hammer pounding a nail that drove ever deeper. "How did you know this was here? How did you know this was going to happen? Why did you bring us here, too late to save them? How did you know?"

Kriska stepped back, eyes closed as she watched the Fabric of Life strain. Verdell's anger would snap the fragile threads that remained and send them all into everlasting darkness, where the Monsters waited.

"Calm down, Verdell," Kriska said.

Kriska saw the flash before Verdell moved, the brightening of purpose, and opened one eye. Verdell's fist propelled forward, and Kriska braced herself for the opening move of the fight that would tear the Fabric of Life for good.

John stepped between them and swallowed the punch to his gut without pause. He put both hands on Verdell's shoulders and held her.

“Not here. Not now,” he said with unnatural calm.

The orange outlining Verdell’s fist disappeared into the void that was John. The Fabric of Life rocked, but the tenuous strands held.

“They’re all dead.” Verdell’s words were barely a breath, muffled by John, who pulled her close so she could bury her head in his shoulder.

“We will find the ones who did this,” John promised. “But it wasn’t Kriska. And looking for someone to blame will only do harm. This is a place where death reigns, and violence, whether you intend it or not, will only lead to death.”

Could he see it too, that the fabric was so weak a gunshot could snap the threads and send them tumbling into darkness? It was the only explanation Kriska could think of.

Kieko grabbed Eric’s hand and started tugging him away. “We should go.”

Eric’s feet moved robotically, and his head was still turned to stare at the room of death.

John pulled Verdell away, and she didn’t fight him, which only left Kriska.

“I’ll catch up,” she said, and stepped farther into the room of death. She had to find out who did this, and she couldn’t do that by standing in the doorway. The Fabric of Life would support one individual who could see the most dangerous places and avoid them.

She stepped between bodies, looking for any sign of the person who had done this. In the corner, behind the bar, there was a figure outlined in red and purple, like a ghost. A memory, held by the fabric he had almost destroyed.

*He stood here, it said. He did this.*

Perhaps it was a warning to those who came after. Perhaps it was only the Fabric of Life’s inability to cope with his presence. Regardless, his ghost stood there, frozen in the moment when he killed them all.

Asa. The one who walked in death.

He didn’t have a weapon in his hand, although several hung at his waist, all imprinted with the interlocking rings topped by a snake head that was the Duanti crime family’s stamp.

## DEATH WEAVER

He obviously liked Earth-made illegal weapons, but the fact that he hadn't used any of those weapons was not surprising. She wished it was—but seeing his shadow, she could imagine the scene. Something had pulled every single Hunter in the facility into this room, and Asa did what he was best at. He killed them all without lifting a finger.

Slowly, carefully, Kriska picked her way out of the room, and found the others sitting around a table.

“You're sure?” John was saying. They were all arrayed around a table in a room that looked almost identical in lay-out to the mess hall back at their outpost on Earth, down to the food in the back of the room, still mostly untouched.

“My mother was here. I can feel the ghost of her mind.” Kieko's normally serene voice shook, and her usually dark skin was pale as she sat in the plastic chair, staring at the table in front of her.

Eric squeezed her hand. “We'll find her and bring her back,” he promised.

“But why?” Kieko asked. “Why would she do this? Why would she do any of it?”

“I've asked myself the same question for years,” Eric said.

“They're murderers, and traitors,” Verdell said from her place leaning against the wall. “We will bring them both to the guild, where they will stand trial for what they did.”

Kieko pulled into herself with a raspy breath reminiscent of a sob.

Eric glared at Verdell. “Read the room, why don't you?” He helped Kieko up, and they left.

Verdell stared after them, arms folded unapologetically. When they were gone, she looked at John, who was frowning.

“What?” she asked.

“Ozaki might be a traitor, but she's still Kieko's mother, and life got a lot worse for her the moment her mom left. You couldn't try to be at least a little sensitive?”

It wasn't a great time to butt in, but Kriska had at least some confidence in her ability to survive if Verdell decided to attack her again. The Fabric of Life here was strained, but not threadbare.

As she opened her mouth to tell them what she'd found, she stopped. Was there even a best way to broach this subject while

John and Verdell were arguing about Kieko? Then she shrugged. Their sensitivity wasn't her problem.

She plopped down in the plastic chair Kieko had just vacated and looked at Verdell. "Asa was here. You know, the one from Death's Companion that shot Kieko and knocked Eric senseless?"

Verdell drew herself up.

"And how would you know that?"

Kriska cocked her head. "The same way I know the rest. Someone steeped in that much death leaves a shadow everywhere he goes—especially when he's killing hundreds of people. I'd guess that he was here, doing this, while we were all still trying to get on the planet. There was no way to avoid it."

"You don't know that." Each word from Verdell was a punch. Kriska could see her fingers curled into fists. For someone in such a relatively relaxed pose, leaning against the wall, she radiated tension.

Kriska shrugged. "Believe what you want, but that's what my Sight tells me. Your thick skull isn't any of my business."

Was that last bit necessary? Kriska suppressed a frown as Verdell's aura spiked in preparation. She could have at least tried to avoid a fight—or perhaps mindless violence fueled by grief and rage would be a relief. Behind her eyes, she could still see the yawning darkness of that threadbare fabric. It filled every black space in her Sight, waiting for her to close her eyes.

Kriska turned away from Verdell with a snort. Her anger was misplaced. She should be provoking the one wreathed in death, not Verdell.

John stepped into the violent silence, palms forward in the universal sign for peace. "Can we not do this right now?"

Kriska couldn't bring herself to answer him.

"Great," John finally said. "Now, Verdell. Is there any way to dial the timeline in any closer? Or figure out where they all went after they did this? By my count, Ozaki Thaddeus, Malcom Sexton, and this Asa guy were all here. If they're all going to the same place after this, we need to intercept them before they can cause this amount of damage somewhere else."

"We should call it in," Verdell said, her voice a whisper. A quick blink, and Kriska could see that her aura had faded to a

## DEATH WEAVER

light yellow—as far from violence as Kriska had ever seen her. “If those two were here, Mom needs to know.”

“So she can send us back to Earth?” John asked. “And what about Kriska?”

Verdell looked up at Kriska, her brown eyes dull. “What about her?”

“Thaddeus is probably back at Io, and he’s probably grabbed every ear he can find to tell them how Kriska shot Kieko and then vanished. Which, like it or not, isn’t that far off.”

“So? We will tell them the truth.”

“And if the Conclave has already opened an investigation?” John snapped. “Still want to call it in?”

Verdell clenched her jaw. “Screw you, John.”

“That’s a no, then.”

Verdell sighed. “You’re right.” Another pause of thoughtful silence, then, “There will be two messages. The first will let them know that a Warbane team was here and what we found. I’ll put the second on a time delay. It will go straight to Mom, letting her know that we’re ok, and what we found. I’ll even put in a good word for the Wolf. Mom’s not stupid—she’ll believe us over Thaddeus—but there still won’t be much she can do if the Conclave confiscates the message. We’ll go to ground on Titan until we figure out what’s next.”

“Thank you,” John breathed.

Verdell continued, like she hadn’t heard. “I harvested what I could from the Council’s lockbox computer with my clearance as a sub councilor. That should tell us where everyone else went, but I’m not opening it here, or it could get infected by the Sexton protocol.”

John nodded. “Thank you, Verdell,” he said again.

“You’re a pain, John.” In spite of her words, Verdell managed a smile, then kicked off the wall and stared at Kriska. “I hope I was wrong when I accused you before. You did good, here. Without your Sight, we wouldn’t have known the failsafes were off, and a lot of people would have died. Also, the missile.”

Kriska didn’t respond, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Sure enough, Verdell’s expression hardened. “If I find out you’re connected with any of this, I’ll hunt you to the end of the

universe. There's not a thing out there that will save you from Warbane's justice."

Kriska shrugged at the threat. She'd heard it before. And having a mother who supplied their weapons was hardly her fault. She stood. "Back to the ship?" Her stomach grumbled. Looking around, though, the odds of a decent meal any time soon were low. Not unless she wanted to eat what was laid out at the back of the mess—and she wasn't about to take food from the dead.

She fished a ration bar from her pack and ignored Verdell's disgusted look.

"Kriska has used a lot of Sight. Let it go," John hissed at his sister, and Kriska pretended that she hadn't heard.

Some people lost their appetite at the sight of the dead. Kriska had to admit that seeing the Fabric of Life in that state hadn't done much for her stomach, either, but John was right. Even Kriska's Sight took energy to use. More than that, seeing the dead made her value life even more. Food—especially good food—was part of that. So yeah, she was hungry. It just meant she wasn't some sort of half dead shade.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The ship was silent, with Eric and Kieko in the closest thing the egg had to a back corner, John and Verdell sitting in the piloting chairs, and Kriska in an uncomfortable middle spot. John fished out a headset—a mic dot that went on his throat, and put another com bug in his other ear, which was a dozen times better than the bulky mic packs Kriska had used in the past—and got to work trying to sort out orbital traffic. From what she could overhear, Io had been notified and the array was being put in quarantine until a Warbane team could get there—courtesy of Eric messing with the environmental systems on board. Anyone from Death’s Companion who went on board would suffocate and freeze, which meant that any further attempts at destroying the array would have to be done from space.

To that end, all orbiting traffic was to be re-routed. If someone with a passel of missiles strapped on their ship got even close, the tower would know well in advance and, according to Verdell, Warbane had given Titan Space Control a wonderful small, though heavily armed, spacecraft. Problem solved.

Perhaps it was because John and Verdell felt the need to sort out traffic on Warbane’s behalf as well as fly the ship, but the journey back to Titan took almost an hour and Kriska spent most of it thinking about her new quarry, Asa. What kind of person could do that much damage to the Fabric of Life? It was like the entire situation had been engineered to destroy not just the Warbane base, but to tear the Fabric of Life into tatters. What could he possibly gain by destroying life itself? It would kill him just as surely as it would kill everyone else.

When the egg ship landed, Kriska was no closer to finding an answer.

Verdell and John stumbled out of the ship like the rush to the base, scrambling of traffic, and subsequent repair had taken years off their life. They stopped on the tarmac.

“I’ve got to open the Council Archive to figure out where everyone went,” Verdell said, rubbing her temples. “But I’m not doing that in an unsecured location.

“When will the message that we were the ones on the station be released to Io?” John asked. He’d lost the usual energy in his voice, and he just looked exhausted.

“Tomorrow morning.”

“That’s not a lot of time.”

Verdell shook her head. “It’s too much time, frankly. I don’t know what Carol put in her report but, knowing her, it was just that all of us had left base. If that message got to Io this afternoon, then that means Mom’s going to be freaking out about her children being kidnapped or something for almost a whole day.”

John looked down at the landing pad. “Right.”

Kieko and Eric were still clinging to each other. Kriska wasn’t sure they heard a word Verdell or John said.

“Where are we going to find this ‘secured location?’” Kriska finally asked. She needed to get to Asa before he could do any more damage to the Fabric of Life, and part of her longed to just abandon them all and follow the tattered threads back to him, but that would take forever. The longer they waited, the longer Asa had to do even more damage.

Verdell folded her arms. “We have places. Now come on.”

They all set off in the same direction they’d been going before. Kriska kept one eye closed so she could catch any hint of the Lens’s imminent destruction, but luckily, this time, there was nothing.

She found herself wondering why Death’s Companion had targeted the array in the first place. Their plan had been smart. If Eric hadn’t been there, the failsafes they’d disabled would have been hard to find and the missile would have destroyed whatever survived the array’s self-immolation. But what should the array’s destruction have gotten them? Was it really as simple as destroying the Wall of Life? And if so, why?

## DEATH WEAVER

They finally stopped in front of a house with undecorated eternacrete walls and dirt where the other houses they'd passed had a yard filled with green things. There was still a fence around the outside, which Verdell hopped with ease. The door opened without protest and showed them into a large room with plastic furniture, an info screen set in the wall, and an eternacrete floor covered by a degraded plastic rug that shed crunchy plastic flakes on the floor around it like little black bugs.

"This looks like it's from the Establishment," Kriska said. She'd meant the observation specifically for Roma, but John caught it, too. Bounty Hunter hearing was inconvenient.

"That's because it is," John said. "It took a while for everyone to decide that letting the Establishment and Patronage settle with the rest of the galactics was a bad idea. Now we use the shells of their initial attempt to live here as safe-houses for us. None of the galactics want the place. They like real furniture."

Looking down at the degraded rug—it was black and green, with an approximation of something that could have once been leaves—Kriska wondered just how long this house had been here. Establishment buildings were built to last, after all.

"We'll have to be on the move by tomorrow morning," Verdell said. "So find a place to get some shut eye. No telling when we're going to have to scramble or where we'll be going when we do."

There were two bedrooms, which was remarkably luxurious for the Establishment, but they had more space on Titan, so it made a certain amount of sense. Kriska chose one at random and glanced around. There were hooks in the wall—probably for hanging coats, but they looked like they would hold Raven.

"You ok with spending the night there?" Kriska asked.

Raven stayed her regular golden color, not dimming or brightening. Nothing.

"What? Are you mad at me for something?"

With John and Verdell around, she knew she hadn't been paying Raven or Roma as much attention as they deserved, but surely Raven couldn't be mad about that. Or maybe she could be. How well did Kriska even know Raven, anyway? They'd been together for a few days total.

"Do you miss Verdell?" Kriska asked.

Raven darkened just a bit, and Kriska got the impression of a *yes*.

She pressed her lips together. "I would miss you, but if you're not happy with me, you can go back."

*No.*

That was all she could sense from the weapon, and it was more than she usually got from Roma. Still, she wished she could have conversations that lasted longer than one word.

"Is it because you don't think Verdell will take you back?"

Raven brightened, and then dimmed, like a shrug. *No.*

Well, that settled that. "You'll tell me if things change?"

*Perhaps.*

There was nothing left for Kriska to do except shrug and unbelt Roma, who went beneath her pillow. Even surrounded by other Bounty Hunters—*especially* surrounded by other Bounty Hunters—Kriska refused to let her guard down.

In the morning, she would finish hunting down Asa, and that would be that. The Wall of Life would be safe. She would be satisfied. It would all be over, tomorrow.

"Goodnight Roma. Goodnight Raven." Raven didn't respond, but Roma flashed her version of *goodnight*.

Kriska woke to a presence standing in the doorway, and it wasn't Kieko, who had wandered in a few hours ago and taken the other bed on the opposite side of the room.

One hand on Roma, Kriska sat up and glared at the person staring at her.

John.

He gave her a terse smile. "Eric and Verdell just found more intel. You should come." He turned around and went back into the main room.

Kriska slid out of bed, grumbling to herself. She'd only just barely gotten to sleep when Kieko had come in, and then John had to ruin her rest, too.

## DEATH WEAVER

She belted Roma on and pulled Raven off the wall, checked them both over, then ran a hand through her chin length black hair. It was tangled, but nothing a little finger combing couldn't fix.

That done, she wandered into the main room and froze. A dark miasma had settled over the place. Verdell leaned against the back wall, arms folded, glaring at the info screen across from her.

Eric sat on the hard plastic couch in front of her, a moth-eaten blanket on his shoulders forgotten in his white-faced rage. "That good-for-nothing, traitorous—"

A motion behind Kriska as Kieko's near-silent footsteps stumbled toward her. "Eric, please," Kieko whispered from behind.

Kriska glanced over her shoulder. Was Kieko alright?

Kieko's eyes were dark and sleepless, set in an unnaturally pale face.

John, the only one who didn't look like he was either about to commit murder or pass out, looked down at the disintegrating carpet. "We found where the rest of the base went," Verdell said.

"According to the system records, a scuffle emerged between the Establishment and the Patronage just outside the Griswold settlement on the edge of the Sand Sea. It's on the far side of the planet, which means we have far less surveillance in the area. Before anyone from the Array could respond, the scuffle escalated into a conflict, and then into a miniature war. Eighty percent of the mercenaries assigned to the Array were deployed, with Hunters held more-or-less in reserve." Even John's voice held a tinge of anger.

Verdell cut in, eyes flashing. "Less than two hours later, all systems except non-essentials were shut down on the array, and two hours after that, we arrived. We can assume that the drop in activity is due to whatever happened on the array."

"That's not the point," Eric growled. "The point is that my father slipped into the system undetected, planted a fake report that deployed eighty percent of the mercenaries on the array, and then triggered the Sexton Protocol on the *way out* to keep me from getting this data. He killed two hundred of my guild mates, and potentially thousands more. Then he left this mess for me to clean up."

Kriska could see the redness in his eyes and frowned. He hadn't gotten a lick of sleep. "How did you put all that together?" Kriska asked. Before, he'd said it was impossible.

"How do you think?" He spat on the floor. "Thanks to the gift from my father, it was like putting together a puzzle with no corners, six billion pieces, and no idea what it was supposed to look like in the end." Then his fury calmed by a fraction. He looked at Verdell, then at Kieko. "Verdell got a piece of the picture from the council archive, and I reconstructed the rest of it using that as a corner."

Behind her, Kieko still trembled. "Do you think, maybe, he triggered the system so you wouldn't have to know what he did?" Her voice was a hoarse whisper.

Eric's eyes hardened. "No. He's the exact kind of psycho that would leave this specifically for me to find. Thrust the dagger in a little deeper."

Kieko whimpered and clutched her head. "Please." The word was barely a breath.

John appeared at her side. The wind of his passing stirred Kriska's hair. "What's wrong?"

Kieko grabbed his black shirt in her delicate fists and pressed her forehead against his chest. "I can't block it out. Please, make him stop."

John looked at Eric over his shoulder. "You need to calm down, now." His words were measured like a battering ram.

Eric drew back, anger turning to sudden panic. "I can't." He sounded helpless.

"He led thousands of our guild mates into a trap," Verdell said. "That's not something we can just forget about."

John took Kieko in his arms and cradled her like a child. She was still grabbing her head, face creased with pain. "You two figure it out, but this is unacceptable." He headed toward the door, but before he reached it, he turned. "Kriska, you'd better come too."

She shrugged. Being with John and Kieko was better than sitting in this miasma of anger and betrayal while twiddling her thumbs.

## DEATH WEAVER

John moved fast, creating distance—probably between Kieko and Eric—in a matter of seconds. Kriska kept up effortlessly for a while, but after a few minutes of running so fast that her surroundings blurred past, she began to tire. John stopped a few moments after that and didn't even seem winded.

Kriska shook her head as John set Kieko down. He wasn't a sprinter like she was, he was a tireless machine.

"Better?" John asked Kieko, who nodded.

"Thank you."

"What was that?" Kriska asked, although she was pretty sure she had a good idea. For an empath, that room had to have been hell.

Kieko answered, her voice already stronger. "Strong emotion is...hard. It hurts, and I can't stop it. Eric's father's betrayal—" She stopped and shook her head. "There's nothing I could do."

Kieko was a strong empath, and that came with a cost. Like her paralysis when faced with Asa.

Kriska remembered lying in bed at night, watching the flashes of death across the street where her mother worked. Sometimes more than a dozen in a night if something had gone wrong with her mother's business. She'd tried to ignore them, to look away, to pretend the death wasn't there, or that the Monsters weren't waiting on the other side of the Fabric of Life with their claws ready to rip unsuspecting victims away from the world they knew. Kieko's experience was different, but she couldn't ignore Eric's distress any more than Kriska could ignore the death.

"So, what now?" Kriska asked.

Kieko's color had come back. She walked gingerly next to John, still rubbing her temples.

John looked over his shoulder in the direction of the safe house. "We can't exactly go back. How about breakfast?"

"Breakfast?" She was hungry, but— "What time is it, even?" And how long could it possibly take Eric and Verdell to sort out their feelings? It was time to go find Asa!

But even Kriska had to admit that they couldn't go back until Verdell and Eric had calmed down. Like it or not, that did take time.

John looked up at the sun that glared down at them from the center of the sky. “Planetside? I have no idea. Probably day seven or eight of the cycle. There’s two weeks and two days of light, then the same of dark, so natives tend to forget the day cycle on Earth. Conversions from Earth time are about as useless as taking their standard business day. There are breakfast restaurants open all day every day in different shifts.”

Kriska sighed. “Fine, let’s have breakfast. And then let’s go back, find Asa, and take him out.”

John shook his head softly. “You really do have a one track mind, don’t you?”

Kriska held up a hand in mock-defense. “It’s not that I don’t like good food,” her belly grumbled to accentuate that point, “it’s just that I have ration bars for a reason. The Fabric of Life is far more important than yummy pancakes.”

“Pancakes mean happy times,” Kieko said, and her tone had recaptured some of its dreamy quality. “We should have pancakes.”

John chuckled. “And here I thought waffles were superior. Fine, we’ll go find pancakes. But first, we have to figure out what shift we’re on.”

“Eric would know,” Kieko whispered. “He could tell us what time it was. He’s on Titan’s servers.”

And John wasn’t, because there was potentially an evil Tech Weaver on planet.

It took them a while to deduce the time—the buildings were all color coded, so they just watched until they found a color which had people inside—but John eventually located a place that served pancakes, waffles, and sausage, all soaked in gravy. John ordered epic proportions to-go, and they were all sent to wait in a room filled with what looked like displays of Earth rocks. Geodes, crystals, obsidian—Kriska could hardly name them all.

“What’s the deal with the rocks?” Kriska asked.

John grinned. “Most places want to give you a calm place to chill while they make your food? Well, rocks are pretty calming to people who live on a man-made raft floating on an ocean we’re responsible for melting. Besides that, they’re a novelty item.”

A planet without rocks. Kriska shook her head. How strange was that concept, that all the rocks were just super-frozen ice.

## DEATH WEAVER

The sky was blue, though, without the ash fall from a cracked planet. Losing ash, but also losing rocks—Kriska would make the trade in an instant.

A few minutes later, a restaurant worker in a red apron handed John a tray as long as Kriska was tall. John accepted it with ease, and soon they were walking down the street again.

“Do you think he’s calmed down?” John asked Kieko.

Kieko shook her head. “His father hurt him deeply. He still struggles against that.”

“Then I guess they get to wait before they eat.” John led them to an island of green amidst the multicolored cacophony of the settlement. Plants with broad leaves cast shadows on the grass, and a winding path ran through the center, like a stream except for people.

“This is a park,” John said. “Before they got so expensive to maintain, they used to be everywhere on Earth.” He found a bench next to the path with a clear view of a tiny stream of water that ran beneath a hill of green covered in purple and red flowers.

Kriska stared. That much color—used to be everywhere on Earth?

“It’s a lot,” she finally said, and focused on the little plate John handed her, already heaped with a base layer of pancakes and sausage dimes all covered in a white gravy.

“But pretty,” he said.

Kriska nodded. “But pretty.”

“I’m going to go for a walk,” Kieko announced as John passed her a plate. Food in hand, she strolled out of sight.

John shrugged. “I guess it’s not like we won’t know if she gets in trouble.”

Kriska closed her eyes and saw Kieko’s outline moving away at a relaxed pace. “I’ll keep an eye on her.”

“Good.”

John looked down at his food, frowning.

Taking advantage of the silence, Kriska stuffed a bite of pancake into her mouth. It was just as delicious as it smelled, and the pancake melted in her mouth.

After a long moment of silence, Kriska snuck a sideways glance at John. Kieko sounded like she was doing better, but John looked

worried. Kriska stuffed another bite of pancake in her mouth and waited.

“She and Eric always worry me,” John finally said.

Kriska had the feeling that it was more than the fact that neither were capable of going Lone Wolf.

“They bonded at an early age over the betrayal of their parents. Neither have been trusted by Warbane since that day, and so they trust each other. Kieko had it worse than Eric. Her powers are like nothing even her parents could do, and who trusts someone who can play with their brain without them ever noticing? Bounty Hunters like threats they can shoot. If a computer’s been taken over by a technopath, shooting the computer is still mostly effective. More than that, though, Kieko still has faith in her mother. Or, at the very least, she wants to know why. An empath doesn’t betray her husband and daughter without good reason—the betrayal hurts the empath just as much as it hurts the people around them. So Kieko wants to know why. Eric, though.” John shook his head.

Kriska took another bite, conflicted. Why was John telling her this? It was more than a mere introduction to the people who would be on her team. He was baring his soul, his worries, like she could help him. She didn’t know how to help him. She didn’t know what to say. So, she just kept eating slowly, methodically, waiting for something to jump out at her and tell her what to say.

“Eric wants his father brought to justice. He hates his father for leaving him alone and turning him into an outcast in his own family. He wants Ozaki brought to justice, too, but he smothers that when Kieko is around because he knows how much his hate would hurt her. He’s gotten very good at suppressing his feelings. This morning, he couldn’t, and Kieko couldn’t block it out. It didn’t just hurt her because she couldn’t think past his rage, but because it stokes a primal fear in her that they’re going to kill her mother before she gets her answers.”

John looked up from his still untouched food, and Kriska paused, fork halfway to her mouth. His eyes had conflict in them, the tension between hate, betrayal, and questions forever left unanswered fighting in a three-way war.

## DEATH WEAVER

Kriska put her fork down and took a deep breath. What could she say to his honesty? She didn't know Kieko and Eric, not really. But she did know herself, and betrayal was an old friend of hers, haunting her when everything else was gone.

"When I was just learning to walk, I got this Sight that let me see violence and death. Every night when I went to sleep, I could see my mother across the street hurting others, killing some." If she closed her eyes, she knew she would still see it, branded into her memory with a hot iron. She kept her eyes open. "Flashes of death and tears in the Fabric of Life were my lullaby. I wondered how she could do that after I went to bed, and yet during the day be a wonderful mother. Kind. Protective. Say whatever you will about my mother, she did care. But she was a murderer, and I couldn't stay in that place."

Jimmy Comhen's boss towering over her. The backhanded blow that had knocked her into the wall. The feeling of Roma in her hands for the first time.

If she hadn't left, she might have been overseeing Jimmy Comhen's arms deal the day Death's Companion killed Nilsa. Mother Dearest kept a close eye on her associates.

Kriska shuddered away from that thought and forced herself to continue. "I knew I would get dragged in eventually, and I couldn't face the possibility that she would force me to kill for her. In my head, she betrayed me first, but I'm sure she's still wondering what went wrong—what she did to drive me away, or what caused me to betray her."

Kriska shook her head. That story was hardly helpful here—painful as it was. But she couldn't stop. The words just kept coming.

"Anyway. A kind old Bounty Hunter took me in soon after that. I was still barely more than a child, six, or seven, or something. He saved me, and from then on, he was Gramps. I didn't actually have a grandfather, you know. My mother's father was dead—an occupational hazard in the family business—and I never asked what happened to my father. For all I know, my mother got a sperm donor and never met the guy. Gramps was both father and grandfather, I guess. He taught me everything he knew about Hunting, made sure I could fend for myself, taught me history,

writing, mathematics, how to think, how to survive. For so many years, it was just the two of us, Hunting side by side, playing, living. He was the only family I had.”

Kriska’s lip curled as she thought about what happened next. The day her life turned upside down. Why was she even sharing this, anyway?

She brushed that question aside and pressed on. Someone needed to hear it, or the pain would burst out of her chest. She couldn’t bury it anymore. If someone was going to hear it, John was the best person she could think of.

“Then something changed?” John’s voice was quiet, pushing her to go on.

Kriska nodded. “The day after I got my Lone Hunter license, he disappeared. No goodbye. No inkling of if I would ever see him again. His things were gone, like he’d gone on a job, and he just never came back. I looked for him until my funds ran out, but Gramps is good at hiding. Either he doesn’t want to be found, or he is dead.”

Her throat tightened as she said that, and she clenched her teeth. He wasn’t dead. Surely if he was gone, she would have felt something. And yet death was a constant companion for Bounty Hunters. Perhaps she would have felt nothing, and his death would have been swallowed up in the countless number of bodies she’d left in her wake. Perhaps he really was gone.

“He’s not dead,” John said.

Startled, Kriska looked up to find John looking at her, eyes intent. “You can’t know that.”

“Kriska, you know he isn’t dead. That’s all I need to know. One day, I’m sure you’ll get your answers.”

“I don’t need answers,” she snapped—she didn’t even know what made her say that. Her cheeks colored, and she looked back down at her half-finished plate.

She did want answers. She wanted to look Gramps in the face and demand to know why he left her. She didn’t want him hurt for his betrayal, she just wanted him back, and wanting something that bad, so bad her chest ached, and her eyes burned with tears she couldn’t bring herself to shed, hurt more than all the physical pains of Hunting combined. Gramps needed to come

## DEATH WEAVER

home, to tell her the stories of his adventures, and then list piece-by-piece corrections of every Hunting mistake she'd made in the last five years. And then, when that was done, he would be freely forgiven.

Perhaps that was what Kieko felt. Except, her mother had actually hurt people she cared about. That had to make it infinitely worse—like if Mother Dearest had kidnapped Gramps, and then left her a note detailing his torture day by day.

Kriska shuddered away from that thought. Gramps was fine. He was hiding, not kidnapped. Mother Dearest couldn't hurt anyone she cared about any more. Mother Dearest operated on Earth, and let her associates deal with the galactics. Kriska was outside her reach. Gramps was safe, doing the things he needed to do. One day, he would show up, and tousle her hair, and tell her the secrets of the universe he discovered on his trip, and show her new training games, and scoff at her score on the range, and beat her soundly at hand-to-hand, and push her to do better.

Gramps was fine.

He had to be.

"You'll find him one day," John said.

Kriska shrugged, like John's words weren't stabbing her in the heart—like she was alright, like the burning in her eyes was just from Titan's non-existent ash fall and not from over five years of repressed anger and hurt. "Yeah, one day." She choked the words out, then turned her attention to shoveling food in her mouth so she wouldn't have to talk.

"Thank you," John said.

Kriska didn't stop to look over at him. Just stuck another piece of sausage in her mouth and kept chewing like a mad person. If she stopped chewing, then she would cry, and she couldn't let herself cry in front of John.

Kieko's appearance, still strolling gently along the twisting path, was a relief. Her plate was empty, and so was Kriska's.

"It seems like this was a productive time," she observed quietly.

Productive? Kriska felt like she'd just run stark-naked across a battlefield, dodging enemy snipers.

Kieko smiled. "Let's go back."

K. A. EXCELL

John put away his meal in six seconds flat and they walked back in silence.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The house they'd hijacked to hide out in was quiet when Kriska and the others returned. Verdell was leaning against the wall opposite the info screen, arms folded, like she hadn't moved since they left. Eric was scrolling through aerial images of some sandy place with no trace of civilization. Both accepted food gratefully. A moment later, Verdell commanded their attention.

"Eric and I were able to unearth the coordinates that most of the array base forces deployed to. Just as soon as we're done with what reconnaissance is available to us—"

"—With the technopath on their side, recon is a joke." Bitterness laced Eric's voice, but the raw hate from earlier was gone.

Verdell gave him a withering stare, and he closed his mouth.

She turned back to the group. "As I was saying, we'll deploy to those coordinates to see if we can figure out what came of everyone else *just as soon as* we have whatever reconnaissance we can get. Hopefully the rest of our personnel just ended up stranded, and we can call them a ride." Verdell's lips twisted with wry bitterness. "Given what we found on the array, I'd start preparing for the worst."

And that was it. Everyone was dismissed to start gathering their things.

It took Kriska no time at all to sling her bag over her shoulder. Kieko was still packing, so she decided to take a peek in the yet unused closet.

Whomever had decided to store a passel of grenades inside an abandoned Establishment closet was probably crazier than Kriska had ever been, but Kriska wasn't going to berate them. She just

grabbed two from the pile and handed the rest to Verdell, who took a few and gave the remaining one to John. Kieko finished packing, and they left.

The air inside the egg ship was tense. Kieko was quiet, and for the first time since Kriska had met her, Kieko did not sit by Eric. Instead, she sat by Kriska, who stifled an internal groan—not because she didn’t want to sit next to Kieko, but because she was probably the absolutely worst person to try and fix the interpersonal issues of others.

“I don’t need you to fix anything,” Kieko whispered.

Then what did she want? Just because she didn’t want to sit by Eric didn’t mean she had to come sit next to Kriska—there were plenty of other empty seats.

Then, abruptly, she remembered that Kieko was an empath and could probably hear every word she thought.

“I’m not a mind reader,” Kieko said.

“Right.”

If she wasn’t a mind reader, then why did she keep responding to Kriska’s thoughts?

Kieko gave a little laugh. “Some people think with their emotions. You do, anyway. John does. Lots of people. My mentor would say that your Wall is the closest to mine and so my Sight can see deeper into the fabric of your—nature? Being?” She sounded unsure how to explain.

That was just great. Kieko wasn’t a mind reader with anybody except Kriska. Didn’t that just make her feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Well, Kieko wasn’t the only one with Sight. Kriska closed her eyes and looked at the Hunter sitting next to her.

Kieko’s outline was wreathed in yellow and green, the kinds of colors that split Kriska’s head if she looked at them too long. More important than that, though, was the fact that those colors were utterly unsuited to a Hunter en route to a place where they would have to fight. Everyone else on the ship, from Eric to Verdell, was all the orange of preparation.

So why was Kieko relatively unprepared for violence? Then Kriska remembered what John had told her before.

“You came to sit next to me because you’re scared, and you don’t want to kill your mother on the battlefield. You’ve learned

## DEATH WEAVER

that I have issues with my mother, and misery loves company. Is that it?"

Kieko shrugged. "I know your mother betrayed you just as surely as mine betrayed me."

Kriska snorted. "Everyone here has been betrayed. Even John and Verdell. We all get it. We've all felt that same raw anguish, and you know that, empath. Asking me to open up, to tell you about my experiences, or to give you advice based on an open wound—that will only hurt both of us. I'll feel hurt remembering what my mother did to me, and you'll feel those emotions as well as your own, right?"

Slowly, Kieko nodded.

"Then don't take this the wrong way, Kieko, but suck it up."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"We've all been there. We're all hurting, and you're feeling all of it. That's a lot, but it's your lot. You're the empath, so you deal with it. We're about to go into battle, and you're letting your hurt and your questions get in the way of that. Everyone here wants answers, even if we pretend we don't."

Kriska looked at Eric. His father had betrayed him, and it seemed like all he wanted was revenge. Somewhere, deep inside, he had to be faking it. Kriska had grown up knowing exactly what a monster Mother Dearest was, and still she wanted to know why. Why was killing so many people on a whim acceptable to her? Why had she been so caring at home—on days she wasn't already infuriated by work—and so terrible the moment she crossed the street? Eric's feelings couldn't be as cut and dried as they seemed.

Kriska looked back down at her lap as Kieko nodded. "I want to know how Asa destroyed so many lives. You want to know why your mother left. Eric wants to know why his father left. John and Verdell want to know why they killed Nilsa. This whole operation is filled with questions, and we all get it. There will be no summary executions, so put that problem out of your mind. Get your emotions under control and get your head on straight. Questions can wait until the shooting has stopped."

Kieko looked down at the harness strapping her into the chair, a frown evident on her face. “That’s exactly what the Councilman would have said.”

Behind closed eyes, Kriska could see Kieko’s resolve strengthen abruptly.

“You’re right,” Kieko said, “I can deal with all this after everyone’s out of danger.”

“And Kieko?” Kriska said, her voice serious. “Don’t you dare freeze the way you did the first time we faced Asa. Fear is just fine, but not when it keeps you from moving. We’re going to need every gun we can get.”

Kieko smiled softly. “Right.”

The ship rocked violently, throwing Kriska against her harness.

“Winds are high. Going to be a rough landing,” John called back.

A few minutes later, they were all shaken but safely on the ground.

“Those were some winds,” Kriska remarked to—well, she wasn’t sure. To Roma and Raven, certainly, but perhaps also to Kieko.

Regardless of who Kriska had actually been talking to, Kieko nodded. “The high temperature differences humans introduced when we created our settlements and the natural atmosphere of Titan have multiplied to make the winds quite formidable.”

Verdell stood by the door to the egg ship, arms crossed, like she was a one-woman barrier between them and the outside. “Everybody listen up,” she said. “Check your heaters and shields. We don’t have the benefit of a lens array, a grav field, or any atmosphere manipulation out here. Grab redundant systems from John and don’t let them get hit if we go into combat. We didn’t see anyone while we were on approach, but we still don’t know what happened here. Be on your guard.”

John pressed another brick heater, like the one clipped above her collar bone, into her hand. “Put it somewhere that it’s not going to get hit.”

Kriska looked at the brick. Then, smiling, she put it under her left armpit. Potentially stinky? Absolutely. Gonna get hit by a

## DEATH WEAVER

bullet? Probably not. Besides that, it wasn't going to mess with her ability to use Raven.

John chuckled when he saw her choice and handed her a third. In explanation, he said, "we've got one extra and you're a bullet magnet."

He had her turn around and clipped it to the inside of her jacket over the small of her back. "Now don't let any of them get tagged."

Kriska shrugged. "If they take out all three, then I'll be so filled with holes that it won't matter what the ambient temperature is."

"Lovebirds," Verdell snapped, "finish it up so we can deploy."

Kriska flushed. "Yes, *dearest*." She glared at Verdell. "I'm going to try and kiss you next."

"Kiss with a bullet, perhaps," Eric said from behind her. Kieko laughed, and even John covered a snicker. Verdell didn't react to the comment.

Did she and John really act like lovebirds? Kriska reviewed her behavior and found herself shaking her head. She was barely civil to him. Just because she talked with him more than she talked with anybody else didn't mean a thing. They'd worked together fractionally longer, and she trusted him more than she trusted anyone else—

In her mind, the image of his finger on the trigger of a gun with its muzzle pressed against her head, the scent of gun oil and blowback heavy in the air drifted around her. Kriska clenched her fists. Any revenant of fuzzy warm feelings fled. When this was done, she was out of here. That hadn't changed just because she found herself more-or-less getting along with this team. Warbane was still crazy. She was still a Lone Wolf at heart. This job was temporary. It would let her kill her quarry who had proved himself capable of so much death, and it would keep the Fabric of Life safe from him. It would let her clear her name with Warbane and the Conclave. When that was done, she would find a nice planet with a blue sky and an atmosphere that was a little less deadly than Titan's and start running Lone Wolf again.

When everyone's equipment was attached, redundant, and double-checked, Verdell opened the door. Kriska found herself on sand that chilled the soles of her feet through the three inches

of industrial rubber on the bottom of her boots. The wind wasn't severe—one the ground, anyway—but it did gust every once in a while with biting cold that made it through the active heater attached to her collar. Between the gusts, it was like standing in the sunshine on an early spring day, a thing she'd done twice with Gramps as a child, when he'd found a place on the planet currently free from all traces of ash and they'd made a trip to that spot just so she could feel the sun against her face. In this case, it wasn't the sun that warmed her, but the heater blowing warm air against her skin.

In front of her, a wasteland of sand and ice stretched into the distance until it met the blue sky. A heatless sun glared down at them and turned the little grains of sand into crystals that spread light and made the desert glitter like it was made of a million minuscule gems.

“Remember that the sand is made of ice crystals,” John told her as she stared. “Footprints are going to be more tenacious because that's where you've melted the ice. Be careful of your feet. Plenty of people have lost toes to frostbite just from hiking through this area. If you need a break to warm your feet, just tell us.”

Kriska nodded. In the distance, she spotted an orange cloud that looked like it might have been an ash cloud except for the color. “What is that?” she asked, pointing at the horizon.

Verdell cursed. “That's an ethane cloud, and it's moving fast. John, go pull filtered breather masks. The O<sub>2</sub> generators on the heaters aren't going to help one whit if we're breathing ethane. You'll be drunk in two seconds, and dead a minute after that. Activate helmets, if you've got one.” Verdell's glance at Kriska was unreadable as she tapped something on the inside of her collar and the transparent bubble of her helmet slid around her face. “Eric, tap into the weather satellites. Is that a full-fledged storm?”

As Verdell worried about the weather and the others deployed their helmets, Kriska closed her eyes to get a feel for the landscape.

“This place—” Kieko choked off.

John returned from the ship and handed Kieko a filter, which she slipped over her nose and mouth. Her aura was depressed with fear.

## DEATH WEAVER

“It certainly wasn’t natural,” John said. There was an edge to his voice Kriska hadn’t ever heard before. Was he afraid, too?

Kriska opened her eyes to look at him, but his face was as normal as always. Any differences she might have seen were concealed by the breather mask he wore.

He handed a breather to Kriska. “Make sure it seals.”

Kriska chuckled. “Don’t worry about me. I grew up on Earth, remember? I’m the queen of these things.”

“I’m having trouble getting a satellite connection,” Eric said, and his frown was obvious even through his breather.

Kriska examined the plateau more closely to see if she could figure out what was making everyone else so uneasy but saw nothing except hundreds of boot prints made by standard merc-issue combat boots. The people from the Array had landed here, but there were no bodies and no violence that Kriska could see. She closed her eyes to look for the telltale glow of spent brass, but saw only a flicker of light off in the distance, so far off that she couldn’t even guess what it might be.

But one thing was clear. The Fabric of Life was thin. Not threadbare, but nowhere near normal. Asa had been here, and the Fabric of Life had suffered.

Verdell crossed her arms and set her shoulder against the nose of the egg ship, turned so she could see the rest of the team with the sand sea behind them. “Looks like a picture perfect drop to me, except for someone who twisted an ankle on the dismount.”

Kriska turned back to the sand, shaking her head. This couldn’t possibly be as innocent as Verdell thought, or John, Eric, and Kieko wouldn’t be freaking out. John and Eric were both on the edge of violence, and Kieko was about to try and impersonate a turtle hiding in its shell.

“The land,” John finally got out. “It’s absorbed the aqua-teal of forced calm. Mercenaries don’t feel like that. Nobody feels like that, and certainly not enough to wash the land that color.”

“There were empaths here,” Kieko whispered. “And not just my mother.” She placed a hand on Eric’s shoulder for support as she swayed, her face pale.

“Be careful,” Eric said. “Don’t spend yourself right here.”

“They used so much power. Changed so much, and my mother’s mind is over the whole thing. There is so much. No one person could have done this, and yet how do I sense only her? She couldn’t have been working alone,” Kieko said.

“What did they do?” Verdell asked. Her aura had gone from a resting yellow to alert orange, and she swept the area for any sign of an incoming attack.

Kieko shook her head. Her fingers grabbing Eric’s shoulders were white.

John shifted, drawing attention away from Kieko. “The empath’s forced a complete calm on the mercs that were sent to repel the false attack. They turned the will of over three quarters the manpower of our entire base into a piece of taffy, and then molded it to do—something.”

“Was it just Ozaki? Can you feel anyone else?”

“It couldn’t have just been her,” Kieko whispered. “No one empath has that power. Not even her.”

“She wasn’t working alone,” Eric said. “My father was here too. It was all of Death’s Companion.”

Verdell looked up sharply. “How can you tell?”

Eric’s voice turned hard. “Because the network device they set up as a relay to Array base is a stammering piece of junk, and all the weather sats have been set up specifically to lock me out. I can’t touch a single piece of technology out here. My father has made sure of that.” Eric’s face was red from the blood-flush of anger. His hands clenched into fists and then released, then clenched again in a kind of massage.

Verdell nodded her understanding, and Kriska did too. Eric’s father had been here, just like he’d been to the Array. This was a message. Death’s Companion could take out whatever Warbane chose to throw at them, and mercs were little more than cannon fodder to them. Kriska wasn’t stupid. She’d seen how one ill-intentioned empath had almost caused John to murder her in cold blood. There was nothing that would be able to stop these empath’s from turning the entire planet into even more of a war zone. All it would take was a little anger sprinkled around an Establishment or Patronage settlement. Even worse, they could

## DEATH WEAVER

have droves of people commit suicide. With that many people, that powerful, anything was possible.

Verdell looked at Kieko. “Is there any way to shield against this? Protect the innocents so they can’t be influenced?”

Kriska looked at the stunned group and shrugged as they started discussing the implications of what they had just learned. This was Warbane’s business, not hers. Her job was finding Asa and stopping him before he could tear any more holes in the Fabric of Life.

She wandered away, toward the closest set of footprints. Somewhere around here, there had to be some indication of their destination. Empaths didn’t go to the trouble of forcing everyone to be calm just for them to stand there, and wherever they’d taken the mercenaries was probably where Asa was. So where had they all gone?

As she studied the tracks farther and farther away from the drop site, she scrunched her eyebrows in confusion. The tracks at the drop site had been barely organized chaos, but the tracks here weren’t. The merc tracks were in five neat columns and continued with military precision in a straight line away from the egg ship.

Kriska arched an eyebrow. Death’s Companion was powerful—she couldn’t deny that if she tried—but they weren’t masterful kidnappers. Unless they *wanted* Warbane outside their gate for some reason. There was nothing to muddle the tracks, and nothing to mar the perfectly straight path the boot prints carved through the sand.

She moved a little farther down the boot-trodden trail, making sure not to muddle the tracks as she went. The boot prints were invariable. The stride was uniform, and it continued as far as the eye could see. Half a mile’s sprint later, there still was no change—beside the fact that the ethane cloud was closer, and the wind was starting to muss the sand. Kriska went back, more certain than ever that those tracks were a path to Asa.

If they didn’t hurry, all those mercenaries would die. The Fabric of Life would grow thinner.

If it got thin enough, everyone could die.

Kriska explained what she'd seen to a frowning Verdell. When she was done, Verdell shook her head.

"I agree that we probably could follow that trail, but there isn't enough time. This is the perfect trap, and I'm not walking into it."

"I'm not suggesting that we storm the facility now," Kriska argued, "only that we locate it so we can come back when we're better prepared. Soon, of course. We need to get those mercenaries out of their hands before they do something terrible, but I'm not suggesting that we spring the trap."

"There's a storm approaching, and it's coming fast. If we start following those tracks and get caught away from the ship, we're dead. Our best option is to set down in the nearest settlement and take shelter with the locals. Hopefully the storm will miss some tracks."

"What's the chance of that?"

"None," John said, his voice clipped. Although his aura still didn't show on her sight, she could tell that he was angry—and she knew why. If they had come only a few hours earlier, they would have had time to follow the tracks before the storm hit.

Kriska curled her fingers into fists at her side. "We're Bounty Hunters, people. Put Verdell in the front to watch the tracks, and let's run it. If we don't find where they took the mercs in ten minutes, then we can turn around and come back." This was their last lead, and Kriska was starting to regret coming back to tell them what she'd found. They were wasting precious time participating in a committee, while mercs could be dying and Asa could be getting away. This was why she had gone Lone Wolf in the first place!

"No, that's suicide," Verdell said.

"Then we take the ship!"

John shook his head. "In those winds? That ship is almost indestructible, but it can't maintain stable flight through that storm. The tracks would be gone in an instant, and the winds would slam us into the ground. That's the only ship we've got."

"Well, maybe..." Eric said, but Kriska stopped listening.

Everyone was arguing while precious seconds slipped away. She *had* to get to Asa before he did any more harm. If he destroyed

## DEATH WEAVER

the Fabric of Life, it would be because she hadn't stopped him. Because she let these people keep her from achieving her goals.

Kriska cocked her head at the arguing group of Hunters and pursed her lips. Silently, she made a decision. She wasn't going to let their one chance of completing their mission slip past because they were all being stupid. She'd set her priorities, and playing nice with others wasn't one of them.

John's head whipped up, like he could sense her thoughts. His lips parted to form the word, "wait," but she was already gone in a blur of sudden speed as she sprinted away at her fastest. Her eyes picked out the telltale signs of the marching column as John blurred into motion behind her.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

She dashed through the sands of Titan, eyes picking out the tell-tale gleam of melted footprints as her legs propelled her farther and farther away from her—no, *the*—team.

John wouldn't catch her immediately. She had a whole half-second head start, and she was faster than he was in a sprint. Unfortunately, she couldn't run forever, and he was the most tireless Hunter she'd ever met. Still, she would be far enough away when he caught her to either convince him to get out of the way or help her. One way or the other, she was going to find those mercs.

*Priority One: Locate target Asa.*

Nothing warned her the moment before she hit the ground. She was just running, breathing deep into the mask that whirred on overdrive, finding oxygen to feed her mad sprint as the ethane cloud swept over her and the wind began whipping her hair into her eyes. John was a blight on her senses, and she hadn't the time, energy, or focus to waste with closing her eyes to check on his position even if she'd been able to sense him. Sand, cold and yet burning hot, grated against her cheek as she failed to tuck and roll. John was too heavy on her back, and it was all she could do to catch herself on her fists and roll down her forearms into a prone position. Her hands would be bruised, but she didn't slide enough to break the skin. No, frostbite was the bigger concern here. The heater grew warmer still against her collarbone as it struggled to maintain its bubble of warmth. The other two heaters kicked on, whirring loudly.

"What the *split* were you thinking?" John's voice was harsh in her ear. His arms wrapped around her neck, restricting her air,

## DEATH WEAVER

and his knee pressed into her back. He made no move to get off her as the sand burned her arm, face, and belly.

Kriska fought her tripping heart rate and marshaled her voice through heavy breaths strangled by his arms. "I'm not letting us lose this lead, John. I can't see another one of those rooms like at the Array, and I won't let the mission fail."

"We're a team, Kriska. You can't go haring off by yourself!" Barely bridled terror filled his voice, making Kriska shiver. John didn't scare easily.

"Is she stable?" Verdell's voice barely reached Kriska through the screaming wind.

John loosened his arms around her neck—enough that Kriska could breathe well again.

"No." Kieko sounded winded, but her voice was still as unwavering as ever.

Kriska twisted under John's body in frustration. Unstable? How could they think that? Didn't they see that their goal wavered just within sight? They were so close—they just had to reach out, and Death's Companion would fall. Kieko would get her answers, Eric would get his revenge. Verdell and John would get their justice. Kriska would finally be free of Warbane's insanity. Superseding that, they simply didn't have time to argue. Those mercs could be dead by the time the storm passed, and all the evidence of their passing—evidence that would lead her to Asa, and the others to their traitor parents—would be gone.

Kriska stopped struggling and sank everything she could into her voice. "You don't have to come with me, but you do have to let me go,"

Verdell ignored her. "Eric, can we get back to the settlement alive?"

"We can try. Getting a signal in this mess is a shot in the dark, and I doubt the ship is where we left it."

Kriska shifted again, and John leaned harder against the small of her back.

"We're running out of time!"

No one seemed to hear her, or care.

"John, bring Kriska. If we hurry, we might be able to survive the storm. It's as bad as we originally thought. Possibly worse."

Verdell's words were punctured by a flash of lightning in the distance, and an explosion of blue fire.

Kriska's eyes widened as she let John lift her to her feet. Her jacket, zipped against the storm, was soaked from melting the sand beneath her. The storm swirled all around them with dust so thick she could barely see the ground beneath her feet anymore. The prints she'd been following were gone, covered by ice. There was nothing to follow any more.

She'd failed.

Kriska went slack in John's grip, and he let her go without even a prompt from Kieko.

She should have run faster, been more persuasive—maybe then, she would have achieved her objective.

As it was, finding the lost mercs was hopeless. There was nothing to protect them from the Monsters behind the Fabric of Life. Asa had them, and Kriska could do nothing.

"Save the apologies for later, Hunter," Verdell snapped. "We've got to get back to the settlement before the storm really sets in."

Apologies? Anger overrode defeat, and Kriska resisted the urge to snort. They were the ones who needed to apologize to her. Without them weighing her down, she could have found the end of that trail. She could have completed her objective, eliminated Asa, and saved the mercenaries.

Kriska stuffed her objections deep inside and focused on making her way through the bizarre cross between sandstorm and blizzard as the others turned to do the same.

The sand around them was ice. It cut their skin, froze, and the heaters couldn't keep up as the ambient temperature dropped more with every second. Howling filled their ears as the sand whipped from every direction. Visibility was nothing. Kriska could barely see the shadows of everyone else. More than that was a joke. The wind came from every direction at once, so that even staying on her feet was a challenge. It was like an ash storm, but cold, and there were no buildings to shield them.

"Surely it can't get much worse than this," Kriska said.

The rest of the Hunters turned to her just long enough to stare.

## DEATH WEAVER

Something tickled in the back of her mind, warning *danger*. Before she could do more than close her eyes, violet red flashed and Kieko screamed.

The empath crumpled to the ground just outside of Kriska's sight. There was too much sand between them for Kriska to figure out what happened. She spent precious seconds rewinding the vicious flash of light as the other Hunters reacted.

Verdell was the closest to Kieko, but Eric still beat her to the empath's side.

"She's alive but unconscious," he reported.

Kriska cursed as her mind finally started working. She closed her eyes to find the location of their attackers just in time to see the Fabric of Life beneath them all twist and begin to warp in the pattern of death. The fabric tore, and the Monster's claws, violet and deadly, grasped the edges of the tear. Then, as quickly as it had started, the maw of death stuttered and closed. Kriska saw an impression of blue thread stitching the Fabric of Life closed for one blinding moment.

Kriska's eyes snapped open again, and she saw John sway on his feet with beads of sweat rolling from his temples.

"Well, that was interesting." A masculine voice infused with dramatic flair. Asa.

Kriska brushed the paralysis from her mind and turned to see three figures standing just out of sight, in the middle of the swirling storm.

"Take him too," Asa said.

The figures flanking him nodded and Eric dropped to the ground, screaming. The man on the left flared the bright red of near-death violence, but he had no weapon in his hand. The same could not be said for the woman on the right. She pulled a rifle to her shoulder and fired two measured rounds toward Verdell.

Verdell danced out of the way of the first, but the second skimmed her side and drove her to her knees.

Kriska's eyebrows narrowed. The woman didn't have killing intent, even though she glowed a dark orange. Could the weapon be loaded with a tranquilizer?

Time enough for analysis later. Kriska brushed the thought to the back of her mind as the woman's gun turned on her. The gun

flashed. Kriska saw where it would hit. She moved. The bullet passed through sand-swirled air. She sensed another flash of dark orange somewhere behind her. John collapsed.

Kriska looked around, but everyone was on the ground. Kieko, Eric, Verdell, John, all incapacitated one after another in moments too disjointed to stitch back together.

A scream pierced the sand behind her, keening death or worse. Talons raked up her back, carrying helplessness alongside pain. A bird, just visible in the howling sand, stretched its wings as it returned to one of the Dark guild Hunters. Talons laced with—something? Kriska tried to stop her knees from folding, or her face from smashing into the ground. It didn't help. Her body didn't respond, even as her muscles cried out to do something—anything—to stop this. She couldn't even close her eyes to access her Sight and watch their auras. In less than ten seconds, she'd changed from a Bounty Hunter, back into a child held in the iron grip of one of her mother's associates. Then, her mother had come to her rescue. Now, no one could save her as she lay face down in the dirt.

Booted Hunter feet stepped just in front of her. Enemy feet, she was sure.

"It's a paralytic, not a tranquilizer, Asa. She can still hear and see us. Let's just take her and go."

The voice wasn't coming from the figure in front of her, but rather from somewhere behind her. It was distinctly female, though. The woman who had shot Verdell and John.

The information was welcome. A paralytic would explain why she couldn't move.

A derisive voice—Asa—answered. "Why should we?"

"Because the Master wants her." The woman's voice held an edge. "Now let's go before the storm gets any worse."

Kriska shuddered. The one in charge of Death's Companion wanted *her*? That could not be good.

Asa crouched down and buried his fingers in her chin length black hair, massaging her skull as if he relished the power over her. His fingers stiffened, grabbing her hair at the roots as he yanked her up, neck extended. She stared him down, the promise of death in her eyes.

## DEATH WEAVER

*Priority two: Eliminate Asa.*

Looking into those eyes that were as violet as the claws of the Monsters he called to do his bidding, Kriska found herself staring in a mirror. Both of them were agents of death. Both served the Monsters—her reluctantly, and him with a zeal that turned her stomach.

“The Master said she needs a Death Weaver, but she doesn’t need two. I’m plenty to fulfill her plans.” He dropped her with a smirk.

Her face slammed into the sand again, and there was nothing she could do to break her fall. She felt the bones crunch, and blood began to hiss into the sand, freezing as it flowed.

“Take her, leave her, I don’t care. Let’s just go,” the other male voice said. The voice was as reedy as the person it issued from, thin and devoid of emotion. “All this sand is wreaking havoc with my equipment.”

“So go get your little brat—”

“He’s not mine.” The voice froze colder than the sand beneath the skin of Kriska’s exposed face.

“Honestly, Malcom, I don’t care who belongs to you and who doesn’t. Just get them back to base.” That was the female voice again.

Asa snorted and turned. “Don’t you forget my—friend. He goes to my lab, not with the others.”

The woman gave a disgusted snort. “So long as your experimentation doesn’t get in the way of the mission.”

Asa wanted to experiment with John? The thought made her stomach turn. Kriska tried to snarl at him, but it came out as a squeak. Curse that paralytic! They were going to take her teammates, and she could do nothing.

Shadows moved to crouch over the distant mass of tangled, unconscious bodies.

No!

Kriska gathered her strength and *pushed*. Her right arm moved forward almost an inch. She gathered herself again. Whether these Warbane Hunters were her friends or not, they were her teammates, and she had a responsibility to keep them safe. She wouldn’t let Death’s Companion take them. She wouldn’t see

their bodies, empty husks, drained by the Monsters that lurked beyond the curtain of life.

“This one is impressive. You sure you don’t want to bring her back?” the Death’s Companion woman called.

Asa’s feet shifted as he turned his attention back to Kriska. “Oh, don’t worry. I don’t plan on becoming *dispensable* any time soon. There isn’t room for two Death’s Companion Death Weavers, whatever the Master thinks. Besides,” he gestured at the storm swirling around them. “You don’t think I want someone who could be *this* stupid on my team, do you? Instead, the death by a thousand cuts is yours. Your friends will die far more quickly, believe me.”

Kriska snarled again, and he laughed.

“You don’t believe me? Death is my domain, and I rule it without question. You never could quite adjust to your abilities, could you? Your little Angels kept you from your true path.”

Kriska ignored his words and focused on getting to John, who was the closest to her. No puny storm was going to kill her. She was a Hunter, born and bred.

Malcom, the other man Asa had brought with him, hoisted Eric up onto one shoulder, and put Kieko on the other. “Stop gawking at the idiot, and come on,” he said, and Kriska couldn’t tell who he was talking to.

The woman picked up Verdell.

Kriska forced her left hand an inch forward.

“Put her out of her misery or bring her over here,” the woman called. “Either way, we’ve got to go, or this storm will get us, too. I’ve already sent my pet home.”

Asa just stood there, and Kriska could feel his eyes studying her as she moved, inch by painful, exhausting inch, to get to John. Kriska blocked out the feeling of Asa’s eyes tracing her body. So long as he didn’t move to stop her, he was no longer of any consequence.

*Priority one. Get to John.*

*Priority two. Protect him.*

*Priority three. Get to the others.*

*Priority four. Stay alive.*

## DEATH WEAVER

“Idiocy aside, you’re a strong one,” Asa said. “I would love to stay and find out how long that strength lasts, but the paralytic is going to finish settling into your system in a few moments, and I really don’t have time.”

Kriska ignored him and pulled herself half an inch towards her fingertips, every muscle straining. Slow progress, but progress. Sweat poured from her forehead, a mix of exertion and the heater’s overcompensation blowing heat along her skin to fight off the biting cold of the sand.

Asa gave a chuckle of dark humor and strode over to John’s unconscious body with ease that only fanned the flame of hate Kriska felt for him.

He laughed again and pulled John from the ground. He looked toward the shadows of his teammates in the distance. “The other Death Weaver escaped into the storm, and it got too bad for us to chase her. Understood?”

A chorus of assent answered him.

Then, slowly, deliberately, he returned to Kriska’s side.

“The storm should blow over in a few hours. If you can survive until then, you might have a chance. Just between the two of us, though, that chance is very, very low. If I could, I’d stay and watch my friends on the other side come for you. Unfortunately, I have other *business* to attend to.”

She didn’t see the kick coming, couldn’t prepare for the agony in her side or the sound of crunching bones as her ribs caved. He punted her away with the full force of Hunter strength. In a moment, she left the ground and flew at the mercy of the wind which whipped her every way. The storm obscured her vision, but not before she saw his eyes, still piercing and hateful, gloating over his victory. He already tasted her death and was drunk off it like a Hunter after one too many swigs.

Sight failed—leaving only darkness and pain when she crashed into the ground, and yet more things broke—ribs, arms, legs, she couldn’t tell anymore what was whole and what had snapped like an ill-treated candy cane. She tried to scream, but her vocal chords wouldn’t move. She just lay there in the cold heat of frozen sand as the three heaters strapped to her body worked in a

frenzy to keep her alive. She drifted somewhere between reality and the dark haze of Hunter hell.

Asa was right. There was very, very little chance of her surviving this.

She should have listened to Verdell and gone back with them. The thought hit her just as hard as Asa's kick. She closed her eyes against the pain.

No one would be in this mess if she had just *listened*. They would be safe in the egg ship, or at a settlement, out of the storm and uncaptured by Death's Companion.

She had been so blinded by her need to execute that Monster and free herself of Warbane that she'd rushed in, thoughtless. This was a different planet, and the others had known it so much better than she had. They'd warned her, and she hadn't listened, and now they were all gone.

John was gone.

And that hurt more than the broken bones and frostbite ever could.

She'd thought she was a Lone Wolf, that she could take on the world by herself. The truth was, she wasn't, not anymore.

Because she'd abandoned her team, Asa had won.

Above her, against the backdrop of silver-orange sand flung sideways by the wind, Kriska could see Gramps staring down at her with silver eyes. He shook his head gently, the creamy white moonstone drop in his right ear bobbling. Whether memory or hallucination, Kriska didn't care. Tears fueled by too many emotions to name streamed down her face.

"Gramps, I failed," she wanted to tell him. He wouldn't gather her in his arms, but he would pat her on the head and tell her that this wasn't the end of the road.

In the sky, Gramps smiled his characteristic half-smile, his hair—as silver as his eyes—arrayed behind him in a careless knot.

"You've still got your priorities, Kriska," he said, and then Kriska knew she was hallucinating. "Fulfill them."

"I can't," she tried to say, but her voice was still paralyzed.

It didn't seem to matter to Gramps though. He shook his head again. "You aren't dead yet, kid. Mission isn't done until you've fulfilled it and got paid, or there's nobody to collect the money.

## DEATH WEAVER

*Find your team.* Let Roma and Raven guide you. Asa's got his hand clamped over the demons of death, but you've got Angels on your side, Weaver."

Gramps said other things while Kriska hovered between life and death, paralyzed and helpless in the sand, but she held onto the last. He was right. She wasn't dead, and neither was her team. She got them into this mess, and it was her responsibility to get them out.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Warmth in the middle of an icy sea called her back from the blurry stupor, and Kriska realized that she could feel her toes. Wind still whipped around her, and sand still assaulted her, but they weren't being hurled with hurricane force.

She could blink her eyes and shift her arms, although every breath sent waves of agony radiating up and down from her chest, where she suspected her bones were smashed, not just broken.

She tested her movement methodically, taking note of injuries. Her left arm—broken. She could close her fingers into a fist, but even that small motion hurt. Not as badly as trying to actually move her arm did, though. Toes—those didn't hurt too bad, but when she tried to move her right leg, a ball of fire lit in her hip. Walking was going to be awful, and yet she knew she would still walk. She had set her priorities, and Gramp's voice echoed in her mind. She wasn't done. Death's Companion had yet to see what she was capable of.

The limbs that didn't hurt were stiff, like someone had poured pure lactic acid into her muscles, but that was a consequence of her mad dash across the sand.

A dash that had ended with all her friends taken, and herself being left to die.

Kriska steeled herself against another kind of agony. She'd been so confident, so sure of herself, so stupid that she'd led her unwilling teammates straight into a trap. Now they were gone, and John was in Asa's hands.

That thought made Kriska stagger to her feet. She doubled over as her body protested the change in orientation. She threw up the

## DEATH WEAVER

remains of breakfast, and then some, and when her stomach was completely empty, she continued to throw up stomach acid.

Some Hunter she was. She hadn't even gone for her weapon.

Kriska stayed on her feet by sheer force of will and took stock. Her stomach hadn't stopped turning over, but she was stable enough. Every piece of her body hurt, but nothing was worse than her ribs, which had more in common with a dog-chewed bone than a human ribcage.

*Find your center, Kriska.* Gramp's voice reverberated in her mind. He was right. She needed to stop acting like a civilian. The storm wasn't over yet, and that gave her some cover. She was a Hunter, and she'd already set her priorities for this situation. She wouldn't accept a failed mission.

*Priority one. Get to John.*

She closed her eyes and focused on the weaponry around her. Roma and Raven—her best friends. Roma, who had been with her since the beginning, and Raven, a Warbane gun in the hands of a Lone Wolf—except, was she really that, anymore?

There wasn't time for the soul-searching required for that question.

Kriska pulled Roma from her holster. She'd learned this exercise with Roma only a few months after Gramps rescued her and now, with so much unease, fear, and hate, whirling in her mind, Roma was the more comfortable choice. Kriska sank into the metal with her thoughts. She traced the familiar lines and felt Roma's constant friendliness.

Then, slowly, gently, she melded with the weapon.

Her entire body shivered as ice shot through her veins to extinguish the burning pain. Her eyes flashed open, but she saw very little. Her vision was black, with only the distant flashes of red-purple death that had to be a battle of some sort. With Warbane gone, the Patronage and Establishment were at it again.

This wasn't a safe state. Without being able to see anything of the physical world around her, she could walk off a cliff or run headlong into a wall, trip over a rock—any of the above and more. If she'd had any other choice, she would have worked through the pain, instead. Gramps warned her time after time that doing this was *dangerous*, and his sort of Sight meant he knew it for a

fact. For a few moments, though, she was free of the all-consuming agony wrought by the storm. This state kept her alive.

She examined her surroundings in detail she couldn't usually see, even with closed eyes. The fusion with Roma pulled all her abilities to the forefront, made every single flash of light brighter and more defined. Every part of her which wasn't linked to her ability faded to the background with the pain as she took on the aspect of her Angel.

There was a faint, mostly orange, glow where the three Death's Companion Hunters had stood to attack her team, and another orange glow where her teammates had fallen. Then over all of it, she could see Asa. Everywhere he'd been, everything he'd done, was outlined in raw, angry violet. Her eyes narrowed at the sight. Asa walked in death, and someone needed to give him to the Monsters he so complacently fed.

But dealing with Asa wasn't even on her priority list right now. He was irrelevant except for as far as he could help her find John.

She took one step forward, and then another. Cold washed her veins in the place of blood, and Roma's golden glow consumed her, but the pain was gone.

*Priority one. Get to John.*



**PART  
THREE**

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Kriska followed Asa's trail tirelessly, although she knew she would pay the price when she finally let go of her connection with Roma. Gramps had shown her this state in the interest of completing her training, and he'd been very clear about the consequences. Usually, she only used this after minor injuries—to keep them from impacting the hunt—and the agony when she let go was almost unimaginable, although it was always mercifully quick. She'd never used this to survive a storm, and never to try and track a killer. Nights when she'd finally come back to herself before, had left her passed out in a pain-filled haze—which was better than a night of sleepless pain. At least then she'd slipped into unconsciousness.

This time, the backlash might kill her.

She pushed that knowledge to the back of her mind as unimportant. Her safety wasn't high on her priorities. She just had to get to John.

The trail of violet she followed brightened in some spots and dulled in others, along with Asa's mental state, but it was always bright enough to follow. She stepped precisely where he'd stepped and touched everything he'd touched. She stepped onto something more solid than sand, and touched cold, hard things which slid aside with a hiss. Doors, if she had to guess. She didn't waste time feeling around them—only touched the handles where Asa's aura stained them. After some time had passed, she started to see the orange-yellow glow of other people. Hunters, if she had to guess. The wind no longer blew around her. She'd entered a compound of some sort.

## DEATH WEAVER

When one of the Hunters started to come close, she folded her arms across the Warbane insignia on her jacket and mustered as much snarky confidence as she could. None of them brightened to alarm, and nobody cried out. It seemed impossible that they wouldn't notice her, bloodstained as she likely was, but evidently no one cared—and she didn't have the focus to wonder why. It didn't matter. All Hunter jackets looked alike. Perhaps they thought she was one of their Hunters? Perhaps questioning a Death's Companion Hunter was more than their lives were worth. Perhaps the ghostly colors were just that. Ghosts. Perhaps she was fading faster than she thought. Perhaps all this was a fever dream and none of it was real. All that mattered was getting to John.

Real fear clawed at her, but she continued on. She clung to the possibility that she could save John and kept following in Asa's footsteps.

Finally, she heard his voice. She pressed herself up against what she thought was the wall of a corridor and listened.

"Interesting. Very interesting." His voice was low, almost like he was talking to himself. "Well, Mr. Fitzgerald, the next part is going to have to wait until you wake up, I suppose. I can't say I won't enjoy that." He gave a *tsk* and started moving toward Kriska.

There was a surface between them that had Asa's fingerprints all over it—a few toward the center, a little above chest height for Kriska, and more to the right with a cluster of fingerprints like he'd inputted some sort of code. A little brain power, and Kriska was forced to believe that it was a door, and Asa was coming right toward it. As soon as he was through, he'd see her. Hopefully, he wouldn't sense her before that.

Kriska darted back down the hallway at her best speed until she found a turn in Asa's path. He'd turned to the right, so she turned left—and smacked headlong into a hard surface.

Wall.

With one hand tracing the hard coolness she'd just collided with, she back-tracked along Asa's path until the wall turned, then stepped around the corner and used that solid surface as support, leaning against it, head tilted down, arms crossed, trying to look as nonchalantly normal as possible. Asa stepped out

of his lab—she had to assume that’s what the room was—and turned away from his trail almost immediately.

“You,” she heard him say, and she froze. But there was an orange-ish person there, who stiffened.

“Yes, sir?”

“Come with me. We’re going to go deal with the prisoners.”

Kriska grit her teeth. *Stay away from them.* But she held herself rigid to avoid jumping out at them.

*Priority one. Get to John.*

After John, she would follow Asa’s trail to get to the others. In the meantime, she would just have to trust them to endure whatever Asa had in mind.

She hurried back the way she’d come, and then turned her attention to the set of fingerprints beside the door. There were eight prints, each with a slightly different shade from lightest to darkest. The difference in shade was minimal. Without Roma’s help, she never would have been able to tell the prints apart. With Roma’s help, though, she punched the lightest fingerprint first, and the darkest one last. A click echoed through the empty hallway. Kriska grasped the handle and pulled. Nothing happened. She pushed, and the door opened.

Inside, she felt colors of all hues and intensity fighting for her attention. Most of it was red, or orange, or yellow—weapons, some of them. Others were colors that John described seeing. Green, white, blue, gray. Too much, driving through her eyeballs and skull. Too much color for this state.

She closed her eyes to shut out the onslaught of color, but that didn’t help. Roma grew warm in her hand, helping her parse the colors. Helping the neon green and blinding white fade to muted shades of their previously painful state. With Roma’s help, Kriska ignored the colors. She was looking for something else. A complete absence of color. John.

She scanned the room once, twice, three times, and then staggered to the ground. Her head pounded like it was about to split open. Too much light in this world that should be dark. Roma cooled in her hand. Raven started to fidget.

*Let go.*

## DEATH WEAVER

Anxiety filled her chest, but the pain was worse than the fear. Roma and Raven were right. She set Roma back in her holster. The moment she released her friend, full color, blinding and numb crashed over her head and the headache dulled.

*Hurry, hurry, hurry*, the weapons chanted in her mind with a beat that drove her forward. The wave of agony she knew was coming hadn't hit yet. Were Roma and Raven helping her?

She stumbled to her feet and immediately found John. He lay spread eagle on a large, square metal slab in the middle of the room. His hands and feet were secured by metal cuffs welded directly to the table—the best way to counteract Hunter strength. The welding torch lay on a board a few feet away. His jacket and the white shirt had been shredded with ruthless efficiency, revealing his bare chest. Cuts ran down his face, bloodless and gaping, and cuts still red with dried blood covered his arms.

Kriska's fists clenched as she surveyed the destruction. John had believed in her when all she could see were enemies. No one got to do this to John. *No one*. And now Asa would pay.

*Hurry, hurry, hurry*, the chant pounded in her head, driving her past evaluation. She jumped to the top of the table and grabbed the manacles. She had the leverage. After too long, the manacles popped free.

John's eyes flickered open as nausea found a crack in the armor her weapons had woven for her and hit her in the gut. She stumbled off the table and narrowly avoided colliding with the floor. A moment later, that same floor had stomach acid on it, and Kriska felt infinitely worse.

*Hurry, hurry, hurry*, the weapons still chanted.

Kriska strangled a scream as agony worse than hell consumed her, and it took everything she had not to collapse into the puddle of stomach acid and wait for the Monsters to find her—and they would. She could already feel their attention on her.

"Kriska, is that you?" John's voice was scratchy. Who knew what Asa had drugged him with or done to him.

She couldn't spare any attention to form a response, or to even register relief. Priority one complete.

*Priority two. Protect him.*

She wasn't in good enough shape to do that, but it was her mission priority, so she would.

She barely registered the presence of a warm human hand on her shoulder. She couldn't stop herself from shaking, even though moving would only cause more damage to her broken bones and add more agony to the world.

Slowly, the pain degraded—not in intensity, but in speed. It came in waves, the red haze lapping at her like the ocean. There was almost a half second of relief between the waves of fire that consumed her.

Through heavy breaths, she pulled Roma from her holster. The red black of pain induced unconsciousness was close—too close. She couldn't afford to pass out now. John's hands held her as she sank into Roma's metal skin and forged the bond. It was stronger, this time, fueled by need and pain. In the corner of her mind, she could see the golden lines of the bond vanish into the weapon.

Slowly, too slowly, the agony receded, and Kriska could breathe without pain. The relief came with an unavoidable truth that hung heavy in her mind.

She was dying.

“Kriska? Kriska!”

John's harsh whispers finally found their way to her ears. She untangled herself from his arms.

The colors assaulted her eyes. Squeezing them shut did nothing. “We have to find the others, and then get out of here. Free the mercs, if we can, and come back for them if we can't.” Her voice sounded cold, even to her. Colder than she'd intended, but she had no warmth to give him.

She was dying.

John stayed stubbornly rooted where he was, an anathema to her vision, human shaped black in the cacophony of colors infringing on her world.

“What was that? What's wrong with you, Kriska?”

She couldn't look at him. She couldn't tell where his eyes were, so she found the general direction of his head and stared with dead eyes. “It's passed.” For now. “We need to find your sister and the others.”

## DEATH WEAVER

It was a small lie but as painful as the death that stalked her. She was dying. She could stave it off, for now, but no weapon could solve death. Not even her Angels.

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

They set off at their best hobbled pace, through four separate code-locked doors, down a set of stairs, and through two more doors. A few times, John had to grab Kriska back from corners to avoid being seen, but between Kriska's ability to input codes throughout the facility—assuming the code had been used in the last few hours, that was—and John's unimpaired vision, they avoided setting off any alarms.

Kriska stumbled through the last door, gasping for breath that came reluctantly as her heart hammered painfully in her chest, a pulse of red with every beat.

The fingers on her shoulder—John's fingers—stiffened. "Verdell!"

John's exclamation was a welcome one, and Kriska traced the rapidly fading yellow marks of a keypad. It took her three times to get the code correct, and by the time John's sister was free, her hands were wet and clammy. Verdell was the only one in that cell. Two more to find.

Priority three. Get to the others.

They didn't waste time talking, except for a quick situation report from John that Kriska ignored. She didn't have to hear his words to feel the violet aura that infused this room. The mercenaries were all dead. The Fabric of Life was raw and thin, and Kriska's stomach twisted itself into knots.

What did Death's Companion want? Why kill the mercenaries here? Why kill them at all?

Did Asa get a perverse high from ripping holes in the Fabric of Life?

## DEATH WEAVER

Kriska stumbled to the ground and caught herself with her broken arm. Agony broke through the shield of black. She ignored it.

No one seemed to notice, and that was good. They didn't need to worry about her. She got them into this mess. It was her fault they'd gotten kidnapped, and her fault they'd gotten hurt. Every morsel of pain, even the heavy knowledge that she was dying was insufficient compared to her debt.

If they knew how badly she hurt, they would slow down to try and help her.

Not only would it be futile, it would only increase the harm she'd done to them.

She kept her teeth closed around the pain and moved forward.

She followed Verdell as best she could, focusing on not falling over and keeping up. Her breath gasped from her chest, feeling smaller and smaller every time. The others didn't seem to hear.

Time passed, and their small group grew. Kieko came. Eric came. The mercs were already dead.

They started toward the exit of the facility. It was all Kriska could do to keep pace with the other, relatively unhurt, though slightly drugged Hunters. The stiffness in her chest spread and started to ache. Alarms went off in the facility, screaming in the darkness around her, but Kriska couldn't spare any attention for them.

Someone grabbed her, lifted her off her feet, and Kriska let him. A void in space carried her over his shoulder. John. All thoughts of resistance fled like dust bunnies.

Keep breathing.

*Priority four. Survive.*

After minutes of being carried like a little child, some of her surroundings started to return. Oranges and reds filtered back into the dark. Her heart calmed, and the aching in her body cooled to a faint throb. It was still more than she should be feeling, but she had enough control to marshal her thoughts.

Red flared behind them, but John didn't turn, didn't stop, didn't acknowledge that the figure in red was there.

Roma guided Kriska's hand to the right angle, then flared twice—killing purple. The Fabric of Life knotted in a desperate

attempt to keep the Monsters from stealing the dying person's soul, and then gave up with a tear. Death.

Kriska tried not to gag at the sight.

John's stride shifted slightly. Was he looking at her? She couldn't tell.

"Thanks."

Kriska managed a nod.

"Two in front." Her throat stuck together, trying to stop the words, but she forced them out. They were still in combat, and she was still a Hunter.

She was dying.

Kriska brushed that thought away as the Fabric of Life twisted. Verdell killed them.

Then the air changed, and Kriska could feel grit in her mouth and in her nose. The wind howled around her and set her ears screaming for relief even as the heaters attached to her began to hum.

John's pace changed yet again as red flared behind them. Three individuals, this time. One of them trailed Monsters in his wake, and just looking at his aura made Kriska shudder. Asa.

Her hands moved, but her mind didn't register it. Grabbed something from her belt. Pulled something out of the top. Threw.

Kriska's eyes widened as she realized what she'd just done. One of the grenades she'd found in the closet.

"Get down!" she screamed above the wind. Somehow, her voice worked well enough for everyone to hear.

John dove down, and Kriska tumbled away from him as the grenade exploded. Her vision flashed red, and the Fabric of Life writhed, but she still found her feet. Ears ringing, she stumbled forward and then hit the ground again.

*Get up, get up, get up*, her weapons chanted in her head. She forced herself to her feet and stumbled after a red figure that was probably Eric. John followed her, and the other two were in front of Eric.

Time passed, and the others' paces solidified as they shook off the grenade's impact and the effects of whatever drugs were in their system. As the others recovered, Kriska found herself falling farther and farther behind. Her legs were weighted with lead,

## DEATH WEAVER

and her head was more cotton than brains. Aches broke through the shield Roma formed over the pain—not debilitating while she was connected with Roma, but when she finally let go of the connection, she was going to pay.

Knowing that her death was only hours, perhaps minutes, away had been bearable when survival was so low on her list of priorities. She'd had goals: save John and save the others. Now, they were safe, and she was still dying. Once they found the ship and were safely away, she would put Roma back in her holster, and that would be that. A few moments of fire, and then the Monsters would come. Roma could only hold the Fabric of Life closed against the Monsters for so long, after all. Even Angels had their limits.

Kriska felt tears on her face as she stumbled across the sand and, for the first time, fear covered anger. She'd succeeded in her task. She'd atoned for her mistake. John, Verdell, Eric, and Kieko were all safe. She didn't want to leave them now. She didn't want to see the Monsters come for her, or give up her dreams of Mars, or leave John and the others. She wanted to live with a ferocity that made her chest ache even more.

But she'd known when she'd first forged this bond with Roma that she wouldn't survive, and even stumbling after the others of her team, Kriska couldn't bring herself to regret her actions.

Roma's presence enfolded her, comforting her, and somewhere inside, Kriska found the will to move on.

She didn't want to die, but if that was the cost of seeing her friends to safety, then she would face the Monsters just like she'd faced all of her enemies, with a stern face and a gun in her hand.

After an eternity, the others stopped, and Kriska sank to the ground. Her knees were too weak to support her, and the burning in her hip from walking while it was broken had pierced Roma's armor.

The others cooled from red to orange as the war between exhaustion and vigilance came to a close. Only Verdell's battle was decided on the side of vigilance, and she remained an angry red, towering above Kriska. For a moment, Kriska thought her violence was, like all the others, still directed at Death's Companion. Then she realized that the red outline of Verdell's

eyes was staring directly at her as she lay on the ground, gasping for air and not finding it. Around her, she could feel Roma's hold on the Wall of Life failing.

"If you're going to spank me..." Kriska managed to get out, "do it quick." Her lips twisted into a humorless grin.

Verdell raised a finger trembling with rage. "This is all your fault. Do you hear me? Your fault!"

Kriska nodded, although that motion only brought more pain. Verdell was right. Her stupid race through the sands of Titan had led them here. John's wounds, her own death, she'd caused them both.

Hands gripped her chin and forced it up. Verdell's hands. Probably. Kriska couldn't tell through her rapidly darkening vision.

"Leading us out into the middle of a death storm, right in the middle of Death's Companion's trap." She snorted. "Lone Wolf, indeed." But then her aura softened, and she looked at the others. For a moment. Her grip on Kriska's chin gentled. "But a Lone Wolf never would have come back for us."

The heart smashing at her ribcage didn't stop thundering. Kriska struggled to breathe.

"Thank you," Verdell said softly.

Physical contact. Hands on her shoulders, patting her back. Her team. The feelings were cold.

Kriska couldn't open her mouth. Her jaw was stiff with cold, and her tongue filled her mouth like a ball of cotton.

A new voice. John. "Kriska, what's wrong?"

John, who had stayed by her side; who had led the charge after she found him. John, who she'd fooled for so long, pretending that her injuries were minor.

Kieko's voice. Quiet. Dreamy. Slurred. Had they drugged her? "Fear...panic..."

John's voice, more insistent. "Kriska, hold on."

Eric. "What's wrong?"

Verdell's presence retreated. The world spun. Cold against her back, her side, her cheek. She'd fallen back into the sand.

Titan's storm had promised vengeance. Was this it?

Purple claws, just the points, appeared at the edge of the tear in the Fabric of Life. Kriska's breath caught as she saw them.

## DEATH WEAVER

The Monsters were coming for her, but she didn't want to go. The Monster's face became visible through the gap. It was a misshapen lump of flesh with a slit in its skin where hundreds of needlepoint teeth grinned out at her, and tiny red eyes stared in anticipation. A moment longer, only, and it would feast.

Her jaw finally unlocked. She spit words out through spasming teeth. "H—help... m—" She didn't have the strength to fight the Monster. Roma's strength was almost spent.

Another golden thread joined Roma's in trying to stitch the Fabric of Life closed, but both threads were thin and weak by themselves. The Monster reached out with torturous claws and snapped both threads with impunity.

In her mind, Kriska could hear Roma and Raven scream, but she could do nothing.

Eric and Kieko's voices blended into one, calling for her. Verdell's voice joined them. They sounded so very far away, the words were indecipherable.

Hands touched her. No, not her. Metal skin that wasn't hers, although they were bound as tight as if they were one person.

Roma. Hands pulled Roma from her. Roma resisted, but she was already hurt from the one-sided battle with the Monster.

Kriska screamed as colored vision came flooding back. Red hot pain exploded everywhere, inescapable as the Monster's claws reached for her. And then her vision of the Monster faded along with everything except the pain and the knowledge that this was it. She'd done what she could. She'd saved John and the others.

The last thing she heard as she drifted off was John's panicked voice in her ear.

"Hold on, Kriska."

# CHAPTER TWENTY

Feeling came back in pulses and waves. Kriska reached out with her senses to find Roma, but her friend was nowhere to be found. Cotton in her head and aching everywhere else made it hard to think beyond the taste of terror in her mouth—and yet, when had she ever been so afraid?

The Monster.

Its sickening grin and hungry eyes came back in a flash, and Kriska cringed away—except the Fabric of Life around her was whole, sealing the Monsters on the other side. It wasn't coming for her. Somehow, somehow, she was alive. How was she alive?

Verdell's voice cut through the fog of confusion. "You've been out cold for an hour."

Kriska started to relax. There were vibrations around her, which meant they'd all made it safely to the egg ship. They'd all escaped. She was safe.

Then she remembered Verdell's scathing words, berating her for the stupidity which had almost gotten everyone killed. She peeled her eyes open to look at the other Bounty Hunter.

Verdell sat in the chair next to her, not strapped in, just sitting with both feet on the floor, balance shifted forward, using her belt knife to quietly trim her fingernails.

"Is John—" Kriska remembered the burns and cuts on his body she'd seen during that brief moment of visual clarity.

"He's a trusting fool, but he's alive."

Kriska turned her head to see John in the front of the ship, piloting. He looked better than she felt—that was for sure. Even that simple motion lit fires around her body, but the pain wasn't

## DEATH WEAVER

nearly as bad as before, and breathing was merely a struggle instead of complete agony.

“How am I—” but then she remembered the answer to that, too. His voice had called to her even as the Monsters had wrapped their claws around her soul. John had saved her, just like he’d helped Kieko on Earth.

Verdell looked up from her fingernails. “You were an idiot back there,” she said without venom.

Heat gathered in Kriska’s cheeks. Gramps would probably have said the same thing. Using her connection with Raven and Roma to go beyond human limits had been stupid, but she hadn’t had another choice.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Verdell continued, “I’m grateful that you saved my brother. But hiding your injuries? Walking on that?” she pointed the tip of her knife at Kriska’s leg, which was swathed in a white, blow-up cast. “You do what you have to do, but John could have handled it after you found him. He may not be as invincible as you seem to think you are, but he was only dealing with a little blood loss and electrocution.”

Kriska remembered the image of him lying on the table, and bile rose in her throat. “I couldn’t just—”

Verdell slipped the knife back into its belt sheath and leaned forward to meet Kriska’s eyes. “You’re on *my* team, Kriska. You do what I say. I don’t care what fancy Death Weaver abilities you have, you tell us when you’re hurt, and you certainly don’t face death alone.”

Kriska shivered at the memory of that Monster’s face staring at her with its terrible eyes. “But what if I’m the only one who can?” she asked quietly.

Verdell snorted. “You’re not. John is connected to the Wall of Life and Death, if from a different side than you are. I am, too, even if I can’t see the Wall, only the Angels. You do what you have to, but this self-sacrificial crap had better never happen again. Got it?”

Kriska bowed her head meekly. “Got it.”

A faint warmth built in her chest, even as embarrassment flushed her cheeks.

Was this that same dependence she'd always shamed guild members for? The team was there to pick up after her mistakes, and to keep her alive, even after she'd done her level best to keep them out of it. Was this what she'd derided them for?

This...safety? No, that was the wrong word. Security? The feeling pulsed in her chest, and she couldn't name it, except to say that Gramps had made her feel that way, too.

Eric and Kieko were looking at her from where they sat, cuddled together on the same chair at the back of the shuttle. Kieko was grinning like a fool. Kriska flushed.

Kieko's grin softened. "You know, family is not easy, but it is good."

Is that what she was feeling? Family?

These were people she could depend on to save her, people she would give up her own life to save. The thought wasn't completely foreign, but it scratched at her in the raw place that had torn itself to shreds after Gramps left. Now, the feeling was back, and it eclipsed the ache Gramps had left in her chest.

"Yeah." The word caught in Kriska's throat.

She caught the edge of John's grin from the pilot's seat and wondered if she'd truly resigned herself to the fact that she would never be a Lone Wolf again.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

They landed at another settlement and threaded through the streets of colorfully clothed people—Kriska, doing her best not to lag behind. John looked at her with concern and stood beside her, almost like he expected her to keel over in the middle of the street. Kriska squashed her annoyance. She'd almost died back there, and every muscle protested with every tiny shift in her weight. She probably shouldn't be walking at all, except she'd threatened to murder John when he'd suggested a float-chair, so now she couldn't very well admit that he'd been right. Every step sent agony lancing up through her hips and down through her ankle bones at the same time, and there was a painful catch in her ribs every time she took a full breath.

Still, breathing shallowly and walking very, very slowly, she managed to get to the hotel Verdell had decided to use as their place to lay low.

She waited outside the hotel with the others as Verdell went in and came back with a room key in one hand and a hyposyringe in the other, which she handed to John. Those would be the promised 'bots, then.

Kriska glared at the hyposyringe in John's hand with loathing. 'Bots were general fix-all, but the fact that Kriska's leg felt like it was on fire didn't make her hate them any less. She was one of the around twenty percent of Hunters who could feel the stupid things moving around inside of her, and her whole body became a mass of yellow and orange flashes while they did their righteous destruction and reconstruction to try and fix her.

John motioned for Kriska to hold out her arm, and she did it grudgingly. Hunters healed fast, and they healed even faster when

they had someone like John around to save them from being very much dead, but a broken (although now splinted) arm, leg, hip, and ribs weren't going to heal up in the next few days, especially after how much strain she'd put on her body earlier. She didn't want to admit it, but if a simple six block walk was enough to put her out of commission, she wasn't going to be able to face Asa anytime soon, was she?

John pressed the head of the hyposyringe to her arm, and there was a hiss as the 'bots flooded into her body. Kriska grit her teeth as she felt them get to work immediately.

"Don't you need some of that, too?" Kriska asked. John's cuts were already healing, though.

He shrugged. "I'll be at the top of my form by tomorrow morning. It seems that you got to me before Asa could do any real damage." Which would have been great, happy, and all sorts of fun, except that meant there was no one to share her misery with.

Kriska took a room key from Verdell and stalked toward the external elevator. Well, tried to stalk. When she stomped down on her broken leg, it buckled, and she caught herself on the wall, breath hissing out through her teeth.

John moved to her side, offering a shoulder. She took it.

"Where are you going?" Verdell called after them.

"If I'm going to have these things inside me, I'm going to sleep until they all deactivate themselves."

"Moody teenager," Verdell said in a low voice, and John chuckled.

"I heard that!"

All joking aside, Kriska really did crash on the first bed she found. Roma went under her pillow, Raven went on the bedside table, and then she willed herself to sleep.

Her dreams were full of snippets from the past. Howling wind which blew sand every which way. Isolated words too vague to remember whispered in her mind, intangible and yet cacophonous at the same time. Asa's voice. Asa's laugh.

She came awake to silence, her body drenched in sweat, her finger already on Roma's trigger.

But it wasn't the silence which came in the aftermath of destruction. The colors behind her eyes were sedate: yellows

## DEATH WEAVER

so light they were hard to see. Kriska pulled her hand out from under the pillow where she'd put Roma and took a deep breath to calm her racing mind.

Everything was fine. Everyone was fine. They were safe.

The 'bots had burned themselves out in the night, and Kriska tried an exploratory breath. Her ribs, at least, didn't hurt. Her leg didn't feel like it was on fire and didn't twinge when she moved it. Her arm, still in the sling, moved fine.

Kriska pulled the old-fashioned piece of fabric over her head and tossed it at the wall. The 'bots had done a good job. Slowly, she got out of bed and tested her range of motion. Certainly not one hundred percent yet. There were twinging catches as she circled her arm, and the abused muscles of her leg made their protests known as she tried a half-powered kick to the front.

Not completely healed—not yet—but close. Sufficient quantities of amino acids and fluids, another night of sleep, and she would be back in fighting shape.

Satisfied, or nearly satisfied, anyway, Kriska stepped into the main room of the hotel suite.

Verdell sat on an oversized couch which stretched from the wall to three quarters of the way across the room with a tablet in her hand in e-reader mode, the screen converted into to something more mindful of the reader's eyes. Eric was also on the couch, swaddled in a dozen blankets with a controller in his hand, playing some sort of game on the wall screen. Kieko lay on the couch beside him, her head in his lap, sleeping peacefully—although she had probably been watching the game at some point. John had claimed a large recliner set at an angle to the screen, and he had an old-fashioned paper book in his hand.

Kriska gawked at the scene. First off, where had John even gotten a paper book? They'd all burned during the Split and during the first eruptions that followed the planet's cracking. Now they weren't just collector's items, they belonged in museums.

They all—except Kieko—looked up from what they were doing when she walked into the room.

"Feeling better?" John asked dryly.

Kriska shrugged and, for a wonder, the gesture didn't hurt. "Much." And even better, those evil little 'bots were deactivated so it didn't feel like her body was a war zone.

"Do a quick work-up, and then come grab a book," Verdell said.

A book?

"Are you really all just sitting around?"

"Well, not Verdell," Eric said. "She's reading a tactics manual." Then he cursed, and focused back on the screen, where his avatar was getting pelted with bullets. A moment later, his avatar was dead.

"A tactics manual you might have found useful right there," Verdell said.

"Har, har. Now stop being so distracting."

Kriska shook her head and brought her attention back to her body. Slowly, gently, methodically, she tested every major muscle group, noting weakness which might be caused by muscle damage or misalignment around one of the body's many pulleys. Her off-hand had some misalignment in the wrist and elbow, which she took the time to fix, and the damage to her leg was all muscular, which meant she just needed to give it time. When she was done, she went back to staring at everyone else.

"Is there really nothing else to do?"

"Nope," Verdell said without looking up from her tablet screen.

"Leads on Death's Companion?"

"No."

"Asa?"

"No."

"Random quick bounties to fulfill while we wait for something to drop into our lap?"

Verdell put her tablet down with a sigh. "Are you always this anxious to get going after you've been raised from the dead?"

An edge of annoyance entered Kriska's voice. Verdell wasn't dumb. Why wasn't she just as antsy? "If the guy who beat me up is still out there, murdering everyone he sets his eyes on? Then yes."

Verdell shook her head. "I want to get them all just as badly as you do, but we can't go back in there with just us. We're waiting for reinforcements from Io Base."

## DEATH WEAVER

“AKA, our mother.” John turned another page in his book.

Kriska stared. “You just sent an invitation out to everyone who still thinks I’m an evil psycho and told them to come here?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it,” Verdell said.

Kriska squashed the anxiety and took a deep breath. Verdell wasn’t an idiot. It did make a certain amount of sense. They’d all been told that she was one of the good guys. Whether Mrs. Fitzgerald believed Verdell’s message was still up for debate, but they had been told.

After standing around for a few more seconds, staring at everyone’s various occupations, Kriska turned on her heel and strode back into her room. Nothing to do? She’d *make* something to do. Her eyes rested on Raven, hanging on the wall. A few rounds—through what? There were no targets, and the Fitzgeralds probably wouldn’t be happy with the repair bill if she just started shooting the walls.

Instead, Kriska dropped down to the floor and started with pushups. She only made it to one hundred before the arm she’d broken refused to go further. The other arm hadn’t even begun to feel the strain. Kriska grumbled to herself and switched exercises.

Kieko’s head poked through the door. “Try not to shake the building too much?”

Kriska shrugged as she continued her jumping jacks, and she heard Kieko’s voice as the other Hunter shut the door and went back to the others. “It’s hopeless.”

Kriska couldn’t keep herself from smiling.

She did try to keep from causing too much of a disturbance. About an hour later, bored of the ordinary calisthenics she could do in the tiny hotel room, she went to grab a shower. When she returned, everyone was still sitting there. Eric had changed to a cartoonish shooter game instead of the realistic one he’d been playing earlier. Nobody had moved an inch.

Kriska’s hands itched to do something. “How can you just all sit there? Don’t you need to *do* something?”

Verdell arched an eyebrow. “I think you need to go do a reset.”

“You just almost died, Kriska. Take a nap,” John added.

They both went back to their respective electronic and paper books.

Kriska stifled a scream and stalked back into her room. After pacing for a few minutes, Kriska had to admit that Verdell was right. Her brain was cluttered. A few minutes to sit and sort out all the feelings and thoughts would do some good.

She took a deep breath.

This situation was exactly what a reset was for. Reluctantly, Kriska slowed her pacing and found her way to the foot of the hotel bed. She took a giant breath, filling her lungs until it hurt. Then, instead of releasing it, she held it. Her body screamed like it was drowning. Her muscles tried to release, but she kept them engaged by sheer force of will. Only when the world began to flicker did she release the breath with a “hah!” of sound and sink down into her cross-legged position. The world tried to swim—oxygen deprivation did that—but she ignored the illusion, and her body’s urging to gasp for air like a fish. Instead, she sucked air in deliberately, and expelled it with lips pursed, like she was blowing through a straw. After a few moments of breathing, her body stopped fighting her and relaxed into her control. Breaths deepened, pushing thought away with every exhalation.

“*Kriska,*” Gramp’s voice said in memory as she reached toward the trance of reset. “*Take a deep breath. Don’t worry about the other things, just breathe.*”

That thought slipped away like a sigh, and Kriska began to count. Seven seconds in, eleven seconds out. The count slowed with every iteration until the trance stole even the numbers. There was only breath and body. Air and bone.

Gramp’s voice found her, even in the thoughtless plane of trance. His voice was soft, guiding her even now. “*Hunting is an overwhelming job sometimes, but it will never get to be too much so long as you remember this. It’s called a reset and all Hunters do it. We have to, or the stress will break us. Now sit down. Relax. Breathe. When you find the trance, remember, and then go to sleep.*”

Images faded into existence. Fighting through the ash storm to save Kieko; pulling on the Fabric of Life in a desperate attempt to bend the bullets propelled toward Kieko’s heart and head; shrugging off Verdell’s fury; fighting the Monsters which clawed at her soul. The images came one after the other, slowing around mistakes to allow her the time to evaluate with a dispassionate

## DEATH WEAVER

eye. Small corrections filled her mind as she noted minuscule imperfections which would have made her shooting more efficient, and muscle tension differences which would have wasted less energy.

Her impatience during her three day confinement to the Warbane compound earned a wince. A calm, collected mind during all times was essential to a good hunt. That lesson appeared, and then faded as she incorporated it into the fiber of her being. Next time, the confinement wouldn't wear on her so much.

More memories appeared, only to fade as she accepted the lessons.

The wind picked up, whipping grit into her face. Kriska clenched her jaw as the memory surfaced. This was a terrible moment, an awful decision that had almost gotten everyone she cared about killed. The knowledge that she was going to have to go through every second of that disaster again almost jerked her from the trance. She already knew the mistakes here—why re-live it?

She held onto the trance state with fingers that ached with Titan's cold and continued.

The landscape whooshed by as she launched herself in pursuit of mercenaries who were already dead. The emotional strain of the situation showed in inefficient muscle use. At top form, she might have outrun John for another two-point-six minutes.

Another internal wince. *At what cost?*

Another two minutes closer to Asa's ambush. Another two minutes farther from the shelter she'd left in a mad pursuit of the dead.

John tackled her, and then the surprise attack came—devastating, with lightning fast strikes and warnings that her over cluttered brain had shunted away from her awareness. Asa, Malcom, and the other Hunters of Death's Companion appeared in the vengeful sand with nonlethal weapons in their hands and pain on their minds.

She stood there, silent, clueless, useless, as Kieko fell. Eric fell. Verdell fell.

John fell.

Gramp's voice again, overriding the mistakes. *"Resets don't just help you learn, they clear the mind. Every time you find a safe place, use the trance. Then, and only then, will you be able to face the challenges of a Hunter's life."*

If only she'd reset before they went out to that desert of ice, she might've seen the signs. Asa and his compatriots hadn't been silent in their approach, but her mind had been too *busy* to hear.

Shunted away in the banks of her sensory memory, Kriska heard the sharp keening of a bird of prey. Behind her closed eyelids, there was a glimmer of orange and purple. If she had only looked—if she had only used her eyes to see what was in front of her—then they would have had warning. She would have seen the outlines of people come to do them harm, and they would have been ready. A few extra seconds, and she might've had Asa instead of the other way around. John might not have been taken. All the pain and fear that had washed the Fabric of Life might have been erased.

Instead, she had been so focused on what *could* happen that she had led them into a tragedy.

Guilt mixed with sorrow, and then joined with the lesson. Then, mercifully, they faded away, leaving Kriska wrung out and exhausted.

More memories surfaced and then, finally, sleep.

The past was past. Time to start again.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

A sound punctured the bubble of protection she'd spun around her mind during the trance, and Kriska was on her feet before she could register what the sound even was.

A knock on the door—the door to the hotel suite—and the orange of potential violence, visible even before Kriska closed her eyes. She didn't stop to puzzle over the intrusion of her Second Sight on her normal sight. She grabbed Raven off the wall and opened the door that separated her room from the main room.

She half expected everyone to be sitting exactly where she'd left them. Verdell, however, was nowhere to be seen. John stood next to the door that led out into the main hallway of the hotel, one eye at the peep-hole. He grimaced.

"It's Clarence Bunnel." The loathing in his voice was clear.

Kieko appeared at Kriska's elbow and led her back into the sleeping room. "You should wait here," she said serenely.

Kriska let herself be shepherded around as she searched her brain for mention of that name. She'd heard it before somewhere.

Then she got it. Clarence Bunnel, the jerk-head son of Councilor Bunnel who headed Warbane's internal security. In essence, the Conclave's resident snitch. John had told her about him while they were all still on Earth.

"What is he doing here?" Kriska asked. Now was the absolute worst time for the Conclave to have caught up with her. Her body was mostly healed, but not enough to answer the demands of a full Hunter on Hunter fight.

Kieko pressed a finger to her lips. "Quietly, now. They're looking for you."

“Why?” Kriska asked. “Weren’t we all just sitting around, waiting for Warbane to come help us? I thought the misunderstanding about me was cleared up by that message Verdell sent to Io.” She couldn’t keep the irritation from bleeding into her voice. But better irritation than fear.

Kieko shook her head. “Councilor Bunnel is on Warbane’s council, but he works directly for the Conclave. Marie Fitzgerald may be convinced of your innocence, but the Conclave is not. Even if they were, they would still wish to lock you up.”

“What? Why? And why do they care about one Lone Wolf turned Guild Monkey?”

Kieko gave a vaguely disturbing grin. Light burned in brown eyes. “You are a Death Weaver. Dangerous.”

The words sent a chill down Kriska’s spine.

Kieko pulled back the sheets on Kriska’s bed and held out a hand for Roma and Raven. “Get under the covers. We must hide you, or the Conclave will take you.”

Hide her? From Conclave bio scanners?

Kriska grit her teeth as she looked at Kieko’s outstretched hand. Give up her only protection while a Conclave crony was at the door? Then she closed her eyes, remembering how John had fought for her in the teeth of death. Roma and Raven weren’t her only protection anymore. She handed her two friends to Kieko, who tucked Roma into a pocket and set Raven in the closet behind Kriska’s duffel.

She slid into the hotel bed, still confused. Kieko’s intention to hide her was obvious, but her method made no sense. “How is this going to help Clarence not find me?”

“When he tries to turn your face to the light, grab your head and moan. You shall be me. You have seen my reaction when I overuse my gift.”

Kriska remembered Kieko, white-faced and moaning when Eric had been unable to control his emotions. She nodded.

“Aren’t they going to notice an extra person in the room?” Kriska asked.

Kieko glided toward the door as another set of knocks, much, much louder than the first, shook the hotel room. “You have made judgments about me and my abilities in a fight.”

## DEATH WEAVER

Kriska's cheeks heated as she remembered thinking that Kieko didn't belong in a firefight. "I didn't mean—"

"Shhh." Kieko put one hand to white painted lips. "That was not my kind of fight. This is." Her grin returned. "Verdell has gone out to buy provisions."

And then Kieko faded right before Kriska's eyes. One moment she was there, growing pale and transparent, and then she was gone. Kriska stared at the place Kieko had been, but Kriska was alone.

The door opened of its own accord, then shut.

Kriska stared at it in disbelief.

Kieko could do *that*? No wonder she worried the Conclave so much.

But just because she could disappear didn't mean she could throw the Conclave goons off their tracks.

Kriska shifted to the side so that shadows covered her face, and curled in on herself as she closed her eyes to watch what unfolded in the other room. Her ears strained to catch whatever hints of movement she could.

The sound of a door opening and the solid footsteps of a bully. The scent of licorice body spray spread throughout the room. Kriska wrinkled her nose. Clarence's aura moved into the main room of the hotel suite. His fingers, more distinct in his aura than they should have been from that distance, curled around something with exactly no potential for violence. If Kriska had to guess, that would be the scanner.

A muffled voice came through the closed door between her and the others. "Weapons down, thumbs tucked in your waistband. This is Internal Security. John—" Clarence's voice took on a hint of malice. "—stay right there. We've got a solid count on the number of life signs."

Kriska wished, yet again, that she could See John as well as the others.

Thumps punctuated Clarence's words as thin rectangles—drawers?—at the edge of the room gained the faintest aura. Doors slammed open, shut. Clarence was searching.

If they found Roma, they would know she was here.

Did whatever Kieko planned on doing extend to Roma? Had they hidden her well? Would she show up on the scans they had to be running, plain as day in Kieko's pocket?

Kriska found herself breathing hard and clenched her teeth. Clarence was a Hunter. If not for the racket he was making in the main room, he might've already heard her anomalous breathing. She had to get herself under control.

But the dull ache in her arm and ribs after such a light workout reminded her over and over that she couldn't fight. Not against a team of Hunters. If he found her, he would drag her before the Conclave, and they would make her disappear.

*That won't happen*, she told herself. John wouldn't let it happen.

Clarence had brought four other people, all wreathed in varying shades of violence, so the work went quickly. They went from room to room, yanking things out, damaging furniture. But they hadn't found Roma. Hopefully that meant they wouldn't find Kriska either.

John's voice grew louder as he approached the door to Kriska's room with the Conclave enforcers in tow. "This is the last room, Clarence. Satisfied now?"

Kriska's heart rate sped up, and it became a fight to keep her breathing even and sleep-like. She reached for the trance of *reset* as John opened the door and Clarence tromped in with all his cronies.

Her awareness bled away as the trance state ensnared her mind—and then shattered at the touch of a rough hand on her chin. Those fingers tried to turn her head up, toward the sterile light of the hotel room, but Kriska fought the motion, mumbling groans. The fingers were intractable.

Across the room—surely still invisible to the naked eye, but suddenly visible to Kriska's Sight—Kieko's aura spiked.

Clarence continued to move Kriska's face to the light.

Kieko's aura shifted—somehow. A sense of deepening beyond the Fabric of Life. A sense of *change*. An image in Kriska's mind. Kieko holding her face in her hand. A sense of Kriska's own mind below that.

Kriska moved. Her hands came up to shield her face from Clarence's disbelieving glare, and she arched her back in a

## DEATH WEAVER

movement of agony. Her moan bordered on a scream, and it was that sound which made Clarence drop her and step back, aura moving from orange to yellow.

Eric's slender aura moved closer to Kriska, and she felt a hand on her shoulder. "Go back to sleep, Kiki."

Kriska relaxed back into the mattress—an act, until Clarence left the room and shut the door behind him. Then, she relaxed in truth.

Clarence's voice was muffled by the door. "I apologize for disturbing Kieko, but my father was quite clear. The Conclave is searching for a criminal, and there were reports of her in this area. You know how the Councilman is if we are less than thorough."

"Of course," John said. His voice was dry and flat. "Now leave."

Kriska almost laughed out loud—which would have been very bad for all of them, seeing as she was supposed to be asleep.

John had spunk? She'd never seen this side of him before. It was almost as arcane as the idea of his sitting on the sofa next to Eric, reading a museum piece.

"Actually, we aren't done here," Clarence said, as his aura moved to an anticipatory shade of orange.

The room fell silent for one heartbeat, and then two. Kriska could see the outline of a grin displayed in Clarence's aura. "There are four life signs, and we've only seen three Hunters here."

John's voice hardened. "So?"

Clarence's grin was absolutely predatory as he spread his hands to indicate the disheveled hotel room. "So, a couple members of my fireteam saw something interesting while they were out grabbing snacks. A blonde-headed G. I. Jane strutting around like she owned the place."

John's aura pulsed. One moment it was as invisible as ever, the next he was the palest of yellows. Then, quickly as it had come, the aura was gone again. "What did you do to Verdell?"

"What?" Clarence's eyes widened with false innocence. "Nothing. Just took note of her presence and dropped a few of my people to keep an eye on her." He tapped something near his collar bone, releasing a burst of static. Was he wearing a helmet like Verdell's?

“Yes boss?” A new voice asked. The sound was unnatural, like it had come over a speaker.

“Oh, nothing,” Clarence said with a nasty grin. “Just checking in on our girl.”

Kieko and Eric both shifted, turning toward one another. Kriska did her best to unclench her belly. Too many lifesigns and eyes on Verdell, proving that Verdell couldn’t be the extra lifesign. Had their bag of tricks run out? There was no way he didn’t know she was here.

Static fizzed from the speaker. “Last known...had...now—”

Eric grinned, then looked toward where John had to be standing.

“You’re grasping at straws, Clarence,” John said. “Run back to Io while your dignity is still intact.”

Clarence tilted his head. “What happened to problem-solving John, huh? The one everyone praised for being so very constructive?”

John didn’t say anything.

Another sputter of static from the speaker on Clarence’s collar. Garbled words. Clarence’s fingers curled into a fist. “Where is she?”

“Who?” John’s voice was perfectly calm.

Red, the color of non-lethal violence, blossomed in the air as Clarence’s fist met a void of color. John.

“Your Lone Wolf girlfriend.”

Kriska’s eyebrows lifted. Where had Clarence gotten *girlfriend* from?

“She’s a Guild Hunter, just like you. She’s Warbane.”

John’s words sent a shiver down her spine. A Guild Hunter. Once, those words had terrified her. Now, they warmed her. John, Eric, and Kieko had her back. They wouldn’t just toss her to the Conclave and walk away.

Another flash of red from Clarence’s fist. Coughing punctured the still air. “Shut your mouth. That Monster can single-handedly kill us all. She’s not Warbane.”

John’s coughing turned to laughter. “Have you *looked* at Warbane recently? Councilor Xi could shatter reality. Councilman Thaddeus could drive a room mad. My mother could summon an

## DEATH WEAVER

automated armory and go on a genocidal rampage. Warbane is destructive. Kriska fits right in.”

“Fine! Get on the ground.” Clarence wasn’t bothering to hide the naked hate in his voice.

“Really, Clarence? You’re going to cuff me?”

Clarence produced a weapon with a soft orange glow. Nothing that could be fatal—a tranquilizer or taser.

“She’s not a criminal, and she’s not here—” A buzz filled the air.

Yeah, it was definitely a taser in Clarence’s hand.

John was on the floor jerking, and Clarence put a foot on his back. “Would you like to say anything else?”

John didn’t respond, although the void of color did start to jerk far less.

“No?” Clarence sounded almost disappointed. “Oh, well.” He pitched his voice to carry through the hotel room. “John’s little girlfriend! I’ve got a nice padded seat for him in the shuttle, instead of an electric collar and a cell if you come out in the next ten minutes.”

He fired the taser at John again. Kieko grabbed Eric’s hand as her aura paled.

Kriska threw the covers off and made it two steps before a blanket fell over her mind, draped in calm.

If she went out there, then everything the team had done to protect her would be in vain.

The emotions weren’t hers—Kieko wasn’t trying to be subtle this time.

Kieko was too far away to talk to her without giving her away, but apparently, she could still manipulate Kriska’s emotions.

Clarence fired the taser again, and Kriska wished with all her might to be able to see John with greater clarity. He was a full Hunter. He’d taken worse beatings than this before.

But to sit down and just have to take it instead of fighting back?

Kriska clenched her fists.

Suddenly, her eyelids were droopy, and Kriska fought a yawn. She wasn’t tired. There was no reason for her to be tired.

Another message from Kieko?

Obediently, Kriska got back into bed. A moment later, Eric opened the door, Kieko in tow.

Clarence laughed after them. “Yes, go get the little criminal you’ve hidden away!”

Eric shut the door on the arrogant internal security goon and looked at Kriska. “You’ve got to stay in here. They’re just trying to draw you out.”

“I figured out that much by myself,” Kriska muttered. “But what are we going to do about John?”

Kieko put a finger to her lips and went to open the window at the far side of the room. “You must still sleep,” she said quietly.

The sound of the taser went off again in the other room.

Kieko changed before Kriska’s eyes, shimmering bit by bit until she was Verdell. Then, confidently, and with none of the delicate grace Kieko maintained, she strode to the other side of the room and banged the door open.

“What do you think you’re doing, Clarence? There’s going to be a major operation in a matter of hours, and you’re working out petty childhood disputes on my brother? Grow up.”

Kieko, wearing the image of Verdell, leaned against the wall with her arms crossed—exactly the way Verdell always did.

Clarence bared his teeth. “Nice try, but we have eyes on Verdell.” He keyed his com. “Status update.”

The only response was a burst of static.

Clarence glared at Eric. “You messed with my comms, didn’t you.”

Eric sniffed. “You bring your comms in for maintenance maybe once every two years, and now you’re blaming *me* because they don’t work? It doesn’t take a wizard to static up your comms; you’ve done it yourself.”

“Fine, then come over here and do your little *maintenance*.”

Eric shrugged, then walked ever so slowly over to Clarence. He messed with something near Clarence’s collar for a moment. “See? You’ve got anti-grav goop on the receiver. You’ve probably been having static problems for months, haven’t you.” It wasn’t a question.

Clarence’s aura spiked hard, but he didn’t quite sock Eric. Instead, he hit what Kriska had to assume was the button which

## DEATH WEAVER

keyed his com link open. “This is Bunnel. Warren, Diego. Do you copy?”

No response, but no static either. Then, “Um... copy?” The voice sounded dazed.

Clarence glared at Kieko. “See? You can’t be here. I don’t know what trick you are pulling, but I can guarantee that the Conclave won’t be happy to see that whoever you are is actively impersonating a Hunter.”

Kieko/Verdell snorted. “Going to go running back to the Conclave with delusional allegations? Clarence, you’ve got the restraint of a two year old. Now get going already. I’ve got a team to run, and I can’t do that while you’re working off your anger issues on my brother. Grow up.”

“You can’t order me around,” Clarence said.

Kieko yawned. “Who cares. I’ve got better things to do than babysit you. Stop being so noisy, will you?” She snapped her fingers and two rifles clattered to the ground. To Kriska’s sight, they looked like John’s rifle and Raven—Kieko must have grabbed them when she’d come in last, but Kriska definitely hadn’t seen her do it.

But Clarence also had to have seen something else, because his aura flashed.

Clarence’s mouth gaped open as he stared at the weapons. “Wha—” He snapped his mouth closed. “Those are Warren and Diego’s weapons. What did you do to them?”

Kieko shrugged. “Laid them out flat and decided to return their weapons to their fireteam leader. Why else did you think they sounded so woozy?” She narrowed her eyebrows. “You really think they could tail me for more than thirty seconds?”

Clarence hit his com again. “Status report!”

A moment of delayed silence. “Sorry boss, repeat that?”

“I asked for a status report!”

“She’s gone, boss. I don’t know what hit us. One moment we were just watching her, and then—”

Clarence closed the link with disgust. “You beat up two *guildmates*?”

Kieko grinned. “You tasered my brother.”

Clarence almost lunged toward Kieko. Kriska could see the shifting of his aura, telegraphing—but then the shift in aura faded. It flickered back to yellow, shoved by some outside force.

Kriska blinked hard. That was new too.

“I’m going to report you,” Clarence said.

“Go ahead. But do it somewhere I can’t see you.” She sniffed. “Or *smell* you.”

She returned to Kriska’s room and banged the door shut behind herself, leaving the weapons on the ground for Clarence to pick up.

Sure enough, Clarence stopped tormenting John, but Kriska could just catch the edge of him muttering to himself. “Nice to see you, Clarence. I was just ignoring the fact that my hotel was being searched, Clarence. I hate you and your guts, Clarence. Urgh.” Then, to the rest of his team, “Let’s go. We’ve accounted for all the life signs, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

A few minutes after that, they were gone.

Clarence left with Raven and John’s gun, and Kriska almost went after him to get them back, but Kieko knew how much Raven meant to her. There had to already be a plan in place to retrieve them.

Kriska stared at Kieko as she came, smiling, into the sleeping room. “Can all empaths do what you just did? Convince others that you’re really someone else?”

Kieko shook her head. “If my father knew I’d used it, he’d yell at me for days. Those are the kinds of abilities that bring the Conclave’s attention down on us. It was the only way to protect the team, though.”

Kriska shook her head. That girl was scary powerful.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

With Clarence gone, the little hotel suite was far quieter than it had any right to be. Slowly, everyone resumed the activities they had been doing before Clarence interrupted, and Kriska sat down on the rug in the center of the room to watch them. A few minutes later, Verdell swung through the window Kieko had opened earlier.

John grinned at her. “Clarence came by.”

“I noticed.” Verdell put the bag of packaged snacks down in the middle of the room. Then she snapped her fingers. Kriska felt Raven’s presence materialize on her bed, and John held out his hand. His rifle appeared from thin air, and he put it down beside him.

Verdell was a summoner. Right.

Kieko snatched a bag of peanut butter cookies from the bag before anyone could so much as size up what Verdell had brought. The crackle of her opening the bag highlighted her words. “How long did it take you to spot and take down Clarence’s goons?”

Verdell picked a bag of potato chips out of the pile. “About thirty seconds.” She arched her eyebrows at Kieko. “How long did you tell Clarence?”

“Thirty seconds,” Kieko said, and recaptured her normally serene expression as she popped cookies into her mouth.

Eric gave Kieko a high five, then wiped the cookie crumbs off his hand.

Kriska sighed. Obviously, this wasn’t the first time they’d used Kieko’s little trick.

Eric rummaged around the snack tote, coming back with two bags of cheesy chips and a bag of spicy pretzels. “Why are the Bunnels even still in the guild? They’re jerks who think with their fists, and nobody likes them.”

Verdell thought about it for a moment. “Because nobody likes Guild Security, and everyone would rather Guild Security be represented by people they already hate?”

“Would you want that job?” Kieko asked.

“I guess not,” Eric replied sullenly. “It’s just that they’d been big jerks ever since—” his eyes darkened, and Kriska didn’t have to be an empath to know that he was thinking about the day his dad betrayed them, helped kill John and Verdell’s sister, and went over to Death’s Companion.

John looked up from his book and met Eric’s eyes. “Just because the Conclave can’t figure out who the loyal members of Warbane are doesn’t mean that the rest of us don’t know. Forget Councilman Bunnel and his son. You’ve got us. Right?”

A siren blared from the wall screen before Eric could answer, and the video game cleared instantly as Eric brought his full attention to the technology.

“An all-call just went out under Councilwoman Fitzgerald’s code. They’re moving on the Death’s Companion base we located. Looks like they’ve already got two-thirds of the guild responding. We’ve got a staging base location and orders to report to your mother.”

“Finally!” Verdell snapped to her feet in one smooth motion and handed Eric his tablet. “Eric, show our team as responding. We’re lifting in five minutes, and anyone who’s not on the ship gets left. Is that clear?”

Kriska didn’t waste time responding as a thrill of excitement moved through her. This was the storm she’d been waiting for. It was finally time to show Asa down and take him out for good.

*Priority one. Protect the team.*

*Priority two. Kill Asa.*

*Priority three. Support team activities.*

Some of those priorities felt strange as she laid them in place, but the need for quick, purposeful movement brushed that feeling away as she grabbed her weapons and tossed her jacket on. The only other things she’d brought were emergency rations and a change of Hunting gear, which were all still in the ship. She followed Verdell out the door at a Hunter jog, with Eric and Keiko falling in behind. A moment later, they were strapped into the egg ship, careening toward the sky.

## DEATH WEAVER

Ten minutes later, they had landed on the sands of Titan with organized chaos all around them. They'd landed in a field with a dozen identical ships, and Kriska didn't even want to think about how they were going to find theirs again when this was all over. Hopefully Verdell remembered where they'd parked.

Hunters with Warbane insignia hurried all over the place, carrying materials and guns in equal proportions. In the near distance, tents were being hurriedly pitched, complete with heating and other life support equipment.

Kriska flicked her eyelids closed, checking the distance between the Warbane camp taking shape around them and Death's Companion's base. The flashes of a red and purple outline that had to be Asa winked at the edge of what she could see, minuscule and nearly transparent. Perhaps a ten minute sprint, or a twenty minute jog. Either way, far enough out that they wouldn't have to worry about artillery or other heavy weaponry from the base attacking the camp directly. If Death's Companion had any sort of offensive aircraft, things might get dicey, but hopefully someone else had thought about that. Maybe Galactics had anti-aircraft shields or something.

In the time it took Kriska and the others to weave through, around, and over the preparations the other Hunters were making, six other tents had been pitched. The Warbane Hunters worked efficiently, like they'd done this a billion times before. Given that their guild was supposed to specialize in preventing or interrupting large-scale conflicts, that made sense.

"How many of those things do you have?" Kriska asked as a tent snapped up. They were large and garish, with the silver and black Warbane insignia blown up far larger than it had ever meant to be enlarged. The rest of it was white, which clashed horribly with the silver of the design.

"As many as we could fit, probably. If the crap hits the fan, those have deployable shields, and automatic medical facilities—or, the closest thing we've got, anyway. Servo arms that respond to electronic and vocal commands."

"Don't forget the inference engine," Eric chimed in. "I got to work on those when I was younger. The inference engine routes auditory, visual, and olfactory information and implements medic programs based on conclusions. Closest things to true AI we've got."

Got some technopaths linked in from the nearest base—so, the lens array, if they’ve finished securing it, or maybe they’re in their own enviro-pod—who can make software adjustments in real time if something goes wrong.”

Their chatter brought them to the entrance of one of those enviro-pods, and Kriska followed Verdell inside.

The fact that this wasn’t a medical tent was obvious from the moment Kriska set foot inside. Hunters crowded three tables set in the center and on the edges of the pod, passing plas sheets between them. The din was too loud for Kriska to tune out, and so she stood there, stunned as Eric ran into her from behind.

“Watch it, Kriska!”

Eric’s exclamation made everyone freeze, and suddenly there were thirty pairs of eyes on her, each armed. Kriska blinked, checked the violence levels. The Hunters had been keyed up to begin with, but now they qualified as jumpy. Too many bullets for even her to avoid if they took exception to the way she was looking at them.

Roma darkened in agreement with her assessment.

This was bad.

In the center of the mass was a woman who shared Verdell’s face. She smiled. “You must be the one who saved the lives of my children.”

Just like that, the tension evaporated. The Hunters resumed what they had been doing, and the noise level skyrocketed. Teams on comms with recon teams sent ahead to scout the base, teams electronically directing the organization of the camp, and the preparation of three hundred Hunters. Kriska could almost feel her brain sorting through the din to find important information and shunting the rest of it into a sort of mental trash bin.

The woman who could only be Marie Fitzgerald beckoned Kriska closer and stuck out a hand. She might have Verdell’s face, but she was half Verdell’s height. This four foot tall person grinning up at her was the feared Warbane Councilor who had beat Jere Thaddeus into submission? Kriska flicked her eyelids down again to try and evaluate her, even as she took the offered hand.

The rifle slung over Marie Fitzgerald’s back shone as bright as the sun, spewing golden light along the threads of the Fabric of Life. A powerful Angel. The sword at her hip shone too, although less brightly. What had John said about his mother, earlier? That she

## DEATH WEAVER

could summon an autonomous armory? If all the Angels she could summon were as powerful as the weapon slung over her shoulder, Kriska had no trouble believing that Marie Fitzgerald could wreak havoc on a battlefield, size notwithstanding.

Marie Fitzgerald met Kriska's eyes. "Thank you for going back for them." The words were so quiet that they almost got lost in the roar of activity. Kriska nodded, even as a prickle of shame heated her neck.

"I couldn't have just left them. They wouldn't have been there if not for my stupidity."

Marie Fitzgerald grinned. "Well, thank you anyway. Now go with John, he'll give you a tour and an intro to the order of battle." Her eyes focused over Kriska's shoulder. "Verdell, Eric, you stay here—we'll need you to keep our electronics functional if Malcom is here. Kieko, med team or battle?"

Verdell had already accepted a bulky looking mass of equipment from another Hunter and was starting to sort the wires. Eric gave a thumbs up from across the room.

Kieko took a long breath, then said, "Medical."

Marie Fitzgerald nodded slowly—not quite permission, almost like she was thinking something through. "Go. And have a talk with Von when you get a chance."

Kieko's cheeks flushed for some reason, then she left the room with that same gliding step she always used.

Kriska didn't have time to think through that interaction. With her calming effects, she would probably be very helpful in a medical environment, and right now Kriska had a battle to think about, instead.

Kriska turned to follow John out, only to stop as a flash of purple interposed itself on her normal sight. Her eyes weren't closed. She wasn't focusing on her Second Sight. The purple was just there, hovering on the horizon, misty and small as Monsters tore their way through the Fabric of Life near the Death's Companion base.

She froze. Looked at John. "Did you feel that?"

John shook his head. "What?"

"People are dying."

A voice, loud even in the din. "Ma'am, we just lost all electronic contact with the recon teams."

The chatter quieted as everything extraneous or mundane stopped. Marie whirled toward Eric. “Is it the tech?”

Eric shook his head. “The comms are working just fine.”

“They’re dead.” Kriska spoke without thinking.

The volume dropped further, and Marie Fitzgerald’s eyes bore into her. “They’re what?”

“Dead. I just felt it.” She didn’t have time to wonder how she’d seen it without actively using her Sight.

Behind her, John said, “She’s a Death Weaver, and she’s strong.”

“What happened to them?” Marie asked. “How many are gone, and when?” Then, over her shoulder, “Get the rest of them out of there. Alert defenses. They know we’re here. I want our strike force ready to move out in three minutes!”

Kriska ignored the orders—they weren’t for her. “How many of our Hunters went in?”

Maybe she would be able to tell their auras from Death’s Companion Hunters. She touched Roma but left her in the holster as she forged the bond. The world of normal color fell away to be replaced by a sea of alert orange Hunters, spiked here and there with red auras of someone only fractions away from open violence.

A black void separated her camp from Death’s Companion’s base, but with Roma’s help, it gave way. She focused her attention on the sea of minuscule auras crawling like ants on the edge of her vision. The image grew larger, letting her see more detail.

The colors were sharper, now, and she counted three more flashes of purple. There was something odd about the purple, though. It wasn’t the slow bleed of someone dying of a bullet wound, but the twist of the Fabric of Life as the Monsters tore their way through. Someone on this side of the Fabric of Life was thinning it, making it easier for the Monsters to tear their way through.

“We sent twelve,” Marie said.

Kriska counted the shadows of the Monster’s claws—the raw scars left in the fabric as threads tried to tie themselves back together to cover up the destruction the Monsters had wreaked.

“Two-thirds of our Hunters are dead—all but four. Asa’s up to something,” Kriska said. The Fabric of Life didn’t tear that easily unless someone like him was involved.

“Their Death Weaver?” the councilwoman asked.

## DEATH WEAVER

Kriska nodded and released the bond with Roma.

She took a step forward, fighting lightheadedness as her vision rushed back in full color. Her body was almost recovered from the other day, but 'bots didn't do as well with Weaver abilities, apparently. She wasn't recovered from almost dying.

Marie pressed her lips together. She looked at John. "Von said you were starting to learn how to weave. Are you there yet? Can you hold the Wall together if I send a team to take out the Death Weaver?"

John shrugged. "I've done it twice, but that's it. Kriska's done it, too. Not consciously, but she's got more talent than I've got."

Marie nodded. "That settles it. You, Kriska, and Verdell will go in. You two together should be enough to shield her and each other. We can't send a strike team if their Death Weaver can kill everyone without lifting a finger. We'll hang back, focus on defense, stay out of the Death Weaver's range until you three have cleared the way. Got it?"

"Got it." Kriska heard her own voice amongst John and Verdell's. She was part of Warbane, now—acting on their council's orders and putting her life on the line for more than just her team.

Kriska turned, fingers checking Raven and Roma out of habit.

"Wait," Marie said.

Kriska turned.

Marie's face softened. "Good luck."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Kriska left the tent, moving fast toward the base. Luckily, there was no storm in the air today, and the sand stayed put. She closed her eyes periodically to ensure she was going the right way.

Behind her, Verdell and John kept pace.

It took her a moment to realize that the base they were assaulting was underground. The first time she'd come, she'd been blind and found the entrance without difficulty. But standing on the sand directly above all the alert auras of the Death's Companion Hunters, Kriska knew that she'd been extremely lucky before.

In order to get close enough to have any influence over the Fabric of Life, she was going to have to stand directly over the top of the base and hope that they'd skipped artillery in favor of concealment, because if they'd built weapons into their roof, she was going to be very full of holes.

"What's the plan?" Verdell asked. "They're going to know we're here."

*Yup.* With Asa down there, it would be a miracle if they didn't already know she was there. He would be able to see her at least as well as she could see him.

Kriska closed her eyes to get a better view of her Sight. Two orange outlines drew her attention. The body language she could glean from the impression of their shape on the Fabric of Life showed caution. Those were the four remaining Warbane members. "We've still got one or two people in there that Asa's toying with. I'm going to try to stop him."

"Stop him from what?" There was an edge of exasperation to Verdell's voice. "What is he doing, and how can we stop it from here?"

## DEATH WEAVER

Kriska focused on the colors, ignoring Verdell's question.

John's voice murmured behind her, explaining. "Asa is unraveling the Fabric of Life—summoning demons to kill them. Without Sight that lets them See the Fabric of Life, they have no defense."

"Unraveling the Fabric of Life around them. In short—killing them the one way they have absolutely no defense against." Verdell sounded disgusted and angry.

Kriska could empathize, but she had no room for those emotions. Not now. Not while she could still save them.

She pulled Roma from her holster and knelt on the numbingly cold sand. Forging the bond with Roma was easier this time. Her aura was far more golden, and Kriska sank into the warmth of Roma's light.

Below her, a world of colors unfolded. Orange-red Hunters of the Death's Companion guild lounged in hallways, weapons in hand but hardly alert. There were still a few Warbane Hunters creeping through tiny spaces—vents, perhaps—outlined in an orange color. These were reconnaissance Hunters. They would kill if they had to, but their primary objective was to get a decent map of the place and an understanding of the forces they faced. Then they would leave, quickly, quietly. In a perfect world, Death's Companion wouldn't have known they had been there at all.

Unfortunately, all the stealth in the world couldn't help them unless they could rid themselves of all potential for violence. They couldn't hide from Asa.

There was a tear in the Fabric of Life beneath one crawling Hunter. The Hunter looked around, as if he felt in his bones that something was wrong. He couldn't defend against this, though.

Kriska reached out to that tear as Asa began to widen it. She grabbed one edge of the fabric with her senses, and pulled it closed, trying to replicate what she'd felt Roma and Raven do for her not so long ago. She failed. The Monsters forced their way through with sharp claws and teeth. A moment later, the Hunter was dead.

The blackness of her world, fused with Roma, lightened to red as Asa's presence swelled over everything, Death himself touching lives, sparing some, consuming others with an army of

Monsters at his back, just waiting for him to make the first cut in the fabric so they could come boiling through.

Kriska grasped the fabric, held it as best she could, but Asa's strength was overwhelming, and destroying life was so much easier than preserving it. Slitting a tapestry to tatters was so much easier than stitching it back together.

One more Hunter died, and Kriska was helpless to stop it. The death brought violent claws and more destruction to the Fabric of Life. Purple stained the edges of that curtain which should have been black, like blood spilling from a wound.

As a child, she'd sworn to protect the Fabric of Life. Years devoted to that ideal, and this was all she could do? Two Hunters dead because she wasn't enough—because she hadn't tried hard enough.

Her fists tightened.

No more.

Asa found another victim, and Kriska bent her will to the edge, trying to stitch it closed, trying to make it smaller—and she did. The Monster forced its way through anyway, tearing through Kriska's feeble bandage like scissors through paper. It fastened its claws around the Hunter's soul and pulled.

Kriska could hear the Hunter's scream echoing in her head and redoubled her efforts to close the gap, but all she did was prolong his suffering. The Monster disappeared back into its own realm behind the Fabric of Life, the Hunter's soul held in violet claws.

Kriska shuddered, his screams ripping at her heart. She couldn't do this. She couldn't be the only one to defend life, she didn't know how—and even if she did, she lacked the strength to fight someone as indomitable as Asa.

*Priority one. Protect the team.*

Failure wasn't an option. Asa couldn't be allowed to continue. Even if it killed her, she would stop him. The Hunters of Warbane were counting on her—relying on someone they didn't know because John said she was trustworthy. He trusted her to get this done. They trusted her to get this done.

There was only one Hunter still down there, but she was still part of Warbane. She was part of that team Kriska had sworn to protect. So when Asa opened the tear in the Fabric of Life, Kriska

## DEATH WEAVER

focused her will into one string and stitched back and forth until her will was joined with the Fabric of Life. The tear closed, and the Hunter lived.

Kriska watched as the Hunter she'd saved started back toward the edge of the facility. Maybe she would get out, and maybe she wouldn't. Kriska could defend her from Asa, but not from the other threats in the facility. She closed her eyes for just a spell and hoped with all her might that the Hunter would get back safely. The Fabric of Life had already sustained too much injury today.

For a moment, the Fabric of Life was silent. The redness of Asa's control darkened to something closer to black, and Kriska held her breath. Was it done? Was it over? Had Asa passed out from overuse of his abilities?

The Fabric of Life that wrapped around where Kriska stood darkened, gaining a reddish-purple tint. Kriska saw Asa's blade, red and misty in her vision, cut the strings. Fear, like an icy core, closed its hand around her heart. She had only just managed to save the last Hunter. Now Asa was coming for her.

"Kriska!" John's call of alarm almost broke her concentration. In her peripheral vision, she could see a figure outlined in a different sort of killing purple emerge from the sand.

Someone else sent here to kill them.

"You deal with it," Kriska managed. "I'm busy." She couldn't defend the Fabric of Life and her body at the same time. She would have to trust John and Verdell to defend her, instead.

Monster claws, greedy in their hunger, reached through the slit Asa had made in the Fabric of Life around them. Kriska streamlined her will, her senses, and the energy of her bond with Roma into a single thread. She looped it against the center of the tear and heard the Monsters shriek as their meal was stolen from them. She stitched for her life, pulling her will back and forth through the Fabric of Life, closing the barrier against the Monsters by sheer force of will. If she failed this time, she would die, and so would John and Verdell.

The Monsters pushed back, snapping Kriska's will with claws that sheared through her with ease. Each snapped thread thrust a red hot dagger into Kriska's gut, but she refused to stop. She'd

hidden from those Monsters her whole life, destroyed those who served them by murdering with abandon. They would not take her—not now that she'd finally found a place she could almost belong.

With Verdell and John standing at her back, Kriska fought the Monsters with everything she had, and Roma joined her. After too long, the hole closed. Kriska saw the threads of her will darken to the same black that surrounded her. The hole Asa had torn around her was mended.

Kriska took a long breath and swiped her sleeve across her forehead. It came away wet with sweat. In this state, merged with Roma, exhaustion was hardly a factor, but Kriska took note of the feeling before she dismissed it. There was still work to do.

Kriska surveyed the area around her, looking for tears Asa had opened in the Fabric of Life while she had fought the Monsters back. There was nothing, except a blue-green film beneath Warbane's staging area, flush with the orange of Hunters preparing for battle.

"I need to see more clearly," Kriska whispered to Roma, and she obliged. The blue-green pool beneath the staging area sharpened. The edges of that film were purple, and Monsters looked up from beneath the film, held back by only that translucent color that reeked of Asa.

What was he doing?

The Fabric of Life was destroyed, torn open and held there by Asa's aura. It was one gaping hole, and thousands of Monsters gathered beneath, their claws clicking in anticipation. The moment Asa retracted the film that was the only barrier between the hundreds of Warbane Hunters, and the Monsters, every single one of them would die.

So why was Asa holding the Monsters back?

"John, the staging area!" Kriska said. Her throat tried to stick together, holding the words back.

"You deal with it," John said, and the wet smack of limb on limb accompanied his words.

The Hunters attacking them. Right. She was on her own.

Roma shifted her vision, and Kriska blinked as she found herself looking at the far edge of the film. Asa's misty blood sword

## DEATH WEAVER

severed more and more strings, then expanded his film before the Monsters could charge through the gap. He was tearing the Fabric of Life farther and farther open, so that when he abolished the all too thin film that separated the living beings from the immortal Monsters, they would all die, all at once.

Kriska could already imagine the scene, all the Monsters rushing through the chasm in the Fabric of Life. Not just reaching through with their claws, but stepping through into the world Kriska knew, running amok—nothing would be able to stop them. The Fabric of Life couldn't sustain a breach like that.

If Asa succeeded, her guild wouldn't be the only one to pay the price. It would be a second Split, a cataclysm that changed the universe forever. The Fabric of Life—the very barrier that separated life from death—would fall.

Kriska grit her teeth and streamlined her will into that same dark grey thread that she'd used to fend off the Monsters earlier. The breach was far away, but Roma supported her, helped her find a purchase and begin to weave. Still, she couldn't help the unease. The hole was already so big, she didn't know how much of herself she would lose in the process. When her will was absorbed into the Fabric of Life, how much of her would be left?

*"Why do you fight?"* A voice echoed in her head. It didn't come from her mind, and it sounded nothing like Raven or Roma's voice.

Kriska ignored the question. This had to be some sort of Death's Companion trickery.

The voice didn't go away, though. *"These people are not your own. You are a Lone Wolf. Why do you fight for these people, who have accused you at every turn?"* It was a woman's voice, Kriska knew. Soft, reasonable, persuasive. Familiar in its phrasing and tone.

Kriska's resolve faltered and coldness gripped her body. These people were Warbane, part of the guild that had kidnapped her and held her livelihood hostage—what did she owe them?

A tear in the Fabric of Life, minor, too minor for Kriska to see while she focused on the staging area so very far away, crept open and claws reached for her soul.

Kriska saw the claws, too late, and braced herself for the cold kiss of death. Gold flooded her vision. Gold she'd seen before.

"Raven?" Kriska asked.

Gold fibers sealed the breach around the Monster's claws and a severed claw fell to the ground. Kriska looked at it dumbly. The limb was sheared at the wrist and bloodless. Was it even a physical thing, or just here in this plane she could see when she bound with Roma?

"Who else?" Raven said.

Back in the physical world, her ears could just barely pick up the sounds of fighting. For one moment, Kriska wanted to return to herself and take stock of the odds John and Verdell were facing.

But no. They were her team. Whatever their odds, they would handle it. Just like she would handle saving the staging area and the Fabric of Life. They each had their own job to do.

Kriska grinned and bent back to the task of saving Warbane.

"*Warbane manipulates people,*" the woman said again in her mind, softly. "*How do you know they are not manipulating you?*" The longer the woman talked, the more familiar her voice sounded, and yet Kriska could not figure out why.

Confusion clouded her vision, and Kriska's stitching faltered. Whoever she was, the woman was right. Warbane seemed to thrive on manipulating people. Councilman Thaddeus manipulated John into almost killing her, Verdell and John manipulated her into joining Warbane. Was it possible that Verdell had brought her to Titan to save them from this threat, right here, just so they could throw her to the Conclave?

Raven and Roma's auras crowded close, warming her. They fed her images of John sitting in the park, a plate of breakfast food on his lap, of Kieko standing in the doorway, pretending to be Verdell just so that Clarence wouldn't take her. Warbane might be manipulative, but they were not the ones to fear—not with her team at her back. The woman who had wormed her way into Kriska's mind, though, was manipulating her with a heavy hand.

"*So shut her out of your mind,*" Raven said.

"How?"

"*Like this.*"

Kriska watched as Raven and Roma encircled her black thread with their gold, and then the buzz of the other woman's mind retreated. If Kriska focused, she could still hear the woman there, but it was like she was separated from Kriska by a pad of fuzz.

## DEATH WEAVER

*“Kriska, we still have a job to do,”* Roma reminded her.

Kriska refocused on the chasm Asa had opened in the Fabric of Life, and the army waiting to spill forth just as soon as Asa released his hold on them.

As if her thoughts had caused it, Asa’s film that held back the tide began to dissolve. Claws reached up, eager, snapping for lives.

No!

Kriska flung herself, the essence of her being, spread herself over the hole, and bit back a scream as the searching claws found her in their way. They tore at her, enraged at being denied their feeding frenzy. Kriska ignored them, white hot daggers fading to ice under Roma’s influence. She held onto the edges of the Fabric of Life, refusing to let go and allow the hordes through.

*“It’s not enough,”* Raven said. Kriska could taste her friend’s desperation. *“We cannot let them through, and yet we are not strong enough to mend the gap. Kriska, you must give more!”*

*“I’m giving all I have,”* Kriska cried. Claws tore at her essence, taking bits and pieces of her that she would never get back. The agony was blunted, but numbness was its own pain.

Priority one. Protect the team.

*“Please!”* Raven and Roma’s voices joined as one in a desperate cry.

Kriska grit her teeth and reached farther inside. She found one feeble thread to spin out of herself and join with the threads Raven and Roma stitched.

Through it all, she clenched the Fabric of Life close. If the Monsters got through, all of this would be for nothing, and Kriska refused to let that happen.

Let them destroy her piece by piece. Let them try to take her apart. She would feed them until they choked.

Kriska split the threads under her command, intertwining her gray with the gold of her Angels. She wove a new fabric to place over the one that was frayed and broken like a threadbare towel ripped to rags. Her head pounded with the intensity of a gunshot and the rhythm of a drum.

*“Go, Weaver, go. Go, Weaver, go,”* Raven and Roma chanted to the beat, and Kriska used that certainty to keep going. Every

moment, she knew she would miss a stitch, and then it would be over. But impossibly, they kept going.

It wasn't going to be enough. Her new fabric was a dishcloth, and she needed a blanket that would cover miles. She didn't have enough energy to stitch this hole closed. She didn't have the essence to hold the tide of frothing Monsters back. It was all for nothing.

Her grip slipped. Not a lot, but enough for one Monster to force its way through, snarling and tearing at her.

Pain turned to ice. Kriska dug her nails in and held on as she felt a Hunter die, and then another.

It was on the other side of the Fabric of Life—material and immortal. She didn't know how she knew it, but she did. Even that one Monster could kill everyone.

Gold flashed, reminding her of the rifle Marie had slung over her shoulder, but it wasn't enough.

*"Goodbye, Kriska,"* Raven said.

*"No!"*

But it was too late. Raven vanished in a shower of sparks. A vague sense of gold appeared in the camp, hunting the Monster.

*"Keep going, Weaver,"* Roma snapped. *"There is no time!"*

Priority one. Protect the team.

Raven was part of the team, and she'd just abandoned Kriska.

*"Focus,"* Roma snapped. *"Raven has to stop that one Monster. You have to stop all of them."*

Kriska clenched her fists tighter. Raven may have gone, but Roma would never abandon her. She stitched faster, feeding more and more of herself into the Fabric of Life, and she didn't spare a single thought for what she would become when this was all over.

With Raven gone, though, every stitch took more than the last, and the Monsters rushed at her in a blazing fury. Pain turned to ice. Kriska clenched her teeth and fought through it, dying for every stitch, for every life she would save.

And then she was done. She had no more will, no more vision. She stitched in blindness lit only by the golden light of Roma's thread. Her very own Angel, guiding her into oblivion.

Golden sparks lit the darkness of eternal sleep.

## DEATH WEAVER

“Raven?” Kriska rasped.

“*Where do you need me?*” The voice was male, one that she recognized as a golden rifle mounted on Verdell’s back. Not Raven. An Angel she’d only seen, only felt at the edges of her mind. Not her Angel, Verdell’s.

*Elroy.* The name settled into her bones. She’d guessed it before, but now she knew for sure. No, now they’d *met*. This Angel was Elroy.

Pain turned to ice.

Kriska accepted his thread and set it to work. She forged her thread, Roma’s and Elroy’s thick golden cord into one unit, tying knot after knot, pulling their tiny patch into place in the Fabric of Life. Elroy was a fount of energy, pushing her, feeding her, forcing her to hold on.

Outside of her black world that held only life and death, Angels and Monsters, she could hear the edges of battle. The clash of metal on metal and flesh on flesh permeated her haze of stitching fervor, but she didn’t have the luxury of figuring out what was going on around her mortal body while her soul was stretched between the Monsters and the Warbane staging area.

The new fabric was set in place and tied into the rest of the fabric. Elroy spun off smaller threads to build a scaffold for the new fabric, and Kriska bent to the task of filling that fabric.

They were almost there. A few more minutes and—

A gunshot erupted in her ears. A block of ice lodged itself in her belly and wetness surrounded it.

Kriska ignored the ice and continued to stitch. Warbane was almost safe. The world was almost safe. She refused to let the Monsters through.

Another gunshot. Another block of ice.

Kriska screamed. She worked through the pain that even Roma could not blunt.

Almost there.

Almost.

Al—

She was pulled from herself, fingers on metal pulling halves of her apart and forcing her back to the world of blinding color.

As she fell away from the weaving, her threads went flaccid. A thread of blue surrounded by an aura of peace took up the golden threads and continued stitching.

Kriska lay on the freezing sand, staring up at a hazy blue sky. A hand fumbled to her belly and came away coated in blood. Asa stood above her, Roma in his hand. Elroy was beside her, just an empty shell of metal as he labored over the Fabric of Life.

Asa grinned down at her, his eyes glowing with death, his hair still coated in the blood of all the innocents he'd fed to the Monsters.

To his side, Kriska could see the edge of Verdell's unconscious form lying in the sand. John sprawled on top of her, bleeding profusely.

Was this what they had been fighting as she struggled to save the Fabric of Life? Their own impossible battle, finally lost?

They hadn't left him unmarked, though. A jagged cut ran down the side of Asa's face, from his temple, down his chin, and even into his neck. Blood soaked the top of his black jacket, only half a shade darker than the rest. Kriska clenched her teeth. Blood loss would make him easier to take down—not that it evened the scale at all, but she would take what she could get.

As Kriska watched, both sides of the cut folded together and sealed with just a hint of purple. If not for the blood in his jacket, Kriska might've imagined the wound.

Just what was he, to heal from something like that in moments?

Asa bent over her, put Roma's muzzle to her belly. She grabbed at his jacket, twisted the collar in one hand to cut off his airflow. He broke her grip with a contemptuous jerk and fired.

Kriska had been shot before, but this was different. She felt Roma's struggle against his finger on the trigger and felt the despair as Roma lost the battle and fed lead into her friend's body.

Warmth blossomed, then turned cold as Titan's wind congealed the blood that spilled from the wound. Kriska gagged from the pain.

"How does it feel?" Asa asked casually. "Is it the same for you as it is for me, I wonder? We are the same, you know—only you've rejected the gifts your abilities bring."

## DEATH WEAVER

He reached two fingers into the hole in her jacket, pressed on the wound with vicious pressure. Kriska screamed and twisted, trying to get away from him. She was a Hunter, blast it all, and she wouldn't go down without a fight.

But all the will in the world couldn't make shredded abdominal muscles work, and all she brought herself was more pain.

Asa's grin returned, predatory this time as he dragged the cooling blood on his fingers down the side of Kriska's face, filling her nostrils with the scent of death. Her death, this time. Asa wouldn't settle for leaving her in a storm, he would torture her until he felt his Monsters take her from this life.

"You've killed many of my friends, you know," Asa said. He moved Roma's muzzle up her body. Metal warmed by her skin traced her neck, rested gently at her temple.

Kriska was already dying, she knew. Asa was as strong as ever, and she was reduced to this. When she died, there would be no one to protect Warbane, and her team would die. The Fabric of Life wouldn't recover from the destruction Asa had wreaked, and the whole world would be overrun by Monsters.

"Even before you put yourself with Warbane, you hunted down my allies—the ones who wish that pitiful Wall to fall. Have you ever wondered why we do it?"

Kriska's throat was dry, but she worked up enough moisture to spit in his face.

He didn't even flinch. "You've seen what I can do. Death won't come for me. Death won't come for anyone who has made friends beyond the Wall—and I'm not talking about those so-called Angels, struggling for survival. True power comes from partnering with the strong ones, from feeding them and taking the energy they don't need. And when that Wall falls, death won't come for anyone who has befriended the Monsters."

"And those who haven't?" Kriska managed to keep her voice measured.

"The Monsters have been starving for ages, forced to wait until the Wall that separates their food from their world weakens enough for them to claim a life. When they flood into this world, all that will change. They will feast on the souls of anyone foolish enough to come within claw's reach."

They would destroy humanity and leave only Asa and those like him alive.

Kriska couldn't help the horror on her face.

Asa laughed. "You only see death, and you forget the power which comes with it. That's only understandable given your position." He tossed Roma aside like she was a plaything that had displeased him and drew a buzz knife, holding it like a scalpel. Its whine filled the air, and Kriska snarled. She wouldn't go out like that.

Her hands darted in as he gloated. Her fingers wrapped around his corded throat and squeezed, seeking pressure points which would cut off the blood flow to his brain. He jerked his head back, applied force to the inside of her elbow, broke her grip. She grabbed his jacket again at chest level and heaved. Stomach acid boiled in her throat, and pain washed over everything, but she did not let go. She threw him into the sand, and pushed herself to her feet, even as the pain became blinding. She existed in a sightless red haze, but blindness was nothing new to her. She staggered away, one step at a time.

A hand clenched her shoulder and pulled her back into the burning sand. More pain. She struggled to roll back to her feet but a knee in her belly, right in the center of the three gunshots, made it impossible. She threw up, twisted at the last second so it wouldn't end up on her face, but that didn't save her from the stench of vomit.

Her vision cleared and she saw Asa smirking down at her again. "Valiant attempt," he said. "But I'm afraid it was in vain. I'm not going to kill you, only take you back to my guildmaster." Something ugly entered that smile, more than superiority.

Jealousy?

When they'd met before on the sands of Titan, he'd said that he would not become dispensible. He'd said that his master had wanted her.

Just how much had he paid because he hadn't brought her?

"But not in any shape to supplant me. Just enough to make her happy and let her see that you really are the useless Angel lover I told her you were."

## DEATH WEAVER

Kriska fought for breath, gasping as the knife came closer. One touch, a shallow cut, and the knife would use her blood signature to locate every single nerve in her body. Another cut, and it would burn out every nerve Asa wanted gone.

“You know what this is, then,” Asa said, his grin feral as he enjoyed her pain. “Good. That will make this that much more enjoyable.”

He ripped away her jacket with a motion, the fabric already weak from the holes he’d driven into it.

The knife descended slowly, and Kriska couldn’t stop herself from watching, even though she knew Asa took pleasure from her terror. The whining blade slit her skin easily. Blood beaded in its wake as Asa drew his name in her navel with a flourish.

Marking her as his.

The blade’s whine changed as it used her blood to map every nerve in her body. Kriska gagged again as the reality settled on her like a press. The next time metal touched her, it wouldn’t be with the sting of a sharp blade. It would be the agony of fire playing through her veins as it took every pretense of motion from her.

Asa inspected the buzz knife. “Don’t worry,” he said. “We won’t let death come for you for a long time yet. You’ll be our guest until then—just a very helpless one.”

And that was what terrified her the most. She could endure anything they threw at her, any pain they wanted her to survive. But to do all that without the hope of escape, with the knowledge that they’d turned her body into a prison, no, into a doll for them to play with. That made her tremble to the very core.

The knife started to come down again, slowly, and Kriska knew that he would take his time with the thrust that would kill her in all but name. Her mouth worked without her consent.

“Please.”

The knife stopped.

“What?”

Shame welled up inside her, but Kriska couldn’t stop the words. “Just kill me now. I don’t want this, I don’t want to suffer.”

Asa’s eyes glinted. “Repeat it. Beg.”

Kriska regained control of her throat and stared back at him, defiant again.

He slapped her across the mouth. "Beg!"

Kriska closed her eyes for a brief second. Roma's aura pulsed faintly in her shell, but she was still alive.

There was no way to avoid the buzz knife, but Kriska refused to go gently with the Monster kneeling on top of her. If she was going to be paralyzed, she would do it with a gun in her hand.

She reached out, but her hand was too short, and Roma was too far away.

Asa smirked at her.

Kriska reached out with her mind, felt Roma's aura.

"Please," she whispered again, but this time she wasn't talking to Asa.

He laughed. "You know, I think you and I are going to have quite a bit of fun when we get back to base."

Roma vanished from the sand, but Asa was too immersed in tasting Kriska's demise to notice.

The tip of the buzz knife entered her skin at a forty-five degree angle, cutting slowly into her belly where it would almost certainly lacerate her stomach.

Roma reappeared in Kriska's hand, showering the world in golden sparks.

Asa's eyes widened.

Kriska and Roma aimed together, and the force of the blast knocked Asa off her. There was a hole in his chest where his heart should have been.

Kriska tossed the knife away with as much force as she could muster. It hadn't gone deep enough to take effect.

"*Magazine's empty,*" Roma told her. Asa must have wasted the bullets. "*But I've got one more surprise for the one who consorts with demons.*"

Asa picked himself off the sand. The bullet hole closed as Kriska watched, and he grinned.

"You didn't seriously think that would stop me, did you?"

In an instant, Kriska forged a bond with Roma, making them one being. Roma's thread was tiny, but together they parceled a

## DEATH WEAVER

piece into a golden bullet and loaded it in the chamber. Aiming took barely more effort than a thought. Together, they fired, throwing that golden bullet at speeds too fast to see.

The round pierced Asa's forehead and he collapsed.

Roma supported Kriska as she forced herself to her feet and stood over Asa. The wound in his forehead healed, but he did not get up.

Behind her, more auras hovered on the edge of deadly violence.

"Kriska?"

John's voice reached her from far away, as if he stood on one side of the chasm in the Fabric of Life, and she stood on the other.

She turned, eyes wide even as her vision faded yet again. John staggered to his feet and pulled Verdell up after him. They were both pale. Verdell had a gouge in her side that should have killed her.

Verdell closed her eyes, concentrating. A weapon Kriska had seen in her hand before appeared in a shower of golden sparks.

*Elroy.*

Verdell held the Angel out. Her whole arm shook. Her fingers spasmed open, and Elroy fell barrel first into the sand.

Elroy's voice in her mind, just as it had sounded earlier. "*Hold on, Kriska.*"

Kriska took a step toward the gun, reaching out. The world spun, and she found herself in the sand, Elroy still nearly three feet from her fingertips.

Behind him, Verdell collapsed back into the sand. John crouched over her. A flare of blue glowed brightly over him, her Second Sight intruding on her normal sight.

Elroy glowed gold. Bright, bright gold. Then he disappeared and reappeared in Kriska's hand. He offered his essence, and Kriska forged the bond. She sank into it, letting the gold cradle what was left of her shredded soul.

Sounds echoed around her, but none of them could penetrate Elroy's hold.

"*Hold on, Kriska,*" Elroy instructed.

The sound, blurred as she faded into darkness, sounded like a voice she hadn't heard in far too long. "Yes, Gramps," she muttered as even the gold faded to dark.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Consciousness came slowly. Colors bled into existence on top of a black Wall that was still very much intact, sealing the Monsters of Kriska's nightmares firmly on the other side. Angels, cloaked in golden auras, roamed the world around her, imbued into weapons that Bounty Hunters used without understanding. Elroy was next to her, close, his aura hovering over her skin, although his metal shell rested a few feet away, just out of arm's reach. His magazine was empty, but now Kriska knew just how safe that made him. She remembered those last moments with Roma, fashioning a bullet out of pure essence and firing it in desperation-laced calm.

Asa hadn't gotten back up, but neither had the Fabric of Life torn. He hadn't been taken by the Monsters, which meant he was still alive. Even those who died of old age went with the Monsters, the Fabric of Life worn around them by the simple act of living. But dying of too much life was natural, and the fabric healed quickly. What Asa had done with his blade of bloody mist was worse than a bullet. He'd almost unleashed a horde of Monsters, and they wouldn't have just been able to reach through the Fabric of Life. No. They would have stood in Kriska's world, roamed free, without the Fabric of Life to protect humanity. But what, exactly, had Roma's bullet done to him?

Kriska looked around with closed eyes and spotted the resting orange glow of Roma's metal shell. Her golden essence was absent.

Kriska bolted upright and crossed the room with her eyes still closed.

## DEATH WEAVER

One part of her brain, unmarred by the panic of finding Roma gone, noted that nothing hurt. She'd expected to be in a haze of pain, but there wasn't even a twinge as she crossed the room.

Kriska's fingers hovered over Roma's shell, afraid that touching her would just bring more harm. Roma had given everything for her, and her little thread of essence had been so thin. What if that last bullet had killed her?

*"You need to stop jumping to conclusions,"* said Elroy's dry voice. *"She's fine. Just a little young for that kind of exertion. She's gone home to rest, and she'll be back when she's ready."*

"Home?" Kriska asked stupidly.

*"Your Monsters aren't the only things that live on that side of the Wall. They want to kill everything in sight and steal your power for their own, and they use that power gained from stealing souls to destroy us. We defend you, and ourselves. It is not enough to keep them from winning the war, but it is enough to keep them from destroying us completely."*

Kriska paused, considering. Gramps had always called Roma an Angel, and Kriska had generalized the term to all the weapons with golden auras. She hadn't known that they lived in the world beyond the Wall of Life, or that they fought the Monsters who lived there. It was fitting, though, that three of them would come to her, when she had made it her life's work to kill those who served the Monsters she feared and hated so much.

"Where is Raven?" Kriska asked.

There was a sense from Elroy like a frown. *"She was required to imprison the Monster who broke free. She is bonded to Verdell's mother Marie now, just as I left Verdell to join with you when you required me."*

"But why—" If Elroy was an Angel, then why hadn't he just gone to Marie, and let Raven stay with her?

*"I am older and more powerful. Raven's power was failing anyway. It takes less power to destroy a Monster than it does to re-weave the Fabric of Life. This was decided in a council of Angels long before Raven decided to bond with you."*

Kriska shook her head. She remembered Raven leaving after she had failed to keep all the Monsters back. Raven had abandoned her—that was what she'd thought at the time. But if the Angels were the only ones who could destroy the Monsters, then it made sense that Raven had left.

That didn't help the aching in her heart or erase the crushing despair of her abandonment. Another person had left. Another friend, gone the moment they were needed most.

"Weren't there others who could have helped? I know Verdell has other weapons—Angels, I guess—she can call. Marie has powerful Angels at her side. Why did Raven have to go?" She hated the plaintive note in her voice.

If Raven had to leave, then she had to leave, and there was a good reason for it. Friends were supposed to trust friends, right?

She'd finally found another friend—another *best* friend—only for Raven to abandon her. Tears filled Kriska's eyes, and she wiped them stubbornly away.

*"We do not have the same strength as the Monsters that chase us and kill you like prey. There are many of us who can see into this world. There are few who can speak, even if someone will listen, and fewer still who can destroy the Monsters when they are on this side of the Wall in truth. We are only sad projections of ourselves. Marie Fitzgerald has befriended and protected many scouts, but only Raven and I were ever able to grow into more than that. But to answer your question, no. Raven was the only one who could go, who was bound to someone near where the Monster broke free, and who had sufficient strength to imprison the Monster once she reached her companion."*

Their discussion was interrupted as Kriska felt another aura approach. The door swung open, and Kriska finally opened her eyes. The Fabric of Life faded from her vision—but not completely. It still lurked there, auras mixing with the physical forms around her.

She stood in a room, barren except for a table on one side that held Elroy and Roma's empty shell and a bed on the other with sterile white sheets. The third Wall held an open door. Verdell stood there, staring at Kriska with dull eyes.

"You survived." It wasn't a question. Dark shadows hung under her eyes, and weariness slumped her shoulders.

"You did, too," Kriska responded.

She didn't know exactly what had happened while she wrestled to weave new threads into the Wall of Life that held back the Monsters, but she did know that Verdell had tried to protect her from Asa and failed.

## DEATH WEAVER

Verdell leaned against the doorframe and nodded slowly.

It was quiet, then. Kriska didn't know what to say. How many Warbane had died when she'd let that Monster through? What had happened between Verdell, John, and Asa? How long had she been out? Where were they? Titan? Mars? Io? She didn't know where to start.

"What about John?" Kriska asked. Her throat tightened. Verdell had nearly died. But John—how much of himself had he given to save Verdell? How much of himself had he given to save her?

"He's alive. Tired, but alive."

Suddenly, Kriska could breathe again. Her eyes burned. "Good." She took a deep, calming breath. "What about Asa?"

Verdell winced. "He hid himself in the other goons he sent to kill us. It didn't matter what John and I did, we couldn't hit him. Even with Elroy, I couldn't hit him—and I'm a good marksman. He was toying with us. I got him with a knife, eventually, and I thought we'd won. I sunk the knife up to the hilt in his neck. When I turned to make sure John was okay, he got me good." Her cheeks were hot with embarrassment. "Turns out, none of us could kill him."

Kriska remembered Asa laying on the ground, unconscious after the bullet hole in his head healed. "He isn't dead?"

Verdell gave a dark chuckle. "Nope. Heart still beating, breathing just fine. Brain activity is close to zero, though, so I guess it's close enough. He took at least one bullet to the forehead, but we can't find any trace of damage. He's in medical lockup with five or six Bounty Hunters keeping him company, now."

Kriska shook her head. How was that possible? He was effectively immortal, but comatose? She looked at Elroy. "Got an explanation for that one?"

Verdell's eyes narrowed.

"Sure," he said, and Verdell jumped. Guess she could hear him too.

"He talked to me before," Verdell said with a hint of wonder. "He said he could save you. I thought it might have been a fever dream, but you don't seem at all surprised. How long have you known they could talk?"

Kriska frowned. “He told you his name when you first met him, didn’t he?”

Verdell nodded slowly.

“Then it shouldn’t be that much of a surprise. Didn’t you ever think to ask him more questions?”

Verdell crossed her arms. “I guess I just didn’t think to talk to him. He came when I called and disappeared when I didn’t need him. Are you saying he’s a person?”

“He’s an Angel,” Kriska said. “Not all Angels talk. Roma couldn’t for a very long time—or maybe I just didn’t know how to listen.”

“I always thought we just called them Angels out of a twisted sense of self-righteousness.” Wonder laced her voice.

“Hello, still here,” Elroy said crossly. “Do you want to know what happened to the Devil Servant or not?”

Verdell managed to look sheepish—which was an odd look on Verdell.

*“Thanks. Now, think about it. What you always see as death is the Monsters stealing human souls to turn into the power they use to exterminate my kind. Do you really think Roma would kill him and give more power to the things that are hunting her down in our world?”*

That was a point Kriska hadn’t thought of, and she berated herself for not realizing as soon as she’d heard Elroy’s explanation of the world beyond the Wall of Life.

*“Right. We try not to kill things we don’t have to, although sometimes the trade is worth it. Minor Devil Servants deserve what comes to them, and their soul is worth no more power than anyone else’s in your world. They spend time calling the Monsters, giving power to them, and their own death is worth very little to the Monsters. Asa’s soul, however, had been fed with the power of the Monsters. He struck a bargain with them that allowed him far more influence over the Wall of Life than he could have ever gained on his own. When he killed in your world, he destroyed souls by the hundreds and released so much power that the Monsters gave some of it back to him, enriching his abilities and making him stronger. If a Monster had claimed his soul, it would have created a powerful devil in our world that would overwhelm and destroy any Angel who crossed its path. If Roma had killed him, it may have spelled the end.”*

## DEATH WEAVER

Verdell crossed the room and sat at table in the corner, where Elroy's metal shell lay. She sat. "So why is he laying there, comatose. Is he going to wake up?"

Elroy chuckled. *"No. He will not wake again. Instead of killing him, Roma imprisoned him in her power. She walled his soul off from his body so that no Monster could reach it, and he could not continue to wreak his evil in either of our worlds. Guard him if you like, but it is a waste of good Hunters. He will not wake again—nor will he die. Lack of food, degradation of his body, both will wear on the Fabric of Life, but even a Monster that reaches through that hole will not be able to grasp his soul until the unnatural power that drives him has dissipated. Until enough time has passed that he has become just another misguided human, he will not die."*

Verdell shook her head. "That's an impressive story. Makes me feel sort of bad for littering the hallways with bad guys."

"That's not a problem," Kriska said. "Killing killers, people who will feed hundreds of innocents to the Monsters, does not damage the Wall of Life so much. In fact, it saves the Fabric of Life from the trauma of so many more deaths."

Verdell's eyebrows raised. "You know, I feel like I remember Councilor Xi saying something like that, earlier." Then she shook her head. "Well, your philosophy might be reasonable, given your Sight, but it's not going to help you with Tro Bunnel. Clarence's dad is still gunning for your head—saying you're like Asa because you spent so much of your time on execution jobs."

Kriska took a step towards Verdell, her fingers curled into fists as fury slammed through her veins. *Her? Like Asa?* "I am nothing like him. He served the Monsters that I fight."

Verdell leaned back in the chair, staring at Kriska. Verdell sitting, Kriska standing—they were almost the same height. "I get that, but the Conclave doesn't seem to care. In their eyes, the ability to do something is the same as a ticking bomb. They assume that because you can do it, you eventually will. Just ask Councilman Xi about it. He'll tell you some stories and, what's more, they'll be true."

Kriska went cold. "The Conclave is still worried about me?" She'd thought, if only for a moment, that proving she was part of Warbane would protect her from the Conclave. Obviously,

they knew she wasn't part of Death's Companion or working for Mother Dearest.

"They feel responsible for keeping something like another Split from happening, and they don't like people they can't control. Tro Bunnel's been badgering the medical staff to let the Conclave interrogate you for three days."

Kriska suppressed a wince at that word. Interrogation.

Hadn't she had enough of being yelled at by people who thought they were better than she was? Hadn't she proved her loyalty by nearly dying for these people twice, now? Her life force, her essence, what the Angels called her soul, made up the substance that saved them from the Monsters. If giving her soul to save them didn't get her a free pass, then what would?

"Don't worry about it too much," Verdell said, although her tone was anything but light as she stood and brushed imaginary dirt from her shim-armor pants. "My mother's put together a plan and she's got both Councilman Xi and Councilman Thaddeus backing her up on this one. When it comes to the Conclave overstepping their bounds because they're afraid someone *might* do something, Warbane is a pro."

Kriska suppressed a snort. What was it John had said about Warbane? Someone with the ability to break reality, an automated arsenal, a double dose of beyond scary empathis—it was possible that her becoming part of Warbane was actually contributing to the Conclave's interest in her. From everything she'd heard, they weren't really a big fan of any organization which could single-handedly destroy the world.

Verdell continued. "We've dealt with their crap for years, which means that they don't like us, but it also means that we have enough members to theoretically dismember and replace the Conclave. It would take a long, bloody war, but we could do it—not that we'll ever say that in public. The Conclave wants another war less than they want to take out our members, so they settle for sticking Bunnel on our council as a watchdog, and don't do much more than that. You might have Councilman Thaddeus rooting through your head, but that will probably be the extent. One thing the Conclave won't do is put you in prison, or they will have made a direct enemy out of our entire guild."

## DEATH WEAVER

Kriska managed a tight smile. Perhaps she'd misjudged the guild at the beginning. Sure, they had their issues, but she was actually one of them now, and they were going to stick up for her.

Still. "Thaddeus is going to root through my head?" He had tried to kill her earlier.

Verdell shrugged. "He's an empath and you're a Death Weaver. According to Councilman Xi, those Walls are close enough together that he might as well be a telepath. The Conclave wants to know that you aren't secretly working with Death's Companion, any other dark guild, or harboring intentions of bringing down the Wall of life. Thaddeus can tell them that, and Councilman Xi can make sure he's telling the truth. The Conclave will probably send an extra watchdog along to make sure everyone's playing by the rules, but it should be relatively painless. Just the consequence of saving the universe and everyone in it."

Which made as much sense as anything else in this guild. No good deed ever went unpunished, and this was her punishment for having enough power to save everyone. There was just one thing she didn't quite understand.

"Who is Councilman Xi?"

When Verdell said his name, it was with the same sort of affection she used to talk about her mother. But he definitely wasn't her father because John had said their father was a Merc. Besides that, what kind of Hunter was a truth teller?

"He's Warbane's founding councilor, and he Sees the Wall of Reality. Except for some of the people who form the Conclave, he's probably one of the most knowledgeable Hunters in the galaxy right now. He's also terrifying, like he can see straight through to your soul when he looks at you. He trained John, Nilsa, and I to be Hunters, and he actually reminds me a lot of you."

Which only made him seem more terrifying.

Gramps had always taught her to be truthful with herself, if no one else. Kriska hadn't done that. She'd lied to herself about not wanting to team up with John. She'd lied to herself about not caring about her team. She'd even lied to herself about hating Gramps. If this councilman, who accounted for a third of her proponents, was anything like Gramps, he'd be disappointed in her. If he saw Truth, then all he'd see when he looked at her was

a lie she'd spun like a silvery cocoon to protect herself from more hurt.

Had she broken through that cocoon? Kriska wasn't sure. She still felt the hurt of coming back to the apartment they'd shared and finding Gramps gone. Every time she turned around, she fought the urge to wash her hands of Warbane and escape to safety, and only the support she'd found here—John, Verdell, Kieko, Eric—kept her from running.

She was sure of her loyalty. She'd bled for Warbane, and Warbane had bled for her.

Loyalty didn't keep her from the fear that one day she would turn around, and they would all abandon her, just like everyone else.

Kriska swallowed that fear for the moment and held her head high. "Well, then, I look forward to meeting this Councilor Xi."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Kriska wasn't in handcuffs, although she could sense that Clarence Bunnel, who had come along with two more burly Hunters, had wanted to cuff her. Instead, she stood in the center of a triangle, with Clarence at the point and two Hunters who bore pins on their jacket collars instead of patches with their guild mark. They were from the Conclave, probably, although she'd never seen the stylized star pin they wore. Knowing that Councilor Tro Bunnel reported directly to the Conclave meant that his son's friends were probably from there, too.

Verdell had left a few minutes before Clarence had come to escort her to yet another interrogation, and she'd spent the rest of the time chatting with Elroy. If Clarence had been nonplussed about opening the door to find Kriska having a conversation with the air, he hadn't shown it.

The conversation hadn't just been useful because it had the potential to freak Clarence out, though. With a little prodding, Elroy had disclosed that Roma would be back in a few days, just as exuberant as she'd been before.

The knowledge put a smile on her face, even as she followed Clarence down an eternacrete hallway that could have belonged in the Establishment. She didn't close her eyes to view the auras around them, but she found them bleeding into her reality anyway—something to ask Elroy about when they got this farce over with.

Clarence turned in front of a room with several Hunter auras inside. Kriska recognized John and Kieko, but Eric and Verdell were missing.

Clarence opened the door before she could suss out the other six or seven auras and led her into a room that might've been used for tactical planning sessions: plain gray walls; practically empty wood floors. It was as multipurpose as any room she'd ever seen. The only thing which could differentiate it from any other room in the galaxy was the small black box in the center of the room ringed by four carved wooden chairs. The box projected a blue-tinted hologram into the air.

*Council preparing for session*, the hologram read.

So, none of the Hunters she didn't recognize were council members. Good to know.

A quick glance around told her the rest. Warbane was outnumbered, but not by too much. Discounting Clarence, because he might as well have been wearing a Conclave pin, there were three Warbane, but Kriska knew that she, John, and Kieko could more than account for the seven Hunters in black shim-armor standing around the edge of the room, arms folded, eyes glaring at her.

Their violence didn't spike when they saw her, which was good. Impartial viewers, or the closest she'd ever seen in a trumped up thing like this.

The fact that anyone could possibly think she would destroy the Wall of Life was insane.

John and Kieko sat in chairs that must've been brought in especially for them, because the only other chairs in the room were the four ornately carved, cushioned things that formed a square around the hologram.

Clarence led Kriska to the opposite side of the room, so she was staring at John and Kieko. They were also unarmed.

Working together, the three of them could still beat the Conclave goons if they needed to.

Kieko smiled just a bit and leaned over to whisper something in John's ear. He met Kriska's eyes and shook his head minutely.

Kieko must have caught her thoughts about Warbane being able to take the Conclave and told John.

Kriska shrugged. She couldn't help but tally up the odds in a situation like this. It took the edge off the tension and made

## DEATH WEAVER

her forget that there were several heavily armed guards arrayed around her who all thought she might be just as evil as Asa was.

The hologram in the center of the room changed. *All stand.*

Kriska shrugged again because she was already standing. John and Kieko made their way to their feet. John swayed just a bit and grabbed Kieko's arm for support.

There was a door in the back of the room that Kriska hadn't noticed when she came in—probably because it was just another panel of the same gray wall that coated everything else. That panel slid away to reveal a woman in standard Hunter gear, minus the armor her counterparts wore. Her chin-length black hair swayed as she moved, framing a face devoid of scars or any other imperfection. A black jacket with a patch on the shoulder draped over her shoulders, only that patch held the same golden star burning in the black that was on the collar pins of all the other Conclave Hunters.

Kriska was left to wonder at the significance of a patch instead of a pin as the woman strode into the room, moving with the grace that separated the deadliest fighters from the rest of them. Even Gramps didn't move with that kind of grace, although he bore the same aura of authority.

The woman stopped just short of the hologram, which blinked out as she settled onto the balls of her feet and scanned the room—a deliberate motion, because Kriska had no doubt that she'd already memorized who was where.

“My name is Venus, and I am the Conclave's representative today.” Venus's voice was deep for a woman, the kind of voice that settled into Kriska's bones and stayed there.

There was something strange about the way that Venus's unmarred skin reflected the light. The texture wasn't quite right, like it was coated in invisible armor. The artificial gleam of plastic made to look natural piqued Kriska's interest, and she focused on the woman's aura.

She was calm. As calm as Kriska had ever seen any Hunter except perhaps Gramps—discounting John, because Kriska could still see the threads around this woman's aura. Moreover, the threads of the Fabric of Life were thicker where Venus passed. It

was a difference Kriska had no doubt she never would have seen before her battle with Asa, but it was unmistakably there.

Trying to kill this Hunter would be a grave mistake.

Kriska glanced at Kieko, who had undoubtedly caught her thoughts, only to freeze. Kieko's face had paled, and her eyes were stuck on Venus.

Venus noticed Kieko's stare and turned. "You are Jere Thaddeus's daughter, the empath. Correct?"

Venus's words were correct in every aspect. Not too fast, not too slow. Her eyes drilled into Kieko, who nodded.

"I thought so. I extended a warning to your father, which I now extend to you. Do not attempt to touch my mind. You will find nothing, and I have been told that the experience is quite unpleasant." Venus smiled, pulling her lips back from bone white teeth.

Kieko shuddered out a breath and clutched John's arm—the result being that they were now holding each other. Kriska snorted sarcastically to herself. Eric would be jealous.

Venus turned to Kriska, and she saw that the woman had emerald green irises, like laboratory cut gems, perfect without flaws. Meeting those eyes was unnatural, and suddenly Kriska missed Roma more than she had before.

The woman's aura was just as synthetic as her eyes. Blue. Except not really blue. The color wrapped around a core of pained fury pulsing orange, which was in turn threaded with yellow like claws kneading her potential for violence. Beneath that was a purple core so deep that it chilled Kriska to the center. This woman did not serve the Monsters—probably, anyway—but if her control slipped, the layers beneath would take control, and the woman would become a creature more dangerous than Asa had ever been. Each layer of violence was wrapped in an aura that felt wrong. An aura that didn't belong to Venus, but to someone Kriska had never met.

"*What are you?*" Kriska focused on the woman's aura as she asked the question. There was no flare of violence. In fact, there was barely any reaction at all.

This woman was unnatural. Surely she wasn't human. No human could possibly have an aura like that.

## DEATH WEAVER

Venus smiled. “My benefactor said you might discover that, but she said it would take you longer. Your danger to this world has grown.”

Kriska cocked her head. “By danger, do you mean ‘ability to protect’? In case you’re unaware, the entire universe was almost destroyed, and I’m the only reason it wasn’t.”

Venus’s unnatural smile didn’t waver. “So John Fitzgerald reported. Of course, he had a part to play in that incident as well. His Sight does not give him any latitude for destruction the way your Sight does.”

Kriska remembered what Verdell had said about the conflict, and matched Venus’s smile fakery for fakery. “If we’re interrogating people for their potential to destroy the Wall of life, then I think we should be talking to you, Venus. You have more potential for destruction than anyone I’ve ever met, and that includes Asa.”

“Potential controlled by someone else. My benefactor did not send me here to discuss my own peculiarities. Believe me, the Conclave has a full accounting of my abilities. Your abilities, though—”

“Are checked by the Angels,” another voice said.

Kriska looked over to the slide-away door as the voice cut her to the core. She knew that voice.

No one had seen the door open or the Councilors of Warbane stream into the room, but they stood in front of the back wall led by a face Kriska had thought she would never see again. His eyes were just as silver and piercing as she remembered—unnerving to a small child who could only see that he was dangerous, and comforting to a young woman that knew his potential for violence would always protect her. His left ear was missing the creamy white moonstone he usually wore, but in its place was an emerald that matched Venus’s eyes molecule for molecule. His silver hair wasn’t loose around his clean-shaven chin the way he’d worn it in the morning when he woke before dawn to make cracked wheat for breakfast. Instead, it was pulled back with a shine of elegance and braided over his shoulder. His hair was longer, which shouldn’t have been surprising, but it was. The bottom

of his braid reached his elbow. He must not have cut it, even after all her teasing about how guys shouldn't have long hair.

Gramps—and he *was* Gramps—didn't look at Kriska, though. His eyes of unnerving silver were fixed on Venus, who didn't look away.

“You are checked by your benefactor just as Kriska Duanti is checked by Angels—and by Warbane,” he repeated, no louder or softer than before.

Marie Fitzgerald stood next to Gramps and two other Councilors stood next to her. Jere Thaddeus, the one who had interrogated her and then sent John in with a gun with the intent to kill her, was at Marie Fitzgerald's side. He was short, just like his daughter—something Kriska hadn't noticed the last time they'd met—but still a head taller than Marie Fitzgerald. The last Councilor wore a Conclave pin on top of a white jacket of the same cut as most Hunter jackets: Councilor Tro Bunnel. Which made Gramps Councilor Von Xi.

Gramps had never told her his name. As a child, Kriska had thought it strange that someone so kind, who had taken her in, would be so mysterious about his own past. Once she'd decided just to call him Gramps, the omission of his name hadn't seemed so important—not until he'd vanished, leaving her nothing to search for.

Gramps was a Warbane Councilor. According to Verdell, Warbane's *founding* Councilor.

He stared Venus down without the angry challenge Verdell had occasionally shown and without the serene calm Kieko held close to her heart. Gramps somehow gave the impression of neither, while embodying the essence of both. He was a wall of eternacrete, giving nothing away while he made it clear that he would stand forever.

The smile Venus wore vanished. “Checked by Warbane? Councilor Xi, I have seen how Warbane checks its people. Two of your own council members who, I note, have not yet had their seats filled by others, betrayed your guild and the Conclave by killing one of your own and joining with Death's Companion, a Dark guild which almost succeeded in destroying the Wall of Life, the same way their predecessors succeeded in orchestrating

## DEATH WEAVER

the Split and destroying the Wall of Physicality. Warbane's checks are a joke."

"I don't see you laughing." The malice in Thaddeus's voice ran just as deep as the last time Kriska had heard him speak. He started to step forward, then stopped as Marie Fitzgerald touched his arm in warning.

"This isn't about Ozaki Thaddeus," Marie Fitzgerald said, "nor is it about Malcom Sexton. I was on that battlefield, and I fought the creature who escaped Kriska Duanti's control. Raven assures me that it was only Kriska's interference which kept our position from being overrun by devils only someone like Kriska or Raven can kill. We should be thanking Kriska, not treating her as a threat."

"But she is a threat," Venus said with as much emotion as someone ordering a bowl of chili for lunch. "If she could stop an incident now, what is to stop her from creating the next one?"

"The Angels," Gramps said. "Beings of immense power that neither you nor your benefactor have interacted with. Beings that you do not understand and would much rather ignore."

For the first time, Kriska saw emotion—true emotion, not that fabricated smile—in Venus's face. A flush crept into her cheeks. "That's not true."

Gramps only raised an eyebrow and looked at her like she'd failed a particularly simple math question.

Gramps had always been good at telling when Kriska was lying, but the fact that he Saw the Wall of Reality meant he could probably see truth from lies the same way she saw violence. And Venus had just accused him of lying.

Gramps, one; Venus, zero.

The flush in Venus's cheeks darkened. "My benefactor has been aware of these beings."

"But she doesn't understand what they are or where they come from. Your benefactor is far more concerned with a different Wall."

Venus didn't bother refuting his statement, just stood there and glared.

Gramps continued and, as he did, he began to drift toward the seats in the middle of the room. The other councilors followed his lead. "There are many worlds that exist in parallel with this

one, separated by walls. Some are inhabited, but many are not. When the Organization your benefactor hates so dearly set off the nuclear explosion in orbit that cracked Earth and turned it into a nuclear wasteland of lava and ash, it also destroyed the First Wall. Physics changed overnight. Bounty Hunters discovered that they could jump thirty feet, and run for days on end, and some Hunters had more power than that. The same explosion which destroyed the First Wall also cracked several others—primarily the Wall of Life.”

He arrived behind a chair which Kriska assumed was his, and then stopped. He rested his hands on the back and continued to look at Venus as if she was a particularly errant child. “A physical explosion was not the reason the Wall of Life cracked, but the masses who died in those few hours, and the days that followed left the Wall weakened. Those who were sensitive to that Wall began to see it more clearly. At the same time, death began to come more easily as the Monsters tore through the Wall of Life to steal human souls—power to drive the war they wage on the other side of the Wall of Life.”

Kriska half expected Venus to interrupt Gramps, but she just stood there, unnaturally still. Was she even breathing?

“The world beyond the Wall of Life is inhabited by two species. Monsters—or devils—are behind every death humans have ever suffered, and Angels have saved anyone ever revived from death. In their own world, the Angels fight a losing battle against the Monsters—and it is a losing battle. The Monsters supplement their power by stealing human souls. Angels fuse their souls to the souls of Human Weavers like Kriska and grow their own power without resorting to murder.”

“Get to the point.” Anyone else might have snarled the words. Venus made them sound robotic.

Gramps shook his head sadly. “Do you truly believe that an Angel would bind its soul to the soul of someone who would serve the Monsters they fight?”

Venus didn’t budge. “I will not trust the judgment of a creature I know so little about.”

## DEATH WEAVER

Gramps snorted. It was a humorless sound Kriska had heard many times during her childhood, and that snort meant *wrong answer*.

“Trust has never been your benefactor’s defining attribute. She doesn’t like to work with someone she cannot control, and she cannot control the Angels. That’s her problem, not Warbane’s.”

“If Warbane is going to shelter someone with that potential—”

Thaddeus shouldered his way forward, annoyance plain on his face. “Enough posturing and playing. Doesn’t the Conclave have anything better to do than bother us?”

“Jere,” Marie Fitzgerald’s tone was warning.

Thaddeus ignored her. His gaze swept the room. “It looks to me like we’ve got half a dozen Conclave goons, and one Dark guild flunky. You want to know if she would destroy the world, then just let me dig into her head. There’s enough of you here to constitute *oversight*.” He said the word like it was a curse.

Venus inclined her head.

Kriska clenched her jaw as Thaddeus’s yellow-green eyes glinted with satisfaction.

This was what he’d been after from the start: a chance to dig into her head without angering the Conclave. Now, he didn’t just have the oversight he needed, they were basically asking him to ferret out all her secrets.

Those murders from earlier? He was going to find all of them, and the Conclave representative he needed to report her to was already standing in the room.

Kriska sought Gramps’s eyes, but he refused to look at her. Her stomach sank.

“Hold her,” Thaddeus snapped.

Clarence grabbed her, one hand on her arm, one hand on her shoulder. One of his Conclave friends did the same on the other side. Kriska battled down the instinct to stomp on their feet and wrench her way free.

This. This was why she had never wanted to be involved with Warbane from the beginning.

A faint feeling that smelled faintly of cherry blossoms. Kieko. She would watch. She would guard. If her father did anything to harm Kriska, she would stop them.

A movement from across the room caught her attention and Kriska focused on John. His eyes were serene, his aura invisible. He lowered his chin in half a nod—reassurance that everything was going to be alright.

Kriska stiffened. How did he know? How could she trust that Warbane wouldn't just throw her to the Conclave and let them stick her in a dark hole for the rest of her life?

But then, she'd trusted him so far. She'd followed him off Earth and onto Titan. He'd defended her from Thaddeus before. More than that, he'd defended her from Asa. He'd picked up the threads she'd dropped while weaving the Fabric of Life. He had been there when she needed him most.

This was different than the first time Thaddeus had rooted through her head. This time, she had people to watch her back.

Deliberately, Kriska relaxed into the hands that held her and watched Thaddeus's smug eyes come forward.

When his warm hand touched her skin, the world melted away, and then she was floating in a sea of calm as her memories, at one remove, played in the back of her mind like a film. Her instincts screamed at her to fight it. Instead, she placed an image of John in front of her mind's eye and ignored her instincts. Either John was trustworthy, or he wasn't. He'd already proved that he would fight for her.

She watched Asa kill and she watched her struggle to repair the Fabric of Life. She heard the voice again, smooth and persuasive, trying to convince her that Warbane was not worth protecting. She watched Asa standing over her, Roma in hand, and then saw herself standing over him as the wound in his forehead healed over again.

The pressure in her head increased, like someone had closed her skull in a vise, and was ratcheting the opening closed with her still inside.

Her apartment exploded in memory. The piece of plas settled on the sidewalk. She whirled on John, gun in hand. She signed her thumbprint to his bounty.

The body of that murderous guard dropped like a stone. She dragged him into hiding.

Raven took the shot to kill Jimmy Comhen.

## DEATH WEAVER

Verdell stood in front of her with Elroy in her hands.

The pressure made her head want to split. A moment longer, and her skull would shatter.

She stood in front of Asa, who walked in death. Bullets left Roma, sighted on Asa's skull. They bent, but the purple aura around them didn't vanish.

Horror washed over her, but Kriska could not bend the bullets in time to keep Kieko from being completely unscathed.

And why was Keiko there to begin with? Not to find Asa—that was certain. Kieko could not see the Wall of Life.

The pressure built, and Kriska opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out.

She was back on the sand on top of the Death's Companion bunker. A persuasive feminine voice whispered in her mind. A voice she recognized from somewhere.

In a flash that was also an eternity, Kriska found herself again, standing in front of the Conclave Hunters with Jere Thaddeus in front of her. His eyes flashed with rage, and he opened his mouth to say something.

"Well?" Venus asked, before Thaddeus could make a sound.

Thaddeus closed his mouth and turned, his movements wooden with rage. "Nothing." He spat the word.

Sweat trickled down Kriska's temple—from pain, or maybe from fear. Her brain was mush. If she just passed out, then he wouldn't be able to pulverize her brain again, right? The hands that held her weren't to keep her from escaping, now, but to keep her standing upright as the world did a little dance around her. Floors didn't need to be flat. Right?

Kriska blinked the dancing floor away from her vision and focused on the auras in the room instead. Her Second Sight was far more trustworthy in a situation like this.

An aura gone pale—so pale it had almost faded from her sight—made Kriska look across the room at Kieko. She clutched at John's arm like she was hanging on for dear life and stared at her father.

"Somehow I don't believe that," Venus said wryly. "Your heart rate is elevated, adrenaline spiking. I'm not quite as good a truth teller as Xi is, but even I can tell that you found something."

Thaddeus took a deep breath and smoothed down the front of his Hunter blacks. “It was only a conversation she had with my—daughter. An internal family matter that hardly concerns you or the Conclave.”

Gramps raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

Kriska wracked her brain for what could have possibly made Thaddeus so angry but came up with nothing. Certainly, none of the conversations she’d ever had with Kieko should provoke that kind of response. Perhaps he was mad that Keiko and Eric were probably shacking up? But he’d been assigned to the outpost on Earth, and he was an empath. There was no way he could have missed that little development.

So, what had made him so violently angry?

“You are certain that Kriska Duanti poses no threat to the Wall of Life?” Venus asked Thaddeus, but it was Gramps who answered.

“Kriska wove the very fiber of her being, the core of her soul, into the Fabric of Life. She could no more harm it than she could decide to stop breathing.” The certainty behind Gramps’s words was chilling. He arched an eyebrow at Venus.

Venus looked from Gramps to Thaddeus and closed her eyes for just longer than a blink. Anyone else would have sighed, or shrugged, but a blink was all the emotion Venus had to spare.

“I will convey everything that has happened here to my benefactor.”

Then Venus vanished. Didn’t run out of the room, didn’t fade. One moment she was there, and the next moment she was gone.

Marie Fitzgerald turned to Tro Bunnel, eyebrows raised. “Satisfied?”

“For now.” He left the room through the sliding panel in the back, and the rest of the Conclave flunkies followed. When Clarence and his friend let go of her, Kriska staggered, but managed to remain upright. A few deep breaths washed away the remnants of the pain, and only exhaustion remained.

Kriska watched Gramps, waiting for some gesture of recognition, some permission to approach now that he, John, Kieko, Thaddeus, and Marie were the only ones in the room.

He didn’t even look at her, just turned and followed the last of the Conclave flunkies out the door.

## DEATH WEAVER

That motion was like a dagger in Kriska's gut, more painful than Thaddeus's ministrations could ever have been. Her knees went weak, and she wanted to sink to the floor and sob like a little child.

He didn't remember her.

That, or he didn't want to associate with her. The only true parent she'd ever had, and he'd rejected her.

All that time playing Hunter hopscotch, watching his guarded grin and laughing eyes as she fell on her butt, then the pride as she beat him soundly at the game. His nods of approval when she beat her record at the range, when she forged the bond with Roma, when she mastered her Sight, when she passed the tests and came away with her Solo Hunting license.

His eyes had been empty when he looked at her. She was just another Hunter, just another problem for him to fix for Warbane.

None of the time they'd spent together mattered.

The time he'd been shot. She had been ten. He hadn't been careful. Her sobs, her fingers trying to stop the bleeding, his fingers grabbing at the trauma bandage she'd forgotten to use. She slapped the patch on, grabbed the injector already filled with 'bots.

She finished the job.

He baked a cake, burned it to charcoal. They went out for ice cream instead.

None of that mattered.

She was pulling apart inside—all the wishing that he was alright, hoping that he would come back, knowing that he still cared, wherever he was—all of it destroying her from the inside out.

He didn't remember.

He didn't care.

Kieko hurried to Kriska's side, an echo of Kriska's pain in her eyes.

"He will come back," she promised, her words barely a whisper. "He does love you, Kriska, he just can't say it yet. I don't know why, but you need to hold on a little longer."

Kriska ground her teeth together. She didn't want to wait. She didn't want to have patience, or take her medicine, she just wanted Gramps, and he had walked away from her. Again.

She'd nearly died saving the world, been dragged into an interrogation, and then watched Gramps walk away from her, and it was too much.

Kieko took Kriska's hand and led her swiftly back to the room she'd woken up in, and then not even Kieko's consoling words could keep Kriska's tears inside.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

It felt like Kieko held her for an eternity before Kriska gained back enough control to dry her tears.

“I’m sorry,” Kriska said, and she wasn’t even sure what she was apologizing for. A grown Bounty Hunter crying—the idea would have been laughable, except what she really wanted to do was start crying again.

“It’s been a long few days,” Kieko said.

Kriska stared at the blank floor, too tired even to move. Was this it? Was this her new life, now? Warbane, Walls, Angels, and Monsters? But, then, nothing had changed much. Gramps took her in as a child, and he was Warbane. She’d been trained for this guild, and they’d found her. Lone Wolf to Guild Monkey, and she didn’t even mind.

And to think how much she’d derided Guild Monkeys, when she’d been fated to join Warbane all along.

Fated to join Warbane, where Gramps had run away to when he vanished. The place where Gramps had forgotten all about her.

Tears threatened again. Kriska pinched the bridge of her nose so hard her fingernails drew blood, and she didn’t care. She could crack the bones in her nose and it wouldn’t matter—except broken noses led to tears, and that was a physiological response not even a Hunter could fight, and she *wouldn’t* cry again. She let go of her nose.

The door opened, and Kriska looked up from where she’d been staring at the floor. Kieko stood, putting her hands on her hips.

“You could have given her *something*, you know,” Kieko said hotly.

Gramps stood in the doorway. Kriska brushed the tearstains from her cheeks. Hunters don't cry. Even if Gramps didn't remember telling her that, or didn't care what he'd taught her, she remembered. Hunters don't cry.

Gramps didn't reply, just looked at Kieko evenly.

"Oh, don't give me that," Kieko snapped.

Kriska blinked in shock. Kieko didn't talk like that to anyone. More than that, no one talked to Gramps that way.

Gramps sighed. The skin around his face sagged in wrinkles that hadn't been there when Kriska was a child. In that moment, he looked so old.

"Can I have a moment with Kriska?" His voice held more gravel than she remembered.

"You'd better be nice," Kieko said, and then left.

Gramps stood there, arms by his side, staring at the wall in front of him. He might've looked serene to anyone who didn't know him, but Kriska saw the tiny tremble of his fingers.

Kriska got up off the bed and crossed in front of him. She couldn't sit while he stood. She had to make him look at her. He was inches taller than her. He looked over her head. The earring in his ear was still that synthetic emerald.

Hope in the middle of a sea of despair. He'd come to see her. Did that mean he remembered?

Was he here to tell her why he'd left? Would she get answers, or only the reassurance that he no longer cared, and that raising her meant nothing to him.

The thought nearly made her collapse, but Gramps was right there, and she couldn't collapse. Hunters were strong.

Kriska started to open her mouth, and then stopped. What could she say? He'd raised her, but he hadn't even told her his name. He'd defended her from the Conclave without even looking at her. He still wouldn't look at her.

"Why?" Kriska asked. Why didn't he say goodbye? Why didn't he tell her about Warbane? Why did he save her from her old life if he was just going to abandon her? Just, why?

He finally found her eyes. A silver river of emotions held in an iron grip hung there, turbulent. Regret. Guilt. Pride. Hope. Love. None allowed to spill out, all regimented in their course and kept

## DREAM WEAVER

to their places. “A lot of reasons,” he said, like he heard all the questions she hadn’t been able to ask. “I stumbled on you after being exiled from Warbane. There was a bounty on my head. You needed me. I needed you. They made me leave the children of Warbane: Verdell, John, Kieko, Eric. Nilsa—” his voice cracked. He swayed, just a little.

Kriska took a step forward. “Are you al—” alright. She couldn’t choke the word out. Of course he was alright. He’d been fine, even when he’d been shot.

Gramps shook his head. It was one harsh movement, cutting right to her heart. “I failed her. I didn’t prepare her well enough, I didn’t react quickly enough. I never should have let her join that mission.”

Kriska thought back to the story Eric had told about John’s sister Nilsa. After his father betrayed Warbane and shattered the systems on his way out, Gramps was the only one who had listened to the five year old son of a traitor. “You tried,” Kriska said softly.

Gramps shook his head again. “I failed to protect the family I built here. I endangered Eric and Kieko, I failed Nilsa—I should have seen Malcom Sexton and Ozaki Thaddeus for who they were. My Sight is built on Seeing what truly is on a cosmic scale. I should have known, and I missed it. But even in exile, I never stopped being a teacher.”

And what a teacher he had been. Stern, commanding, playful, kind, always moving his expectations higher, pushing her to keep going. Celebrating victories, using failures as lessons.

“After Nilsa was killed, I escaped the Conclave and found a place to lay low for a while. I also found you.”

It took a moment for those words to sink in.

He had been running away, and he’d stumbled on her, and he’d stayed because teaching her made a decent way to hide.

She was the unintended consequence of a tragedy. An afterthought. A convenient way to pass the time. He had always intended to abandon her.

The thoughts made her world spin, and she reached out to grab the wall.

“No,” Gramps grabbed her shoulder, and his hand supplied so much more stability than the wall did.

He couldn’t know all her thoughts—he wasn’t Kieko—but he’d seen enough. The concern bordering on panic carved into his face made that very clear.

She looked up at his fierce silver eyes. “What, then? You trained me because there was nothing else to do, and when Warbane wanted you back, you abandoned me.”

“And I regret it every single day. You gave me joy during a time when there was only hate and pain. You were never just convenient. You were a brilliant time in my life that was cut too short because the universe needed me.”

“I needed you.” Kriska wanted to scream the words, but they came out as a whisper.

Gramps still winced and turned away as tears started to well up in his eyes.

He had always been a pillar of strength, the one who could do no wrong. But looking at him now, Kriska only saw someone who was irreversibly human, and seeing that side of him hurt. She wanted the foundation of her life back, but she saw him now and knew that he wasn’t a platform of stone for her to stand on. He was just a person. He had knowledge, and he had love, and he had mistakes—just like she did.

He resumed his narrative softly. “The chaos that resulted in my exile resolved itself, as those things are wont to do. They wanted me back so they could pursue Death’s Companion and gain justice for Nilsa’s death. They needed all the Hunters they could get. I *built* this family, and I couldn’t abandon them. I couldn’t let them face this alone.”

“You should have taken me with you.” Kriska’s voice was dark and bitter. All that needless pain and suffering, her desperation to find him, when he’d only returned to the guild that was destined to swallow her anyway. Unless—

Unless he didn’t want her here. Unless he hadn’t thought she was good enough to join the guild he’d founded.

“Don’t jump to conclusions, young lady.” His voice was suddenly stern.

Kriska stiffened.

## DREAM WEAVER

“They needed every Hunter they could get. They would have taken you in a heartbeat. In fact, if they’d known you existed, you wouldn’t have had a choice. Warbane has declared war, and you would have been drafted.”

“I could have handled it.”

Gramps barked a humorless laugh. “You would have charged right in and gotten yourself killed, just like Nilsa. Your training wasn’t complete yet. You were bull-headed, and convinced that you could do anything, and you would have faced off against Death Companion’s Death Weaver, and he would have killed you with pleasure.”

“You don’t know that!”

Gramps nodded slowly, his eyes speculative as he drew the silence out for one heartbeat, and then two.

Kriska remembered her mad dash through the sands of Titan, convinced that she could save them all. She’d been convinced she could get to Asa.

She’d been a fool.

Gramp’s voice was soft. “Perhaps you would have shown more restraint than I thought. Perhaps you would have listened to my warnings. It doesn’t matter. I was terrified for you. I was terrified of losing another student. When I heard that you were on Titan with Marie, I—” He closed his eyes. “It doesn’t matter.”

The pain in his face made her chest hurt. She could imagine his terror. If he truly had been that desperate to keep her out of this fight, then finding out she was headed into combat with someone who had the Monsters on their side would have been awful.

Kriska reached out to touch his forearm. He looked up at her.

“I’m right here,” she said softly. “Roma, Raven, Elroy and I defeated Asa. We’re all safe. You and I are together again.”

His lips quivered. He nodded.

A breath of air against Kriska’s ear made her turn to find John standing in the doorway. He looked a little better than he had earlier, but not by much. His eyes sunk into his face, and his movements were anything but sure.

“What happened?” Kriska crossed the room to help John inside. Physically, he looked unharmed.

John managed a tired smile. "I'm astonished that you're doing as well as you are."

"Bots," Kriska said, by way of explanation.

Behind her, Gramps cleared his throat. John ducked his head, the barest hint of a flush creeping up his neck.

Kriska looked back at Gramps. He'd arched an eyebrow, like he was pushing her to find the answer to a question.

Kriska helped John sit in the chair next to the corner table.

"I usually bounce back faster than this," John said with a sigh.

Then it hit her.

He'd finished the weaving for her. He'd kept her lapse from killing everyone. And in the process, he'd given parts of his soul to the Wall of Life.

"You spent a lot of your essence," Gramps said. "And you don't have Angels to help you."

John nodded. "I guess." Then he looked at Gramps. "Can you give us a moment?"

Gramps didn't make a motion—he just faded into the background. If Kriska tried to focus on him, he was still there. He stood, ghostly and intangible, and her eyes kept wanting to slide around him.

Her lips twisted into a smile. This was one of his favorite tricks from when he was teaching her how to Hunt. He would go mostly invisible and shadow her the whole time. If he had to step in, she had failed the Hunt. If she could spot him, though, she got ice cream.

John shrugged like he knew that was the best he was going to get and turned to Kriska. "Why did you jump in there like that?" he asked.

Kriska blinked. "Like what?" Was he talking about when she stopped Asa from destroying the Fabric of Life?

"Do you have any idea how dangerous it is to spread your soul that thin? And then, to use your life essence to replace the broken threads? Even if you had two other Weavers helping you, that was foolhardy."

Kriska shrugged. "It was that or let everybody die. I might see violence and death, but that doesn't mean I want to see everyone I care about get taken by the Monsters." What did he want from

## DREAM WEAVER

her? There hadn't been a choice. Eric and Kieko had been down there. His mother had been down there! She couldn't have just let them die. It had been foolhardy, sure, but it had also worked.

"It's not about that!" John's voice leaked exasperation.

She met his eyes. "Then what is it about?"

"Your job isn't fixing the Fabric of Life—that's my job. And you don't know how to do it right, and your technique was bad, and it was going to kill you, and I had to pick up all the pieces and put them back together, and *I almost couldn't do it!*" His voice went from a harsh whisper, to almost a yell. "You almost died. Do you even know how many of those things were trying to drag you away? You're *supposed* to serve them. If you weren't then you would have been born like me, or Verdell, or my mother!"

Kriska flinched. "I would *never* serve them." She didn't bother to disguise the rage in her voice.

John looked down at his clenched fists, then deflated. "I know."

It was quiet, then, but Kriska kept her mouth shut. There was conflict in John, visible in the pale green in his aura. Sometimes it was there, sometimes it wasn't. Any other Hunter would be a mass of orange and yellow.

When he looked back up, his eyes were sad. "I almost lost you, Kriska. You took three gunshot wounds and subdued him—"

Asa.

"—all while half your lifeforce was stuck in the Fabric of Life. If it wasn't for Elroy's help, you would be dead. Can you even imagine what it was like, grasping at your soul, trying to shield it from the Monsters, while I wondered if there would be enough of you left to survive, even if the Monsters didn't get you? Even if you survived, you might not have been *you*."

There were tears in his eyes.

No wonder he looked so exhausted. He had finished stitching up the Fabric of Life, and then he had saved her, just like he'd saved Kieko, just like he'd saved them all in the sandstorm after she'd stupidly led them into the middle of nowhere. If she was a Death Weaver, then he was a Life Weaver.

And what reassurance could she give him? Kriska grit her teeth. People were *so* not what she was good at. Shoot a moving target half a mile away? Easy. Wrestle a radioactive bear? Done.

Dry a teammate's—a friend's—tears? She needed air support, GPS, and an arsenal the size of New Chicago.

*Oh, just do it, Elroy's derision was clear in her head. It doesn't require thinking. In fact, that's probably the problem. You think too much. Kiss him, slap him, give him a hug—whatever. Just do something.*

Kriska found her hands on John's shoulders. "I. Am. Me." There was enough punch behind each of those words to derail a train.

He blinked. Flushed.

Kriska wasn't finished. "Trying to save someone like that sucks. I didn't realize that before I went up on top of that bunker and failed to save so many people. It sucks even more if that person is someone you care about. But everyone was down there, John. Kieko, Eric, your mother. Even if I had to weave my entire soul into the Fabric of Life to keep them safe, I would have." Then her cheeks flushed, and she pulled her arms back. Folded them awkwardly. Looked anywhere but at John. "And Verdell would have killed me if I let anyone die..."

John was staring at her with those deep brown eyes of his. The flush had crept all the way up to his cheeks.

Kriska kept stumbling over her words. "...And the whole Fabric of Life would have come apart, and I would have died regardless. So, um...it was the logical thing to do?"

There was a moment of silence. John repeated, "Logical thing to do."

"Yeah." This was so awkward, she was going to die. What was she supposed to do with her hands? He was just staring, and part of her wanted to give him a big hug, and most of her was halfway to *run away* and—

He enfolded her in a hug. One moment he was sitting, and the next she was safe, surrounded by him.

Her breathing eased, and her muscles relaxed, and then she hugged him back. "I'm okay," she whispered.

"I'm glad," he breathed.

After an eternity, there was a cough behind them, and Kriska realized that Gramps was actually still in the room.

He let her go reluctantly, and she stepped back.

He was still flushed. So was she.

## DREAM WEAVER

“So—” John started.

“—I’d better go,” Kriska said.

John shook his head. “Kieko says Councilor Xi is basically your dad. I’m the one who’d better go.” And then he was gone.

Kriska stared at the door as it swung closed.

Another cough from Gramps made her look back at him. He was as amused as she’d ever seen, with that little grin dancing on his lips, and those silver eyes sparkling like stars.

“Do we need to have a talk about John?” he asked.

Kriska couldn’t tell if he was being threatening or grandfatherly.

She shook her head. “John’s just a teammate.”

Gramps’s grin only grew.

They stood there in silence for a long time, Kriska trying to find some way to answer Gramps’s grin—and failing—until a thunderous knock shattered the silence. Kriska had barely taken a step toward the door when it slammed open, and Jere Thaddeus stomped through with a tablet in hand.

“You,” he said, stabbing a finger at her. “You spoke to her. You resisted her pull on your mind.”

Kriska squinted at him. What was he even talking about?

“I heard her in your mind while you wove your threads, Weaver. You can’t hide it from me. You spoke with her. You spoke with Ozaki.”

The woman who had tried to convince her not to help Warbane while she had held the Monsters back. Kriska remembered her voice and thinking that it sounded familiar. It clicked into place in her head.

“That was Ozaki?” Kieko’s mother, the empath?

Thaddeus shoved a tablet at her. “Pick up this bounty. Do it, or your life in this guild will be pure hell.”

Kriska looked at Gramps, whose face had gone stony, and then at the tablet. Ozaki Thaddeus’s name sat there in bold red letters. This was an execution bounty posted by the Conclave, with one listed supporter. Jere Thaddeus.

Kieko’s father wanted her mother dead. Was that what had sparked his rage earlier, and why he’d lied to Venus?

Whatever it was, Kriska knew one thing. She was not going to get in the middle of the Warbane family spat. She started to push the tablet away, only to stop as she saw the rage in Thaddeus's eyes.

If she didn't take this bounty, he would give it to someone else. Kriska didn't have to imagine how much anguish Kieko would feel if her mother died without giving her the answers she deserved. If someone else took this bounty, Kieko would never get to see her mother again. She would be lost in that unknown grey, wondering why her mother had left, just as Kriska had wondered about Gramps. But, if Kriska took the bounty, she would be free to attack the problem however she wanted.

She took the tablet and registered her name, then closed the deal with a thumbprint.

Thaddeus looked at the tablet, then back up at Kriska. He opened his mouth, then closed it, and walked away, past Marie Fitzgerald who stood in the doorway, her eyes shadowed.

"You took the bounty?" Marie asked.

Kriska nodded.

Her lips twisted into a smile, although the shadows still lurked in her eyes. "Good."

Kriska's eyebrows raised, but Marie didn't elaborate. Instead, she stepped the rest of the way into the room and nodded at Gramps.

Gramps nodded back.

Kriska looked down at the tablet still in her hand. She probably should go find Thaddeus to give it back, but he obviously wasn't too concerned with the thing, and she really didn't want to be alone with the guy. The time spent with him in the interrogation room back on Earth was still too fresh. She looked back up at Gramps.

"How big of a problem is Thaddeus going to be, moving forward?" she asked.

Gramps gave her an evil smile. "I dunno. How do you plan on resolving that?" His chin indicated the tablet.

A minuscule groan escaped her. She opened her mouth to respond, only to stop as Kieko led the rest of the team through the door. Verdell and John were chatting quietly, although John gave

## DREAM WEAVER

Gramps a long, semi-anxious look before returning to his conversation. Kieko's hand was very firmly intertwined with Eric's.

Kriska held the tablet close against her body, away from Kieko's gaze, only to draw a glare from Gramps and Marie both. The look was clear. *This is your team, now. Your job is their job.*

Kriska looked at Kieko, smiling that dreamy smile. This was not going to be easy for her—but then, Kriska didn't intend to kill Ozaki. Just because that was what the job said, didn't mean it was what she would do.

Hunting wasn't about the money, it was about protecting the Wall. It was about protecting the people she cared for. And now, every single one of those people was in this room.

Kriska took a long, deep breath to calm her racing heart, and stepped forward, tablet held in front of her. "Um, guys? We have a job."

And then she looked down at the information page displaying relevant information. She froze, eyes stuck to the top of the list of Ozaki Thaddeus's known associates. Cold eyes that she'd avoided her entire life stared back at her, captioned with the name Celeste Duanti. *Mother Dearest.*

\* \* \*

Thank you so much for reading Death Weaver!

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