

Splinterpoint

By Regina St.Claire



SPLINTERPOINT

For stranded Earthling Nunzio Arquette, life in the interdimensional megalopolis of Splinterpoint isn't a piece of cake. Between cutthroat guilds, his flamboyant alien ex-boyfriend, and an unfortunate run-in with a cursed burrito, all he wants is to get back home—if only he knew how to find Earth again. In the meantime, he uses his curse as a tool to assist him in bounty-hunting. It's not the best job in the world, but it pays the bills.

That is, until an attractive, affable, magic-wielding barbarian named Kol'daar crashes Nunzio's licensing evaluation with the Mercenaries' Guild. Nunzio ends up on probation, and Kol'daar moves in next door. Despite getting off on the wrong foot, Kol'daar wants to be friends, even when Nunzio responds to his overtures with vandalism. His curse has kept him celibate for over a year, and even with a flirty new neighbor to tempt him, that won't change. If Nunzio catches himself staring at those perfect abs, it's just because the dude refuses to wear a shirt.

Further proving that Murphy's Law is a multiversal constant, an apocalypse threatens the city. Of course, the only things that can stop it are Kol'daar, armed with his trusty music-magic, and Nunzio's own unique destructive ability—that is, if the demons, pissed-off landladies, teenaged girls, self-interested thieves, radio evangelists, and mad scientists don't get them first.

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

SPLINTERPOINT

By Regina St. Claire

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Two well-built, dark-haired men face each other in a small bathroom, their lower halves nearly touching. The shorter one has his back to the mirror, a disheveled look to his business-casual clothes. The taller one has shorter hair and no shirt at all. Both have shaving foam on their faces. The shorter man drags a razor over the taller one's cheek. A second razor glides across his own face, guided by no visible hand.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Of all the shabby hotels in the city, my biggest competition, the most arrogant asshole in the world, was staying in the room next door, playing his TV loud enough for me to hear Judge Judy's verdict, and each time he leaves to use the ONE bathroom on this entire floor that we all have to share, he drums his fingers across MY door.

Just. Because.

He's waiting for me to make my move, I know it. But he's not going to steal my target AGAIN. Or... anything else... again. I know how to deal with Mr. Does-jobs-while-shirtless. Like, seriously, we get it. You work out!

I thought dealing with him was bad enough. Finding an international convention of assassins nesting downstairs in the lobby? Or catching my (very) ex-mentor (ex-everything...) skulking in the shady bar next door? I don't know what's going on, but suddenly this job is looking a little too popular, and now when I hear those assured fingers tap across my door, it doesn't feel like so much a threat anymore.

At least not the biggest threat today...

Loves: Action, sci-fi, adventure, fantasy, mystery—all the excitement!

Dislikes: Rape, non-con, dub-con, torture and very dark-dark stories.

Have fun, and thank you!

Sincerely,

ttg

Story Info

Genre: science fiction, alternate universe

Tags: humorous, bounty hunters, trope-spllosion, spacemen/aliens, magic users, slow burn/UST

Word Count: 101,513

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This story is for Alison and Ben, who were both remarkably supportive of my plot-related ramblings and tolerant of my occasional meltdowns. You two kept me sane, or at least as sane as I was when I started out.

SPLINTERPOINT

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Chapter One

The commotion in the rooms both above and below his own pathetic little hotel-room-cum-studio-apartment woke Nunzio Arquette from a sound sleep. He dragged a hand over his face, the scrape of his stubble loud in the immediate silence around him, but louder sounds of stomping footsteps, furniture scraping across the floors, and shouting voices clamored all over the building.

He scowled groggily. He hated waking up to other people's bad days.

Why was it so damn noisy? Sounded like people moving out, moving in. Must be the first of the month, then.

His eyes popped open, and he sat up swearing. He'd pulled the blackout curtains last night, which made it impossible to tell what time it was without glancing at the chronometer that occupied his nightstand beside the ancient bed. Its glowing numerals confirmed that it was midmorning, and it had yet again failed to sound his morning wake-up call an hour previous. With another heartfelt curse, he threw himself out of bed.

He'd managed to get dressed in his least-rumpled black jeans, white collar shirt, and black tie in a likely wasted attempt to appear more professional, and was waiting for the coffeemaker to finish coughing up a brew so strong he'd be able to stand the spoon straight up in the mug when a knock sounded on his door. He paused in scarfing down the hasty breakfast of dry Kobold-O's and walked to the door, still chewing. He hit the viewscreen control next to the door frame. It came to staticky life, showing the dingy hall outside. The familiar face of his landlady peered directly into the camera, close enough that the curve of the lens distorted her already-unpleasant, crocodilian features.

"Open up, Nunzio, I know you're in there," Vorkra said, showing her impressive array of teeth. After half a year of living in the building, Nunzio knew that she tried to approximate the body language of other species she dealt with as a courtesy. At the moment, though, he honestly couldn't tell if she was trying to smile or intimidate.

He swallowed his dry cereal with moderate difficulty and pressed his hand against the lock below the viewscreen. The door slid open with the anemic hiss of aging pneumatics, revealing all seven feet of Vorkra, who appeared to be wearing her very best pink housecoat and slippers for the grand occasion of the moving day. The color did not complement her teal-and-orange scaly hide.

“Good morning, Vorkra,” he said, leaning against the threshold, trying to block her view of the disaster area he called home. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Vorkra smacked her jaws together, putting two of her four hands on her hips. “You have an *official* visitor asking after you. I made him wait in the lobby, but he’s waving a Merc Guild badge at me like it should mean something.”

“Dammitall,” Nunzio growled, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. “Yeah. Thanks. Tell him I’ll be right down.”

“Something I oughtta know about, kid?” Vorkra asked, not budging.

Out in the hall, a little green man carrying a cardboard box three times larger than himself tried to tiptoe past. He might’ve even made it, but he stepped on a squeaky board and then compounded his blunder with a startled squeak of his own. Vorkra set her jaw and lashed out with her long, leathery tail. It struck flat across the alien’s gut, slammed him against the wall, and pinned him there. His box tumbled and burst open, scattering a variety of brightly colored polyhedrons and pornographic magazines.

Vorkra pulled her lips back in an unmistakable snarl, craning her neck in a one eighty that would have put Linda Blair to shame. “I know you aren’t thinking of skipping out, Uyowa, not when you owe me for last month, still. Why don’t you just stay put while I finish with this one, then the two of us can talk, hmm?”

“A-affirmative,” came the weak, gasping reply.

The ferocious landlady turned back to Nunzio without checking her expression. “You in trouble with your guild? I don’t harbor oathbreakers.”

“Not trouble,” he assured hastily. “It’s time to re-up my badge, is all. He’s gonna proctor my next snag, make sure I’m following protocol.” At her skeptical stare, he held up his hands defensively. “Look, I’ll be right down. He won’t darken your doorstep much longer, I swear. Thanks for coming up to tell me, I know how busy you are.”

“Yeah, yeah. If you could keep your damn scry-cube from cracking, I wouldn’t *have* to play messenger,” Vorkra said, but the snarl lessened to a sneer. “Just get him out of here. Don’t need rubberneckers cluttering up the joint on a moving day. The crap you make me put up with. You’re lucky I like you.”

Nunzio rather thought it wasn't him that she liked but the year of rent he'd paid up front when he arrived on her doorstep. He wisely held his tongue as she began to leave, still grumbling. She kicked the box aside and scooped up the little green man, who whimpered like a kicked puppy. She tucked him under one arm like a jock with a football and stomped off down the hall.

He stepped back into his room, letting the door shut automatically. With his proctor already waiting downstairs, Nunzio really couldn't afford to dick around. If he lost his license with the Mercenaries' Guild, he'd have to revamp his whole master plan. Such as it was.

At least his coffee had finished. He burnt his tongue on it while he checked his weapons. The nerve disruptor went in the shoulder holster, and a matte-black machete in a sheath strapped to his right thigh. He rolled up his sleeves so nothing would block his access to the wrist-comm and its handy built-in self-retracting monomolecular wire.

The coat he pulled on over his less than stylish ensemble was also less than stylish, a washed-out black, full-length affair that had been made for a much taller being. He'd had to trim a good three feet off the bottom so he wouldn't trip on it and cut the sleeves off entirely, which gave it a frayed kind of redneck chic, but at least the pockets were huge and plentiful. He'd learned early on that a bounty hunter could never have too many pockets. His other miscellaneous tools of the trade were stashed in the coat, which made it a good deal heavier and gave it odd bulges.

He pulled a pair of chunky black sunglasses out of one pocket, slid them on over his aquiline nose, smoothed his shortish, in-need-of-a-trim dark hair away from his face, and checked his reflection in the full-length mirror on the back of his closet door. He looked fucking ridiculous, like a scrawny, postapocalyptic Blues Brother without the sideburns.

He tilted his head.

No, he'd need a fedora for that.

Why didn't he have a fedora?

He wasn't worried about standing out in a crowd. In Splinterpoint, an interdimensional melting-pot cesspool, *everybody* walked around looking like costumed rejects from a Japanese fantasy RPG. His outfit was dull as old toast by this city's standards, or lack thereof. But it was all functional, and besides, there wasn't time to change. He laced up his combat boots with finality.

Fortified for his yearly certification as he was ever going to get, Nunzio exited his hovel with a sigh. As it was a moving day, the line for the ancient, decrepit elevator was a mile long. He opted for the stairs as the faster option, but even these were crowded with other people who'd decided not to wait. He dodged various beings laden with belongings as he thundered down the steps from the seventh floor. At least no one was blocking the way with massive couches or beds, as the tiny rooms came fully furnished.

Rounding the landing on the third, he plowed smack into a man who looked Human enough, though he knew better than to make firm assumptions about either species or gender. The guy was puffy faced and sweaty, dark skinned above a priest's collar and an Old West-style duster coat.

As Nunzio bounced off the portly preacher, he felt the sharp prickle of magic. Shit, the guy must have an enchanted watch or something. Nunzio only hoped the spell hadn't broken in the collision. He didn't have time to haggle fault and compensation right now.

"Excuse me, son," the preacher drawled, brushing off his front with white-gloved hands and straightening his wide-brimmed hat. "But you ought to watch where you're going."

"Sorry about that," Nunzio said. He ducked around the man. "Kind of in a hurry."

He made it the rest of the way without further incident. He stepped out into the lobby, edging out of the stairwell traffic while he got his breath back. That's when he spotted his Guild contact, and he groaned aloud.

Lolanna Solang was easy to spot. It was also easy to see why his landlady had mistaken her for a male. She stood beside the check-in desk, six and a half feet of brooding, muscular disapproval. Her age was impossible to pinpoint, lines weathered into her tan face, but her brown buzz cut showed no trace of gray. The metal patch stapled into the scar tissue over her left eye dispelled any notion that she was a woman who'd dye her hair for vanity's sake, to say nothing of the shapeless, hardened-leather body armor that encased her like a carapace. Twin swords poked up over either broad shoulder, and a belt of grenades encircled her waist.

Of course he'd get Lolanna as his proctor. She was highly thought of in the Guild as a go-to lady when you needed brawn, brains, and brisk efficiency all in one rigidly humorless package. Nunzio wondered if it'd be worth the rescheduling fee if he claimed illness. There was a chance he could get another

proctor. A pretty slim chance, though. There were many other Guild members certified for the job in this sector, but only a precious few that could work with him—or more accurately, his ability. Or, even *more* accurately, his disability.

While he dithered, Lolanna spotted *him* and made the whole internal debate moot when she took purposeful strides in his direction. She didn't have to duck around anyone. People got out of Lolanna's way long before they'd ever truly been in it.

"Hunter Arquette," she greeted icily when she drew near. The frown lines around her mouth deepened. "You are late. Points are deducted for tardiness."

"My apologies, Proctor Solang," Nunzio said, trying to soothe her with formality. "My alarm clock broke."

"We shall begin without further delay," she told him, no sign of thawing in her tone.

She drew a small, round device from her belt and hit a recessed button in its bronze casing. The bauble sprang into action, zipping up in the air with a faint hum to hover just over their heads. A slot opened, showing the lens of the recording drone's camera.

Lolanna snapped her fingers to get the thing to focus on her and then began to narrate. "This is an official performance evaluation for the renewal of bounty hunter license rating X-d6 for Member 769, Nunzio Arquette of Splinterpoint Mercenaries' Guild, Sector 31. I, Member 346, Lolanna Solang, bounty hunter license rating X-d4, will be acting as proctor. Let the official record show that Member 769 is twenty minutes late for the evaluation, resulting in a five-point deduction from the overall score."

Nunzio sighed. He should have just rescheduled.

"Now I commence the evaluation," Lolanna said, and the drone rose a little higher to include them both in the shot. She instructed flatly, "Hunter Arquette, choose an assignment from a Guild-approved message space."

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Nunzio nodded and led the way out of the busy lobby and onto the busier street.

Splinterpoint was a bizarre city. Gleaming spires of space-age materials jutted up next to sprawling stone ziggurats, which in turn were abutted by tiny beehive dwellings, soaring pagodas, cyclopean cathedrals, and thatched cottages. And it went on like that, in every direction, forever. The

Cartographers' Guild was always asking for more adventurous souls to go and map the endless maze of streets, always asking because the few returnees from the frontiers of the known city would come back to report the discovery of *more* city.

Here and there were buildings that would look almost normal in the average American city back on Earth, even if they were generally somehow askew, either vaguely antique or vaguely futuristic, or like his apartment building, a mixture of both. The neon sign out front that proclaimed it to be Le Chateau Florida would not have looked out of place in Miami of the 1920s, if the 1920s had had the unreliable steam-powered technology that accounted for half of Vorkra's perpetually foul temper. Of course, it looked incredibly out of place *here*, next to something that could only be describe as a space hacienda and across the street from an entirely metallic hexagonal structure whose main feature was the deeply etched streaks of rust and corrosion.

But there also seemed to be an odd sympathy between buildings, as well, sometimes more than one of a similar style clustered in little neighborhoods. Le Chateau Florida had one such neighbor, a tower that might have once been taller than the hotel's eight stories, but it was falling in on itself slowly, floor by floor. Nunzio's own tiny window had a lovely view of its crumbling brick wall.

Despite the lack of structural integrity, there were several businesses staked out on the lower floors, the most successful being a no-close bar called Cream, which catered to Humans and other humanoid species.

With a name like that, of course it had to be a gay bar. Had his situation been a bit less bleak, Nunzio might have called it a home away from home, except he really didn't go out for fun anymore. There wasn't much point to it, ever since the Burrito Incident.

The important part was that, like most bars, taverns, and pubs in Splinterpoint, it had Guild-approved boards for posting jobs for just about every guild there was. Pretty much the only reason he ever went into Cream was to check the listings, and once in a blue moon—which, given the changeable Splinterpoignant sky, happened more often than one would think—he'd have a drink after a tough job. He'd probably need one after a day spent with the Buzz-cut Buzzkill.

Twin white suns blazed down on the city today, baking the packed yellow dirt of the road, and eliminating any possible shade as Nunzio made his way to the bar. The masses of Splinterpoint were just as varied as the buildings. They tended to gravitate toward familiar surroundings, or at least places designed for

their body types. The population of Sector 31 was predominately humanoid, give or take a few pairs of limbs, and most were of a multiversal-average medium height. That was where the similarities ended, with skin tones varying to every shade of the rainbow, and just as much fur, feather, and scales on display. It wasn't more or less horrifying than the average comic book convention.

Now that he wasn't in such a rush, he resumed his usual careful maneuvering that ensured he wouldn't so much as brush against any random stranger. Scratch that; he was even more careful than usual because of the recording drone. The Guildmasters who'd be watching the replay later could be really fussy over what constituted an abuse of abilities, and he'd hate to lose his badge over an accident like he'd had with the preacher man this morning.

Of course, given the population density in this area, this resulted in some interesting contortions to avoid collisions, a couple tedious pauses while he waited for large groups to pass, and a bemused proctor with a long-suffering expression. Lolanna didn't say anything about the slow progress, though, and that was fine by Nunzio.

They made it to the bar without trouble. The interior was dimly lit, the dance floor fairly deserted except for the lackluster go-go boys on the day shift, and only a handful of patrons lounged on the stools by the bar. The lizardman behind the counter polished some tumblers with a clean towel, his chameleonesque eyes splitting his attention between the served customers and the door. Nunzio waved vaguely before walking toward the Mercenaries' Guild's board, tucked in a corner by the jukebot.

"Good day, sir!" cried the jukebot as he passed by, its multicolored lights whirling. "Four songs for just one credit! We have hits from twelve major dimensions and their minor iterations!"

"No, thanks," Nunzio said, ducking around the clunky old thing to look at the postings. From his few pleasure jaunts to the bar, he already knew they didn't have any music from his Earth.

"Good day, madam!" the jukebot tried again when Lolanna followed.

She cut off its cheerful spiel with a curt, "I prefer silence." The jukebot drooped as it switched into standby mode, its lights dimming forlornly.

"Ouch, you shut him down fast," Nunzio commented mildly. "Can't blame him, though. I mean, not liking music really is kind of a turnoff."

Lolanna showed no sign of either rising to the bait or getting the joke. Yep, today was going to be ever so much fun.

He turned his attention back to the task at hand. The pickings today were sadly slim. There were several older notices tacked to the corkboard, and these he ignored. He didn't want a case that would take five weeks to wrap up. He needed an easy mark that he could snag and be done with before sundown. The newest wanted poster was dated just that morning and looked promising.

“Wanted: Blatt Skroinx,” he read aloud, pointing to the notice so the drone would zoom in on it. “Posted by the Mercurian Guild. Seems he made off with a shipment of volatile alchemical reagents yesterday. They want him alive and able to talk. Fifteen thousand credits.” He whistled softly. “They want him pretty bad, I'd say.”

“With a reward that steep, competition is highly likely. Failure to fulfill the chosen objective will result in a temporary probation as well as another Guild evaluation,” Lolanna stipulated as per protocol. She cocked her head at him. “Are you certain this is the assignment you wish to choose?”

Nunzio studied the flier, noting the list of places the target's known haunts, as well as his features. Blatt was of a bipedal porcine species more akin to warthogs than swine, stood a bowlegged four feet tall, and had a nasty look in his beady eyes.

All in all, he was exactly as Nunzio remembered him. The surprising thing wasn't seeing his face on a wanted poster; it was seeing it associated with a well-executed heist. The guy was a low-grade smuggler of mean intelligence and few connections. Nunzio had only dealt with him a handful of times after his first arrival in Splinterpoint, and he remembered Zin bitching about the pigman's incompetence on each occasion.

Smugglers and thieves kept close company, but the guilds were completely separate. Out of all of them, the crime guilds were the most ruthlessly territorial over their professions. If Blatt had done the deed on his own, the Thieves' Guild would be itching to take their pound of flesh as well. Unless the Thieves' Guild had put him up to it in the first place.

Zinhalte ought to know about it, either way. He also probably knew more about Blatt's few friends, even fewer of whom would be the sort to harbor someone who had pissed off the Mercurians, the cultish alchemists notorious for both grudges and explosions.

Nunzio grimaced. Zin didn't owe him any favors. He might not be able to help, either, if it was something the Thieves' Guild had green-lit. But none of the rest of the contracts on the board were likely to be as easy, fast, or lucrative.

"Yes," he said finally, taking the flier and pocketing it. "Blatt Skroinx is my target."

Chapter Two

The best way to get a hold of Zinchalte was to call him from an unknown comm-unit. The thief screened his comms, and there was no way of knowing who he was avoiding on any particular day. Well, Nunzio knew *he* was probably perpetually on Zin's direct-to-message list, but he had never tested it out since they'd parted ways. However, Zin had a fairly extensive network of informants who for obvious reasons had no wish to associate their personal comm-units with that of an up-and-comer in the Thieves' Guild, and an unexpected call from an unfamiliar source was pretty much guaranteed to get Zin's attention.

Some enterprising member of the Communications Guild had established a pay-comm outpost several blocks to the south. It was to this dubious installation that Nunzio led his dour proctor. The outpost itself reminded Nunzio of an automated gas station from Earth without the convenience store, and instead of fuel pumps, there were a couple dozen tall, silver-sheened egg chairs set up beneath a dome-shaped transmitter. A low plasma fence kept out the riffraff. A lipless, whey-faced being with three milky, lidless, pupil-less eyes manned the tollbooth.

"Welcome to Comm-As-You-Are Transmission Outpost," the pasty attendant greeted with the bored tone of someone who knew hir job should actually be performed by a robot, but needed the paycheck anyway. The name tag clipped to hir yellow uniform vest proclaimed 'HI MY NAME IS Mxoawimsz.'

"I need to place a call," Nunzio said.

"Local calls are three credits for the first five minutes, one credit for each additional minute. Interdimensional calls are ten credits for the first minute and five for each additional. Calls for masturbatory purposes are strictly prohibited," Mxoawimsz said, pausing in hir recitation to give Nunzio the hairy eyeball, as if he fit some kind of wanker profile. Then zhe looked between him and Lolanna, sniffed, and went on. "Only one being allowed in the unit at a time. Damaging or tampering with the equipment will result in fines up to and including limbs and/or internal organs, enforced by the Guild of Amputators, Vivisectionists, and Haruspices. Does the customer wish to posit any queries at this time?"

“What’s ‘haruspices’ mean?” he asked. “I mean, I get the gist, but specifically.”

“Questions irrelevant to the transaction are outside the purview of this office,” the alien said unhelpfully. And seriously, ‘purview of this office’ was pretty pretentious coming from a peon who monitored payphones for perverts while wearing a yellow vest and name tag.

“I still need to place a call. Local.” He put his credit card on the counter.

Mxoawimsz swiped it, handed it back, and raised the yellow-and-black striped bar to allow him into the outpost. “Unit five, second row on the left. Thank you for choosing Comm-As-You-Are.”

About time. Christ, payphones back home were never this big of a hassle.

“I shall wait here,” Lolanna informed Nunzio. “The drone will accompany you, however.”

Nunzio rolled his eyes behind his sunglasses. The drone hummed as it followed him into the egg chair. The interior was smooth black polymer for easy decontamination, the seat wide enough for four or five Humans. Nunzio plunked himself down and the drone hovered beside his head. He shooed it up higher, where it wouldn’t be seen by the camera, tilted the adjustable screen away from its prying eye, and then entered Zin’s contact into the comm-unit. A privacy field sprang up in the entryway as the system made the connection.

Zinchalte picked up on the third ring. The dark screen resolved into the alien’s familiar fine-boned features. He was shown from the waist up, and he was clearly lying in his opulent bed, not a stitch of clothing on what was visible of his svelte form. Zin was a Twink, a monogendered species quite like the willowiest Human males in almost every respect, save the periwinkle-blue skin, silvery hair shaded in various pastel tints, and jewel-toned, catlike eyes. His were a deep, luminous sapphire. They widened when he saw Nunzio, and the slit pupils dilated fractionally.

“Well, this *is* a surprise,” Zin said, his mellow tenor purring out of the recessed speakers. He brushed chin-length, faintly pink locks away from his face. “Nunzio Arquette. I knew you weren’t dead yet.”

“Mornin’, starshine. No, not dead yet. Not interrupting anything, I hope,” Nunzio said and meant it. Twinks had a very loose set of social mores. He knew for a fact that Zin wouldn’t end either call or any hanky-panky that might occur during their conversation.

“Just my beauty sleep,” Zin said with a yawn. He stretched, knowing full well how to appeal to the camera. Nunzio tried not to pay too much attention to the tempting display. “It has been a long time, though, hasn’t it? I thought you’d lost my contact.”

Nunzio shrugged. “I’ve been keeping busy.”

“The Merc Guild does keep their members hopping. Have you been offplane much?”

Nunzio didn’t see the point in lying. Zin had probably been keeping tabs on him all this time, anyway, the paranoid bastard. Or maybe Nunzio was the paranoid one. Whatever.

“No,” he said. “We’re not all insanely rich enough to afford our own personal diport, and hell if I’m depending on public transport for work. Besides, it’s a pain in the ass to comply with the magic and tech restrictions for every little backworld dimension.”

“I wouldn’t think you’d have to worry about the magic restrictions as much,” Zinchalte mused.

Nunzio’s forced a smile. “You’d be surprised how few magic-based worlds want a guy like me coming in to mess with their shit.”

“So you still haven’t got the hang of that part, then.”

He shook his head. Zin had helped him quite a lot after the Burrito Incident, but certain aspects of his disability just refused to be harnessed.

“Not to rehash an old argument, but you’re letting half your talent go to waste.” Zin sighed as he *totally* began to rehash an old argument.

“It’s not a waste if it doesn’t do anybody any good.”

“It *has* saved your life a few times,” Zin said archly. “Who says it doesn’t do any good?”

“Well, they don’t *say* it doesn’t do them any good,” Nunzio replied, “but mostly because they’re dead.”

Zin rolled his eyes. “Oh, come on. That was a long time ago. Is it *really* still a sore subject?”

Of course it was. Zin had never understood why it affected Nunzio so badly. The thief had a lifetime Splinterpoint resident’s view of death and destruction, which was somewhere between blasé and ruthless. Not to mention he had the

added benefit of not seeing what exactly had happened in that tomb. Nunzio still had nightmares about the glittering piles of platinum, the scent of dust and blood, the inhuman screams echoing in his ears.

Currently, an inhuman whine crept into his perception. Behind his sunglasses, Nunzio glanced over and saw the spheroid little drone hovering nearer and nearer, trying to edge into a position to get a view of the screen. Careful not to draw attention to the movement, he batted it back with one hand. The little bot spun like a top for a moment before woozily drifting up toward the apex of the egg.

“Not to rehash an old argument,” Nunzio repeated with a mocking edge, “it’s none of your business. Something else might be, though. I *did* have a reason for waking you at the crack of noon.”

Zin did not look surprised. He sighed again, this time with put-upon weariness. “So it’s business, not pleasure. How dull. What kind of business is it?”

He licked his lips and leaned forward. Here went nothing. “I need some information.”

“Oh? As a favor?”

There was a hook buried in the mild question. Nunzio knew better than to fall into such an obvious trap. There were no true favors in Splinterpoint, only a complex system of debt. Nunzio had learned that the hard way, from Zin himself, and he didn’t make the same mistake twice.

“As an official transaction with a bounty hunter. I’ll keep you anonymous, of course.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the drone creeping closer again. He tilted the screen further away.

“Can you afford me?” Zin teased, smiling with his full, blue lips and lowering his thick, pale eyelashes in a sultry smolder. If Zin wanted to banter, it meant he was in a charitable mood. This could be easier than anticipated.

Nunzio smirked, feeling a bit hollow and hoping it didn’t show. “Oh, I think so. From the look of you, you’re still pretty cheap.”

Zin gave a soft, musical chuckle and winked at him. “Only because I give you a discount, for old times’ sake. What do you want to know?”

“Everything you got on Blatt Skroinx. Particularly anywhere you think he might go to ground when he’s on the run.”

“You’re after that old hog?” Zin perked up as much as one could when they refused to make the effort to actually rise.

“Yep. How cheap can you go, for old times’ sake?” Nunzio had to be very careful not to add any bitter sarcasm to the phrase.

The alien made a show of biting his lip in consideration. “Welllllll,” he drawled slowly, “considering his poor performance in the past, I hardly owe him any secrecy. Gimme a cut of the reward if you get him. Say... twenty percent?”

Nunzio felt his eyebrows rise, but he quickly schooled his expression. “And that’s supposed to be cheap? Old times must not count for much. Five.”

“The past is gone, hon, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have to pay it off,” Zin replied. “And you know I don’t get out of bed for five.”

“Didn’t see you getting out of bed for twenty, either.”

“If you were here, I doubt I’d get out of bed at all.” Zin wagged his eyebrows. “But it’s so good to see your face first thing in the morning, I’ll settle for eighteen.”

“That’s highway robbery.”

“Who *do* you think you’re talking to?”

Zin loved to haggle as much as he loved to banter, so they could have dickered for quite some time. But Nunzio was on a time table, albeit one of his own making. He was eager to find the target and have done, and he also didn’t like talking to Zin, especially with so much familiar territory on display. He settled as fast as his pride would allow, on the only moderately outrageous fee of twelve percent.

“And not to demean your skills, honey, but if you don’t catch him you’ll still owe me,” Zin added as they wrapped up.

Nunzio hesitated. “Owe you what?”

Zin gave a wide, inviting smile. “Dinner. Somewhere nice, too, not at any of those greasy spoons you like. It’s been a long time, Nunzio. We ought to catch up. And afterward, well, who knows what we might get up to?” He raised one silky shoulder in a careless shrug.

How a shrug could convey so much sexual promise, Nunzio would never understand. He swallowed with his throat suddenly a bit too dry. His body didn’t care about all the very good reasons Nunzio and Zin had parted ways. It

just remembered in a deep, Pavlovian way how nicely Zinchalte's body complimented it, and how often those compliments had been bestowed. It didn't help that Zin had been his last lover before his disability slammed the door on his sex life entirely.

Old habits died hard, but so would Nunzio, because there was no way Zin—or anyone, for that matter—would ever touch him again. Insinuations aside, the radio silence between them all this time had gone both ways. As far as he was concerned, it would resume when he ended this call. He was going to catch Blatt, pay Zin off, and then continue to pretend the Twink didn't exist.

"Deal," he agreed. He batted the persistent little drone away from the screen again. "So do tell about dear, old Blatt. I'm paying by the minute here, you know."

"Somehow, I get the feeling you say that a lot. All right, all right," Zin placated when he saw Nunzio bridle at the barb. "Down to business. Blatt has the social appeal of an amoeba and about the same intelligence. I can't picture any of his usual crew standing by him in a pinch. If it came to trouble, he'd probably hole up with his wife."

"He's *married*?" The shock was completely unfeigned. Blatt was a pig, not only biologically but in every figurative sense as well. That someone had married the bastard was almost as unbelievable as the solo heist he had purportedly accomplished.

"Yes," Zin said with relish, because he loved juicy gossip almost as much as he loved stealing shit and playing head games. "I think it was an arranged marriage. They're usually quite distant with each other, and you can see why—I mean, just look at the guy. And his wife's his exact opposite. She's a decent business-sow and has done everything she can to hide their connection."

"Can't say I blame her. But if they're estranged, why would he go to her for help? Even if he did, why would she help him?"

Zin shrugged. "It's a cultural thing, all honor and blood oaths and whatever, you know. She'd have to help him, whether she wanted to or not, or risk a feud between their houses back in their home dimension."

"Huh. Sucks for her," Nunzio said. "Where can I find her?"

"She runs a specialty lingerie shop on Yantero Road. Terrible stuff, wouldn't be caught dead in it myself. Chafes, you know."

"Not really. Lingerie isn't my thing."

The sound of a door opening came clearly across the line. Zinchalte didn't look toward whoever had just walked in offscreen, but he did finally sit up. "I'll message you the rest. But breakfast has just arrived, and I'm *famished*."

The tone was familiar enough, though definitely not what Zin sounded like when he wanted food.

"Don't get distracted. Get me that shop's address first thing. I can't be the only one after this guy."

"Sure thing, hon. Good hunting, byyyee!" Zin caroled and ended the call.

The privacy field vanished, and Nunzio took a moment to massage his temples. The drone hummed, drifting in front of him to look at the darkened screen. When it realized the thing had gone blank, the hum took on a faintly frustrated buzz, and it whirled to zoom in on his face.

"Don't give me that look. Anonymous contacts are allowed under the Guild Charter, section 7, paragraph 23, subparagraph H."

The drone zoomed out and spun aimlessly, looking for something more interesting to film. Nunzio sighed. His wrist-comm chimed, and he hit the projection button. It was Zin's info, sent from an untraceable comm, and the thief was as good as his word. The holographic file displayed all the dirt on Blatt, starting with the address of his wife, Gronl Skroinx.

When he saw the name of the shop, Nunzio blinked and grinned. "Right. Looks like we're going *shopping*."

Once he'd collected his proctor, they made their way to a busier street to flag down a taxi. The lifeforms of the city teemed around them, but one glance at Lolanna and the small arsenal visible on her person kept the beggars and pickpockets at bay. It took a while to find a tech-powered cab, and she seemed to grow more impatient with him, manifesting in heavy sighs every few minutes, like she was an in-law finding fault with his housekeeping habits. Nothing he could do about it, though, so he continued to try and flag down anything from hovercar to electro-rickshaw. Finally, an ancient-looking dogcart pulled up, pulled by one enormous black dog, and no driver.

"Hey, Bub, need a lift?" the dog growled through six-inch fangs. He had blazing red eyes, and the saliva that drooled from his jaws sizzled when it hit the asphalt, leaving little smoking craters.

“Depends. You got enchantments on this thing anywhere?” Nunzio asked, eyeing the contraption dubiously. If magic wasn’t involved, he had no idea how the thing kept from falling apart.

“Nah, I get hex-hives. Same for you?” the cabbie asked, not without sympathy.

“Yeah,” Nunzio lied because it was easier and none of the dog’s business.

“Hop in. Where you headed?”

Nunzio gave him the address and settled in. Lolanna joined him, folding her lanky body into the too-small space provided by the seat.

The cabbie craned his neck over his shoulder. “Say, folks, does one of you wanna use those opposable thumbs to crank the radio? Under the seat. My show’s up next.”

He and his thumbs obligingly found the knobs and turned up the volume. The sound of multiversal static was somehow more colorful than the regular kind, but over the pop and crackle, a program came in reasonably well.

—and sponsored by the Holy Roller Derby. Buy tickets at the Bay Falls Roller Arena this Sunday, Sunday, Sunday. Now, it’s time again, listeners, to make sure that you’re keeping right with the Holy Edicts. We live in a sinful world, and it’s easy to get beguiled by—

Ugh, religious talk radio. Another multiversal constant, unfortunately; it turned out that almost every religion there was thought it was *The Religion*. At least Splinterpoint’s various religious guilds mostly kept the holy wars to themselves. The rest of the city held fast and true to the Tolerance Aphorism, which suited most of the community just fine. If any particularly zealous group got out of hand with their conversion tactics, they brought down the wrath of the entire secular majority, which included all the heavy hitters, from the mercenaries to magic-users to mad scientists. Nothing like the epic defeat of a bunch of true believers to keep the rest of the bloodthirsty proselytizers in line.

Which unfortunately didn’t preclude the Communications Guild from broadcasting crap like *this*.

To compound his annoyance, the ride would be longer than it would’ve been had they managed to get a hovercar. The things he put up with in order not to be inundated in a crowd. It was just stressful, never knowing when a magic spell might pop up out of nowhere, until he’d already walked right through it.

At least his cabbie was sensitive to such things as well, and Nunzio didn't even have to ask that he take them on an only slightly more circuitous route to avoid driving through Witches' Row.

Though, even if it meant tolerating the cabbie's questionable taste, the added time also gave Nunzio the chance to speak to Lolanna.

"So, there's this shop. Where we're going, you know," he said as nonchalantly as Humanly possible. Lolanna turned to look at him, brows furrowing. He plowed ahead, "I'd hate for you to feel bored, waiting for me while I case the joint and look for Blatt. If you want to take time to look around, try some stuff on, don't be shy on my account."

"I am here to monitor your actions, Hunter Arquette, not browse the wares," she told him.

"Yeah, I know. But you're a capable woman, and I know that hardware you have right there," he indicated the steel eyepatch, "allows you to hack into video feeds. Like, say, the one from our little bird here." He nodded at the drone that was humming loudly as its tiny propulsion system kept up with the pace of the quadrupedal cabbie. "You can monitor my actions through it, can't you? Isn't that why you sent it into the comm-unit with me?"

She looked away briefly, and he knew he'd surmised correctly.

"This is fact," she allowed. "What is your point?"

"I think my hunt might be better served if you stood back from the hands-on proctoring, is all," he said carefully.

It didn't work at all. Her back stiffened and her shoulders squared. "You cannot be suggesting that I shirk my duty."

"No! No, no, no, of course not," Nunzio said, waving his hands for emphasis. For the benefit of the drone, he added loudly, "That is, of course, far out of regulations, and I would *never* ask you to, um, shirk anything."

"Good. I take my duties to the Guild quite seriously."

"I know you do," Nunzio agreed and tried not to sound as aggrieved by this fact as he felt. "You're... very honorable."

This seemed to smooth her feathers, and she gave a sharp nod. "Then the matter is settled."

It wasn't, but he had to take a moment to collect himself for another round.

“—*So you see, the cleansing power of pain can purify your soul. If you have trespassed against the Edicts today—and I know you have, you dirty little liars—go to your stove, turn the burner on, and put your hand—*”

Loudly, so he wouldn't have to hear the absolutely *terrible* spiritual advice, Nunzio tried again.

“All I'm saying is that this part of the snag requires a bit more subtlety. I mean, if Blatt *is* holed up in the shop, he's not going to be standing at the till waiting for the first bounty hunter to come along and bust him. It'll be hard enough to sneak into any areas he might be hiding to begin with, much less with a... statuesque sort such as yourself, doing your duty by standing a few feet from me and not assisting me in any way.”

“I cannot interfere with your hunt,” Lolanna insisted firmly.

“Yeah, that's what I'm saying. It works both ways, doesn't it? You can't help me, but if your physical presence actually *hinders* me, how is that supposed to be a fair evaluation?” Nunzio pointed at the drone again. “It's not dereliction of duty, either, because you can still keep your eye on me, even if you're not there. You see me put a toe out of line, you call the whole thing off.”

The mercenary woman narrowed her eye at him. Grudgingly, she said, “Your logic is sound, Hunter Arquette. As Guild Proctor, I shall allow this.”

Nunzio sighed his relief as quietly as he could. “Wonderful. Thank you, Proctor Solang.”

Chapter Three

Yantero Road was pretty bland for Splinterpoint, most of it appearing to have been some kind of massive strip mall in a previous life, if strip malls could be made of a combination of green adobe-like material with transparent red honeycomb-things for windows. He told the cabbie to stop half a block before they reached the shop.

They got out and the dog extended his foreleg in a gesture that looked very much like the ‘shake hands’ trick Humans taught their pets back on Earth. Nunzio was struck by sudden homesickness for a moment, but then he noticed the cybernetically implanted card reader in the mutt’s forearm.

“That’ll be thirty credits,” the cabbie growled.

“Right.” Nunzio swiped his card and entered in a generous tip. The ride had been completely magic-free. Despite the awful radio show he’d had to endure, he felt like throwing the guy a bone. The hellhound gave a tongue-lolling grin and wagged his tail enthusiastically. Nunzio pulled away with alacrity to avoid the beast’s acidic drool.

He turned toward Lolanna as the cab drove off, only to find that she’d taken up a stern parade-rest stance, glowering cycloppically at the street, her back to the shopfronts. The city was less crowded in this area, it being more high rent, and the two of them stuck out like sore thumbs. People were already starting to stare uneasily.

“What are you doing?” he asked out of the corner of his mouth.

“I am waiting for you to finish your business here,” Lolanna said.

“Yeah, well, can’t you at least wait inside the shop? Preferably without acting like you’re waiting for a fight to break out.”

Lolanna set her jaw. “I know you wish for me to distract the staff by pretending to be a customer. I will not assist you in such a manner.”

Dang, she’d cottoned on. So much for that, then.

“I don’t expect you to,” he said in an innocent tone that she obviously would not believe.

“You are trying my patience,” she warned severely. The drone ruined the effect of her impressive scowl when it drifted between them to zoom in on it closely.

“You don’t even have to *talk* to the staff. Christ, just, you know, go inside so you’re not a walking red flag.”

“The Honor Code requires—”

“Yeah, I know,” Nunzio interrupted. “But there’s a time and place for the declaration of challenge. I know what I’m doing here. So, please, just go inside and wait for me.”

Lolanna huffed and began to walk up the street without responding. Taking this as the best he was going to get, Nunzio trailed after her. He pointed out the storefront before they reached it.

“That one, right there. I’m going to find the back door.”

“As expected from a man of your tastes,” Lolanna muttered under her breath.

Nunzio blinked, then grinned. “Was that a joke? Seriously?”

She gave him a quelling look, but the smallest tilt to her lips gave her away. The mild mirth faded quickly, replaced by her usual chilly formality. “Hunter Arquette, I will be paying close attention to your progress. You have a penchant for collateral damage that the Guild finds... taxing. Given the nature of the d6 limitation of your license, they are aware that your ability is to blame for most of the incidents on your record. However, you would do well to take strenuous precautions regarding contact-triggered side-effects.”

“I always do,” Nunzio told her, his smile fading. Hadn’t she been paying attention all day?

He looked up to see a brief flicker of sympathy in her eye, but she simply nodded in dismissal. “Good hunting. I shall wait inside the building.”

Nunzio hustled toward the gap between the storefronts and then poked his head around the corner to see Lolanna’s reaction when she looked through the big red windows to the display. She stopped dead with her hand on the door handle, pausing for a good five seconds before she turned toward him and glared balefully.

Gronl Skroinx owned and operated a lingerie store called Daisy Chains, which specialized in under-armor of a risqué nature, and catered to every gender and species that showed a passing interest. Zin’s info had included the shop’s digital catalog; the merchandise looked like the wet dreams of Luis Royo and Boris Vallejo had taken acid and then gone to the nearest forge to

consummate their undying love of iron wedgies. Nunzio had no idea what kind of things were on display for passersby, but even at this distance, he could see the flush crawling up Lolanna's corded neck to settle deeply on her cheeks.

He ducked back around the corner of the building and smothered his shit-eating grin behind his hand so the drone—and thus, Lolanna herself—couldn't see. He didn't want her getting her apparently-not-chain-mail knickers in a twist and deciding he was too much of an asshole to bother humoring him by going inside the store. He waited until he heard the door open with a chime before heading off down the alley.

The suns had passed their peak, leaving the narrow passage between buildings in dim shade. A soft breeze wafted the odor of the trash receptacles softly reeking in the heat of the afternoon. There weren't any homeless beings here; the Guild of Beggars, Vagrants, and Hobos had agreements with the Merchants' Guild to keep the unsightly poor out of the ritzier retail districts. Had there been any, Nunzio might've been able to question them about Blatt, but the lack didn't trouble him overmuch. It made sneaking around a lot cheaper without having to bribe anyone's silence. He rounded the corner and ducked behind a trash bin.

The back of the shop was unremarkable, no windows and a single large, hexagonal red door with the words 'DELIVERIES ONLY' painted onto it, which overlooked a small patio and a larger alley. There weren't any overt security devices aside from a small black panel over the door, where likely a camera or scry-ward focus was housed. Nunzio gave a tight-lipped smile. Some shops took theft deterrents to a whole different level, but it seemed Gronl either paid enough protection insurance to the Thieves' Guild not to worry, or was subtler than most.

To test which it was, Nunzio caught the drone as it hummed next to his ear, ignoring its surprised buzz and chucking it like a baseball. It hurdled into the middle of the patio before its propulsion unit managed to stop its sudden momentum. It hovered in the open a moment, disoriented, before making a beeline back to his side. It circled him once before hovering right in his face, zooming in accusatorily.

"Hey, sorry, just testing a theory," he whispered to it. "Guild Charter, section 4, paragraph 3, subparagraph D, using available materials to establish a course of action without incurring bodily harm."

Nothing had reacted to the drone's presence with lasers or fireballs. Satisfied that he wasn't going to be struck dead by simply venturing out of his

hiding place, he crept out with his back to the wall and one hand on the butt of his nerve disruptor.

Once he was underneath the innocuous black panel over the door, he raised his free hand. The entrance was actually fairly short, so he didn't have to reach very high. His hand tingled when he did; it was a scry-ward focus, all right. At least he didn't need to worry about Blatt watching a vid feed of this and knowing his doom was poking around outside. He touched the dark panel directly.

He felt the magic inside snap and vanish, prickling tingles running through his hand. He bit back a curse, shaking his fingers out even as he turned his attention to the door itself. There was a small red panel inlaid in the wall next to it, awaiting an authorization code to open the door. He debated just breaking it like he had the scry-ward, but that might just jam the door shut.

For this task, he had a neat little gadget in one of his many coat pockets. He dug the code bug out and pressed it to the input pad. Its shiny bronze legs latched on and dug in with wires, and in a few seconds, the panel flickered green. Nunzio stowed the code bug, then hit the button to open the door.

The door began to rise like a garage door, sections rattling noisily.

Nunzio dropped down and looked around the corner of the doorway. The immediate area beyond appeared deserted, metal shelving units filled with wooden crates blocking the view of much of the backroom. He rolled under the door and squeezed himself between two stacks of crates and into the gap behind them, back against an overfull shelf. The drone followed him more slowly, and he got the feeling it was doing it out of revenge for the baseball stunt.

With a heavy clank, the door finally came to a gaping rest. Nunzio waited with his heart hammering. The store wasn't that large. Anyone in the vicinity had to have heard the door go up.

Sure enough, someone came to investigate the disturbance, footfalls echoing on the tile floor. Nunzio peaked cautiously around the crates, expecting Gronl or perhaps Blatt himself.

It was neither. Nunzio's breath caught despite himself.

The man, for all appearances Human, was tall, pale, and well-muscled all over, a fact emphasized by the chain mail banana-hammock that did very little to preserve the man's modesty, but Nunzio supposed that was the point. After a moment he finally dragged his eyes away from the glittering metal pouch

nestled between long, lean thighs and up a hairless abdomen and chest that couldn't have been sculpted any more perfectly by Michelangelo, to broad, sinewy shoulders, and finally to a handsome face with a high forehead and patrician nose. Short black hair made him seem even paler, and eyes as gray and sharp as a knife's blade peered in confusion at the open door.

The soft hum of the drone seemed very loud, and Nunzio put his hand on it to muffle the sound, careful not to block the camera. He held his own breath as the man lingered and stepped outside to the deserted alley, having to duck to get under the low frame of the door. The view of the man's back and backside was just as appealing as the rest of him.

Even as Nunzio allowed himself a good ogle, he noted that the man didn't move with a mere model's self-conscious posturing, but with the controlled motions of a fighter. Multipurpose hired muscle, then. Nunzio silently drew his nerve disruptor and set it to stun. He had no idea if he could take the guy in a fair fight, so if it came to that, he wasn't about to make it fair.

"What are you doing, you worthless ape?"

The guttural and oddly nasal shout came from the backroom, and Nunzio almost jumped. He hadn't heard anyone approach, and he mentally cursed himself for getting so distracted. The man outside turned back with a grimace, looking toward the speaker, who remained out of Nunzio's line of sight.

"Nothing, sir," the employee said, nothing meek in his baritone voice.

"Trying to run out on my wife?" accused the other, and Nunzio perked up. "You signed an indenture contract, didn't you? You an oathbreaker? You some honorless whorson who'd do a runner on the sow who took you in, fed you, clothed you?"

The questions were punctuated with the clop of hooved feet taking belligerent steps closer. Finally the potbellied, tusked Blatt Skroinx came to stand almost directly in front of the narrow view provided by Nunzio's hiding place. He hadn't changed much since the last time Nunzio had seen him, perhaps a bit heavier, a bit angrier, the greenish-brown bristly fur that coated him a bit mangier. The man seemed as unimpressed by the hog as he himself; the look on his face blanked even as disgust clearly shone in his striking eyes.

"No, sir."

"Why's the door open, then? Why aren't you out on the sales floor, warbling for the customers?"

Blatt was so close that Nunzio could literally smell him. Whoever said that pigs were clean animals by nature obviously had never caught a whiff of this one. The eagerness to get this snag over and done warred with his good sense. Blatt's back was to him, which was the only thing that kept him safe from a disruptor bolt. While mostly Nunzio appreciated the Mercenaries' Guild's Honor Code, sometimes it was idiotically inconvenient. He couldn't help the impatient fidget, but froze when he saw the Human's eyes dart past Blatt's shoulder to his hiding place.

Fuck, the dude had spotted him. Had to have. Nunzio tensed and readied himself for the declaration of challenge that had to precede an attack.

"It was too cold back here," was all the man said. He gestured to his chain mail package. "Men react to such things in a way that would not compliment Lady Gronl's workmanship."

"I have never noticed a problem with the cold," Blatt sneered suspiciously.

"No, I suppose in your case such a small change would hardly make a difference."

Disbelieving, Nunzio bit his lip hard to keep from giving a bark of laughter at the cheap dig. Blatt snorted his fury, but before he could retort in actual words, there came the sound of a swinging door and rapid approach.

"What is taking so long, Kol'daar?" another grunting voice that closely paralleled Blatt's demanded loudly. It could only be Gronl. She drew nearer, and from the faint jingling and creaking, he could only guess that she, too, was wearing one of her creations.

"Wife, your peon has offered me insult!" Blatt squealed, turning to address Gronl, who remained out of Nunzio's narrow field of vision. "I won't be disrespected in my own home."

"Then it's a good thing that this is *my* home, and I don't care," Gronl replied, sounding harried. "Kol'daar, stop wasting your breath on that swine. There's a lady who can't make up her mind out there; perhaps you can convince her to make a selection. Why's that door open? Never mind, I don't care. Just close it and get out on the floor."

While Blatt sputtered indignantly, the man's eyes flickered infinitesimally toward Nunzio's hiding place before he turned and obeyed. The delivery door rattled shut, and Kol'daar walked away without another word.

Nunzio let out a silent, relieved sigh. He'd thought for sure the jig was up. But it wasn't hard to figure out why the man would have it out for his boss's

awful spouse, if this brief interlude was any gauge of Blatt's behavior since arriving. Perhaps Gronl had even instructed her staff not to interfere should anyone come to collect the bastard. Whatever the reason, Nunzio was grateful. Maybe he'd buy the guy a drink, when this was over.

Blatt blustered, "Gronl—"

"Shut up, Blatt," she cut him off harshly. "You've burdened me with your presence, and there's nothing I can do about that, but I'll be damned if I let you bully the help because you're bored. Kol'daar is much more useful to me than you are. Have you finished oiling the Habatian collection yet? No? Then get back to work."

"But Gronl—"

"Don't you dare start with me. Husband or not, you're lucky I don't comm the Mercurian Guild and collect the reward myself," Gronl threatened darkly. "I don't want to hear another peep out of you until it's done, you hear me?"

"Yes, Gronl," Blatt replied sullenly, even as she marched away without acknowledging him further. His lank tail lashed in impotent anger where it stuck out of his worn trousers, and as soon as the sound of her steps faded, he started to mutter imprecations about both his wife and the Human.

Finally, the two of them were alone. Nunzio could offer his declaration now and try to blast him, but when he tried to ready his disruptor for the shot he jammed his elbow against the corner of a crate that stuck out from the shelf behind him.

Ow, right on the funny bone. Painful tingles seared the nerves all along his forearm. Nunzio winced, throat clenching around his own swallowed curses.

It seemed that Blatt hadn't heard the *thunk* of impact over his own bad temper, because he didn't whirl around or start running. He did, however, stomp away, still bitching. Well, perhaps it was for the best. This hiding spot was obviously not the best place from which to stage an assault. Nunzio let go of the drone to hold his disruptor with both hands, bolstering his weakened grip.

He gave Blatt a head start of few paces before he slunk out. The hog wasn't in sight anymore, but Nunzio could still hear him. Stealthily, he followed the sounds of Blatt's grunts through the cluttered storage space. Ahead, Blatt's footsteps ceased, followed by a wooden squeak and a metallic jangle. Nunzio positioned himself behind a shelf and stole a look around the corner, the drone mimicking him at about chest height.

Blatt sat on a stool before a workbench littered with what appeared to be a series of metallic bookmarks on thin chains, to which he was applying a strong-smelling oil and buffing with a cloth. Nunzio had no idea what kind of anatomy it had been designed to cover, but that was hardly important. Blatt appeared unarmed, though he could probably throw just about any of the tools or armor at him. A simple swinging door about five meters from the workbench could only lead to the shop proper. The layout of the shelving units and stacks of crates made it pretty much impossible to circle around to an angle to cut off that route of escape.

Nunzio would just have to stun Blatt quickly so he couldn't make a bolt for it. He wasn't particularly worried. He took a deep breath, taking careful aim around the shelving. The drone whirred softly, pulling back to get the whole scene in the shot.

In his best badass voice, Nunzio called out, "That's all, Porky. Put your hooves up or I'll blast you into bacon bits."

Chapter Four

The Honor Code was how the Mercenaries' Guild differentiated itself from the Assassins' Guild. As Nunzio wasn't a cold-blooded murderer, he understood the reason for the required declaration. It wasn't honorable to kill someone without giving them a chance to defend themselves. Assassins didn't give warning, mercenaries did. Simple, see?

Simple, even if the declaration of challenge was tantamount to suicide sometimes. But that was 'honor' for you. The trouble with making things a fair fight was that sometimes you lost. If you were lucky, your quarry wasn't a quick draw with any weapon, couldn't kill with a word, gesture, or thought, and didn't have a bomb, doomsday device, or someone in reach to use as a hostage. If you were *really* lucky, sometimes they actually surrendered, but Nunzio had never been that lucky yet.

Blatt, a talentless coward, chose to run. Nunzio fired, the energy pulse cutting the air with a *zzzot* and striking the porcine alien directly in the center of his back. It made Blatt give an earsplitting squeal, but far from stunning him, it seemed to spur him into a more energetic flight. He plowed through the door while Nunzio swore and hastened to follow.

He flung himself out into the store even as he turned up the intensity on his nerve disruptor. God only knew what setting would work on Blatt, and Nunzio couldn't afford to turn the setting up *too* high. That would stop Blatt's heart and respiratory functions, and the Mercurian Guild wanted the bastard alive. If he accidentally killed the target on a live-capture contract, there went not only the reward but also his evaluation and his badge, in one roast-pork swoop.

The first thing Nunzio noticed on the other side of the door was that the store was larger on the inside than outside. While it should have only been about the size of a coffee shop, the interior of Daisy Chains was more about the size of a department store. Aisles stretched off, created and punctuated by racks of gleaming negligees, mannequins of many different species, and glass display cases of bejeweled G-strings and things that Nunzio could only assume were equivalent coverings for alien genitals.

The second thing he noticed was that Blatt was pelting down the aisle ahead of him, headed for the distant, red-tinged light of the entrance.

Nunzio took aim and fired. Blatt squealed, but he kept running.

“Dammit,” Nunzio said, following and turning up his nerve disruptor another notch.

The customers all around the sales floor began to react, some staring, others taking cover, most running for the door. Nunzio kept them in his peripherals. Other mercenaries might not care about collateral casualties, but he didn’t like ruining other people’s days if he wasn’t contracted to for that purpose.

Zzzot. Squeal. Blatt kept running.

“Dammit!” He upped the juice yet again.

Zzzot. Squeal. Nothing. The disruptor ought to work on anything with a nervous system. What was Blatt made out of—jelly?

The only effect the repeated barrage had was to encourage Blatt to finally grasp the tactical concept of cover. He abandoned the straight, wide-open aisle in favor of weaving through the racks. Nunzio followed, dodging the displays and shocked beings that would not have looked out of place as extras in *Heavy Metal*. Barely clad, triple-breasted chicks and gargoyle-men with spiky codpieces alike shrieked and fled.

“Gronl! Wife, our house is under attack!” cried Blatt. Or wheezed loudly between panted breaths; he obviously had spent too long sitting behind the controls of his interdimensional transport, eating nothing but instant foods.

It occurred to Nunzio that he could easily overtake Blatt and tackle him. The next thing that occurred to him was that Blatt could easily gore Nunzio to death with those yellowed tusks. Getting physical was therefore a bad idea. Sighing, he tried one last shot, which was accompanied by another, more desperate shriek and the smell of burning ham, but still Blatt remained mobile.

“For fuck’s sake,” Nunzio growled in frustration. The only settings left on his disruptor were ones designed to kill or leave the victim a drooling vegetable. He holstered it and started patting his pockets.

They were drawing near the fitting rooms, where there was a counter and a cleared space. Blatt was headed for a piglady with an immaculate beehive updo standing beside the counter, who could only be Gronl. She wore something made of gold mesh and leather strips that strained to contain each of the twelve teats all down her front, and she looked less *surprised* by the chase going on than supremely pissed off. Beside her stood Kol’ daar, who held something that resembled an oversized dream catcher without any beads or feathery ornaments, a wide grin on his face as he watched.

Nunzio found the tiny, blunt grapple he was looking for and attached it to the monomolecular wire in his wrist-comm. If he couldn't zap Blatt, he'd just have to hog-tie him.

He took aim again and fired.

And missed, because Blatt had used the seconds Nunzio had spent preparing his attack to yank a rolling rack of chain mail bikinis and hurl it into Nunzio's path. The grapple struck a breast-cup and latched on, and the wire began to retract automatically, drawing the rack directly toward Nunzio at speed.

Nunzio might have dodged, had not several things happened at once.

A series of bright, plucked-string chords chimed, bringing the distinct tingle of magic. It was different from any magic Nunzio had come across before because it wasn't localized. It swelled in the very air, pressing on him on all sides, the buzz of the enchantment not nearly as harsh as usual. If a regular spell felt as sudden and unpleasant as a water balloon to the face, this felt like being gently rolled under and swept along by an ocean wave.

Everything slowed down, the world's tempo running at half speed.

Lolanna drew back the curtain of her changing booth and revealed herself in a diamond-encrusted corset-style breastplate and matching metal panties. The pacing of the event was reminiscent of a coy burlesque show. Of course, a dancer in a burlesque show probably would have shaved her pits and bikini line, and probably wouldn't be scowling death at the audience with her one blazing eye.

The worst part was that whatever magic was at work, while unique in Nunzio's experience, still had no more effect on him than any other sort. Which meant that he was still running full tilt when he got distracted by his proctor's shocking change of clothes. Stupidly, he noted that the burnished steel armor matched her eyepatch.

And that was how Nunzio managed to slam into the rack of lingerie, knocking him and it to the ground.

He was immediately ensnared by various filigree chains. They stung like jellyfish, and he realized with sinking horror that they were all enchanted—or, well, they *had* been.

The music stopped as suddenly as it began, and while Nunzio struggled to get free, he heard a meaty *thwack*, followed by a thud that shook the tiled floor.

"That was a beautiful right hook," Gronl said, impressed.

“My pleasure, Lady Gronl,” came Kol’daar’s smug reply.

Oh, no. Oh, fuck. The bottom dropped out beneath Nunzio’s stomach. He finally shook himself free of the rack and scrambled to his feet. The scene that greeted him was just as bad as he’d feared.

Blatt sprawled on the floor like the multiverse’s ugliest starfish, completely unconscious. Kol’daar stood over him, one hand holding the dream catcher—thing, the other still clenched in a fist, a supremely satisfied look on his face.

Lolanna approached him, her stride made a bit wobbly because of the unaccustomed platform heels strapped to her feet. The drone followed her, circling Kol’daar excitedly. Kol’daar flinched when it got up in his face and then looked beyond them all to Nunzio.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I am Hunter Lolanna Solang of the Mercenaries’ Guild,” his proctor said before Nunzio could muster a response. She produced her badge from her cleavage, and Nunzio wondered why she’d bothered stowing it there while she was only trying on the armor. Gronl gave it a cursory glance and waved it away.

“I am Lady Gronl Skroinx of the Merchants’ Guild,” the proprietress introduced herself, daintily curtsying with her iron-pleated micro-miniskirt. She gestured grandly to the Human beside her. “This is Kol’daar ox Huuf’ta.”

“Kol’daar ox Huuf’ta, you have apprehended Blatt Skroinx, a being wanted by the Mercurian Guild for freelance theft. The reward for this act is fifteen thousand credits.”

Kol’daar stared at her, completely taken aback. “I—What? Reward?”

“To claim the bounty, you must agree to enroll in the Mercenaries’ Guild,” Lolanna informed him. “I can assist you with the process, provided you are not already beholden by oath to any other guild.”

“He’s not part of any guild, nor is he sworn to any private individual,” Gronl interrupted. Kol’daar turned toward her, his jaw dropping. She cocked her head at him and pointed at her husband. “Getting *that* out of my hair squares our debt, dear. Consider your indenture prematurely settled.”

“Lady Gronl,” Kol’daar said, clearly touched by the words.

“Do you wish to proceed?” Lolanna asked briskly.

Kol'daar glanced from his erstwhile employer to Lolanna and back to Nunzio. "I—I would, but I was only trying to help—"

He'd raised his arm to point at Nunzio, exposing his side to Gronl's thick and unsubtle elbow, which effectively cut off his objection by knocking the breath from his lungs. He dropped the dream catcher-thing, which gave a jarring twang. Apparently, that was the source of the music from earlier.

"Of course he wants to proceed," Gronl said hastily. She glanced around at the customers who had gathered in a circle to rubberneck. "Hunter Solang, I'd appreciate it if you could wrap this up quickly. I have a business to run, after all."

"Right away, Lady Gronl," Lolanna said, inclining her head respectfully.

"Did you wish to buy the armor?" Gronl asked. "I must say, it brings out your eyepatch quite strikingly."

Lolanna did not hesitate, merely handed over a credit card drawn from her evidently bottomless bosom. Gronl grunted her satisfaction and stepped around the form of her husband, then stopped to give the bastard a kick in the head as an afterthought. She availed herself of the card reader on the counter and handed the card back to Lolanna.

"Returns are accepted within ten days. Store credit only," she said. Then she spied the mess of the rack on the floor. She glared at Nunzio. "Hey, you! If you've damaged any of my merchandise, you had better be prepared to pay for it."

Nunzio, struck speechless by the speed at which everything had gone downhill, turned pleadingly toward Lolanna. The warrior-woman had the grace to look a shade regretful, but of course nothing would stop her from doing her duty.

"Hunter Arquette, the Guild does not pay damages incurred during a failed hunt."

Nunzio winced. 'Failed hunt' was not a phrase he'd heard in relation to himself before. The words stung worse than the broken spells had.

Lolanna wasn't finished. In her most rigid, official tone, she went on, with the finality of coffin nails hammering home the point. "The record shows, as I have witnessed, that Blatt Skroinx was subdued successfully by Kol'daar ox Huuf'ta. Thus concludes the evaluation of Member 769. On that basis, I hereby place Hunter Arquette under probation, pending a second evaluation to be

determined at a later date. You are forbidden from accepting any contracts until such time.”

She walked up to him and stretched out her hand. “Hand over your badge.”

Nunzio knew it was hopeless. He knew the Charter backward and forward, knew just how to bend the rules, and knew when they would not be bent.

But he couldn’t just give up his badge without protest. He scrambled for words. “Proctor Solang, um, can’t we talk about this? He already said he was trying to he—”

“The Guild Charter clearly states that collaboration is forbidden during a licensing evaluation, the penalty for which is a lifetime ban from the Guild,” Lolanna spoke over him loudly, glancing at the drone recording everything with its electronic eye. Nunzio took the hint and shut up. Her gaze softened minutely. “Hunter Arquette, you are only on probation. I will personally see to it that your secondary evaluation comes in a timely manner. Now, your badge. Please.”

With a hand that felt numb, he reached into yet another pocket and pulled the shiny metal plate with his name, license classification, and membership number—his whole identity for the past year—over to Lolanna, who received it gravely.

Gronl, meanwhile, had begun to inspect the pile of ruined armor at Nunzio’s feet.

“You’ve wrecked all of it! All my beautiful spells—they’re gone!” she exclaimed, as shocked as she was irate. “I hope you have money. If not, you better be prepared to face the Collections Committee of the Merchants’ Guild.”

Nunzio had no idea how much armor cost, much less enchanted fetish-gear armor. But the Merchants’ Guild Collection Committee was notoriously merciless, even for Splinterpoint.

Dazedly, he asked, “H-how much...?”

Gronl began a running tally, peppered with abuse, and Nunzio realized with rising nausea just how badly fucked he was. The only silver lining he could see was that he’d paid his rent so far in advance when he moved in, because by the sounds of it, this would take the vast majority of his not insubstantial savings.

“Do you even know how hard it is to get the materials to get an epic-level fire-resistance enchantment? Not to mention the days spent in meditation before

the actual working! You have no respect for the magical arts, do you, you little punk?”

“Nope. Not even a little bit,” he said.

The weight of the onlookers’ stares made his skin itch, bringing back unsettling memories of the Burrrito Incident, and he really thought he might be sick. He had to get out of here. He reached into yet another pocket and drew out a pasteboard card with his contact on it, chucked it on the pile of ruined armor.

“Don’t forget to send me the bill.”

While Gronl hemmed and hawed about his attitude, parentage, and general deficiency as a being, Nunzio began the walk of shame toward the exit.

Of course, this meant he had to pass Lolanna and Kol’daar while they trussed Blatt up with bindings retrieved from Lolanna’s pile of belongings in the changing booth. The drone couldn’t seem to get enough of Kol’daar’s face, hovering worshipfully. Lolanna began to show him how to use a comm-unit to call the Mercurian Guild to claim the bounty. Kol’daar’s forehead was furrowed with concentration, like basic tech was brand new to him. Perhaps it was, at that.

As if he could feel Nunzio’s gaze, Kol’daar looked up and their eyes met. Nunzio only then realized that his sunglasses must have been lost in the scuffle, because without their tint he could see the gray of the man’s eyes was even paler than he’d thought at first. Kol’daar offered an apologetic half smile, raising one shoulder in a helpless gesture.

With that simple, dismissive look—like destroying someone’s life and livelihood was something you could smile and shrug off—all Nunzio’s shock and dismay transmuted to rage in one instant. He glared for all he was worth, fists clenching with the urge to pummel that ‘oops, sorry, bro’ look off the other man’s stupid face.

Kol’daar’s smile faded into uncertainty, and Nunzio swept past before he could do something he’d regret even more than promising to buy Zin dinner.

His fury buoyed him up until he made it out onto the street. The suns had not sunk very much, and without his sunglasses the glare near blinded him.

Certainly that was the reason his eyes began to sting.

Certainly it had nothing to do with all the work of a year up in smoke. Nor was it the fact that he was right back where he was when he’d left Zinchalte—worse, even, because at least then he’d had a way to make money.

He blinked, staring at the alien, never-ending panorama of Splinterpoint for a long moment before he began to walk in the direction of Le Chateau Florida.

He was a very long way from home.

Chapter Five

“So you have failed to make any of the payments of four hundred sesterces per annum to your ex-wife since you were divorced in the eyes of the law,” an acerbic, no-nonsense female voice declared.

Nunzio snorted awake and twitched on his bed, the springs of the mattress groaning. Who was talking? What time was it?

“Praetor, I have not made four hundred sesterces in the last year, nor in the years before. I have tried to make ends meet; Juno Moneta knows I have tried to send what I can to my ex-wife, but I must live on the funds myself, as well—”

Whatever the man’s further words may have been, they were lost in the booing and hissing of a large crowd. Nunzio blinked blearily at the darkness in his room. The chronometer blinked sullen red numerals at him, declaring the time to be the ass-end of night, or nearing the ass-crack of morning, however you chose to look at it.

“He lies, Praetor. Reliable witnesses place my former husband at gambling houses and bordellos, squandering his earnings instead of supporting his children,” another female voice declared, which earned more boos and hisses.

The sound was coming through the wall. Nunzio frowned. No one lived next door to him—oh, right, yesterday was a moving day. Someone new, then. And an inconsiderate neighbor at that; the volume of the jerk’s scry-cube was up loud enough to wake him from the coma-like sleep into which he’d plunged when he’d finally made it back to his hovel last night.

Using his ability drained him. He hadn’t realized just how many spells had been on the ruined armor until the exhaustion hit him like a freight train, only halfway back to his apartment last night. He’d caved and gotten a cab then, because passing out in the street in Splinterpoint was only slightly less safe than covering yourself in chum and diving into a pool full of hungry sharks.

He couldn’t believe how exhausted he still was. The only other time he’d been so thoroughly wiped out had been after a snag involving a mage who’d invented the magical equivalent of a Gatling gun. That hunt had ended with the most satisfying destruction of Nunzio’s career, even if he’d collapsed on the doorstep of the Wizards’ Guild while turning in his target for the reward.

If left to his own devices, he might have slept for more than a full day. As it was, he was now unpleasantly awake, had a splitting headache, and could no

longer escape the memory of how badly he failed his licensing evaluation. It felt a bit like having a terrible hangover the morning after a night of incredibly stupid antics, except you were still drunk and hadn't managed to black out during the worst parts.

"*What say you, sir? Citizen Veronica calls your honor into question,*" the first voice said. It sounded familiar, somehow.

Nunzio didn't care enough to puzzle out where he'd heard it before. He pounded on the adjoining wall, taking his frustration out on the aged plaster.

"*Praetor, I am only a man. I have made mistakes, but I am a loyal citizen of the Empire,*" the defendant pleaded, sounding more and more desperate.

"*He lies, Praetor!*"

"*I am a man of honor!*"

"*You have the honor of a—*"

Nunzio pounded on the wall again. For good measure, he shouted, "Hey, turn that shit down! 'M tryin' to sleep!"

The volume rose by several decibels for the pounding of a gavel and the fierce cry of, "*Order! I will have order in my court!*"

With a growl, Nunzio rolled unsteadily to his feet. He was still wearing his clothes from yesterday, though his coat was on a pile by the door. He couldn't quite believe he'd managed to pass out in his tie. It was one of his few relics of Earth, which gave it sentimental weight even though he had always hated ties before, but it still wasn't comfortable to sleep in. He hadn't strangled himself; at the moment he wasn't certain if that was necessarily a relief. He loosened it further as he stepped out into the hallway.

He banged on his neighbor's door. A long moment passed. There was some thumping from the other side of the door. He banged on it again, like the most arrhythmic version of "Shave and a Haircut" ever.

A solid thud from inside the room, and then the door began to open slowly with considerable pneumatic juddering and clanking.

"Look, can you turn that damn thing down? You really don't want me to get Vorkra up here—" Nunzio stopped speaking when his neighbor finally was revealed.

Kol'daar stood on the threshold. The man was more clothed than he had been, in that he now wore a draping, front-to-back loincloth held up with a

narrow leather belt and thigh-high leggings that came across as what happens when you leave Native American buckskins and a Catwoman costume alone in a dark closet to procreate. He seemed equally shocked to see Nunzio as Nunzio was to see him, and they spent a long, poleaxed moment gaping at each other as the scry-cube played loudly in the background.

“It is the decision of this court that the defendant be thrown to the lions! Guards, seize him!”

“Nooo!”

“Hail Praetor Judy! Hail Praetor Judy! Hail—”

“You!” Nunzio finally managed. While he’d experienced many surreal moments since ending up in this city, this was definitely in the top three.

“Um,” said Kol’daar. “Hello again.”

“How the hell—What are you doing here?”

Kol’daar shifted awkwardly. “I live here now. Lady Gronl needed the space for her new indentured servant, and I could afford a place of my own. Your Proctor Solang recommended this building.”

“Oh, she did, did she?” Nunzio had decided on the way home not to hate Lolanna for doing her duty—hell, she probably had even saved him from being drummed out of the guild entirely. This new information had him reconsidering his magnanimity.

“Ah, sorry. About earlier. I really was just trying to help,” Kol’daar offered, his wintry eyes gleaming with sincerity.

Nunzio scowled up at him. The man was ridiculously tall, which for some reason was infuriating. And despite the late hour and what must have been a very busy day, he didn’t appear to have a hair out of place, whereas Nunzio was very aware that he was scruffy, rumped, and probably had crazy, bloodshot eyes from too little sleep. It was also irritating that Nunzio could tell the guy meant every word of the apology, but even so the anger from earlier refused to die down. It didn’t matter if Kol’daar was *sorry*; Nunzio still was shit out of luck. A fact reinforced by Kol’daar’s mere presence here, which proved that the only constant in the entire goddamn multiverse that mattered was Murphy’s Law.

Exhaustion made Nunzio passive-aggressive. “Whatever. Just turn down your damn scry-cube. Some of us are trying to sleep.”

Kol'daar glanced over his shoulder, which was now broadcasting the bloody fate of the defendant. "You mean the magic demon box?"

Nunzio pinched the bridge of his nose. He didn't bother to keep the sarcasm from his reply. "Yes. The magic demon box. 'S called a '*scry-cube*.' You can turn the sound down with the remote."

"Ah, haa," Kol'daar said in a hesitant tone diametrically opposed to comprehension. His brow furrowed. "Yes. *Re-mote*."

"Yeah. The little rectangle-thing made of crystals?" Nunzio sketched a remote shape in the air with his pointer-fingers.

The lightbulb finally switched on for Kol'daar. "Ohh. So that thing isn't a magic back scratcher?"

"Are back scratchers typically made of *glowing jewels* where you're from?"

"Well, no, but nothing here is like it was back home." Kol'daar crossed his arms defensively. "How was I supposed to know it wakes up demons?"

"Didn't Vorkra show you anything when you took the room?"

The landlady usually made a point of giving newbies the full tour, and not just because her guild had a stringent Hospitality Code. Vorkra had jury-rigged the scry-cubes into a makeshift intercom system, which she used to alert the residents of visitors, eviction, and the laundry list of regularly broken systems in the building. The rest of the time, Nunzio assumed people watched programs and shows broadcast by the Communications Guild, and whatever leaked through from other dimensions.

As he'd broken his own the moment he touched it, he had no idea what he was missing. Judging by *Praetor Judy*, it wasn't much.

Kol'daar frowned. "No. She told me to ask someone named Nunzio if I had any questions, but I forgot what room she said he was in."

Yep, and there it was; Murphy, that fucker, really was an optimist. Nunzio groaned and buried his face in his hands.

"Is there something wrong?" Kol'daar asked, alarmed.

"Yes!"

"What is it?"

"I'm *Nunzio*!"

Dimly, he was aware the emphasis was perhaps in the wrong place, but he stood by his answer, as the multiverse seemed to have it out for him specifically.

He couldn't believe Vorkra had put this on him. The problem with being one of Vorkra's long-term renters was that she tended to expect things, like basic neighborly decency. Or at least abject terror of her wrath. Truth be told, he might have not minded, if the neighbor in question hadn't been *this* guy.

"Oh," Kol'daar said, clearly getting the picture. He sounded about as pleased as Nunzio. "Then, could you show me how to make the demons go back to sleep? That's why you came out here, anyway."

Nunzio dropped his hands to glare at him but had to concede the point. It still didn't make him feel any more charitable toward Kol'daar. He wanted the scry-cube off, but if it meant helping this guy, then—

An idea came to him and made him smile. He could tell from the way Kol'daar leaned back that it probably was as deranged as he felt.

"Oh, I'll lay those demons to rest, all right. Step aside."

Kol'daar hesitated, but the screams of the defendant seemed to make up his mind. "Be my guest."

Nunzio marched past him and into the small room, which was exactly as his own had been upon moving in. A narrow bed rested against the left wall, the tiny kitchenette dominated the right. A small pedestal table with a vinyl top and chrome edges, flanked by two beat-up, mismatched kitchen chairs, held a leather backpack and the dream catcher—harp-thing.

The bulky scry-cube rested against the wall beneath the single dirty window that stood opposite the door. It resembled the earliest tube TVs from Earth, complete with a polished wooden frame, thick feet carved to look like paws, and rabbit-ear antennae on top. The rounded-square screen and knobs on the front were all made of glowing crystals.

He crossed the room. As Judy Sheindlinicus announced a new case, he put his hand to the screen. There came an audible pop, a shower of eldritch sparks flew out the back, and Nunzio bit his lip hard against the sharp sting of the dispersing magic. The scry-cube went dead.

In the resounding silence that followed, he choked back a victorious cackle. His hand hurt, and his headache throbbed white hot between his temples. It'd been a while since he'd taken out tech as well as magic. Both at the same time

was more taxing, but worth it in the name of petty revenge. He turned a vicious smile on Kol'daar, waiting for the cry of outrage when the man realized he'd been had.

"Impressive," Kol'daar said, looking nothing but mildly interested. "Are you an exorcist?"

Nunzio's smile fell. "Are you an idiot?"

"Probably," Kol'daar admitted with a rueful half smile. His eyes were thoughtful as he went on, "But now I think of it, you banished the spells at Lady Gronl's shop, too. And you make no Noise at all."

"What the hell are you talking about? I'm making noise right now," Nunzio said, stomping to the door.

"Yes, but the other noise. The Orphic Noise," Kol'daar said, like the pronounced capital letters should explain something. "Your Heartsong. You know."

"I really don't. Nor do I care."

At the door, Nunzio hit the control to open it. Nothing happened.

"The only other things I know of that don't have Heartsongs are the undead. Are you a vampire? One that feeds on magic?"

Nunzio hit the control again, harder. Still nothing. He grunted his frustration. He wasn't a vampire, but he was starting to feel like a zombie. Christ, he needed to get to bed. His revenge hadn't worked out because the victim was too dumb to realize what had just happened, but if Nunzio wound up passing out here then all he would have done would be to humiliate himself further. He really needed to start thinking these things through.

"I'm not undead," he grit out. "Why isn't your door working?"

"Um, try kicking it? I think the magic's wearing out."

"It's not *magic*, it's a piece—of—shit!"

He punctuated each word with sharp kick, and finally the door groaned open with three reluctant jerks. He left without further discussion.

Kol'daar called, "Thanks for getting rid of the de—" but the door closed and cut him off.

Nunzio retreated gratefully to the quiet of his room, peeling off his necktie and slinging it over the back of a chair before he collapsed on his bed. The

sound of fingers drumming against his door made his eyes pop back open. He determined to ignore it, but it didn't go away.

He dragged himself up, fell over, got up again, and checked the viewscreen.

It was Kol'daar, of course.

Using the intercom, he barked, "What *now*?"

Kol'daar jumped and spun around for the source of the voice projected into the hallway. The expression on his face was one of 'what sorcery is this,' and if Nunzio hadn't been about to fall over again, he might have laughed.

"S an intercom, moron. Whaddaya want?"

"Uh, where's the privy?" Kol'daar looked as embarrassed as he no doubt felt, asking such a thing to a disembodied voice.

Nunzio let his head fall with a *thunk* against the doorframe. He'd have to find a way to get even with Vorkra for making him this guy's personal 411. "End of the hall, second door on the left. Now lemme alone."

He waited for Kol'daar to leave—which didn't take long, apparently the guy had been holding it for too long to bother dithering outside Nunzio's door once a solution presented itself—before he turned back to his bed, his vision already fading with exhaustion. Which was why he didn't see the coat, which he then tripped over and fell again.

The neighbor directly below him banged on their ceiling, shouting, "Shut up already, or I'll comm Vorkra!"

With the last of his failing strength, Nunzio curled his hand into the one-fingered salute and passed out.

Chapter Six

The next day, Nunzio regained consciousness exactly where he'd left it, lying in a pile by his door. He felt as flattened as several of the objects he'd landed on, and as sticky as... whatever that thing on the floor was when he pulled his face off of it.

Ugh. Maybe it was time to clean house. Definitely time to shower.

The tiny bathroom at the end of the hall was only one of a dozen in what must have been a more luxurious communal bath chamber. However, as different species had different needs from a cleansing facility, much less a biowaste facility, the large room had been broken up into separate cubicles, each with a little icon on the door to denote species. The approximation of a unisex Human on the door had eyes pointing in opposite directions, but you got the idea. It was thankfully unoccupied when he reached it, and when he emerged clean and clean-shaven, he felt a bit more like himself.

Which meant that it was time to bite the bullet and start damage control. He pulled the blackout curtains open, letting the day's pinkish-hued sunlight spill in as he started his coffeemaker.

It and the weirdly massive supply of truly terrible Folgers that came with it had been one of his first purchases, and his only true impulse buy, since he'd struck out on his own. He still remembered the serendipitous occasion of his first payment burning a hole in his pocket, and spotting the little machine sitting in a shop window as he'd made his way back to the first awful hovel he'd ended up staying in right after leaving Zin. It had seemed a good omen, proof that Earth could be found again, and he was on the right path to do it.

The little sputtering four-cup machine was probably the crappiest coffeemaker he'd ever owned, and the expired grounds invariably created a sludge that tasted faintly of socks. Regardless, it made the apartment sound and smell like home.

A quick check of his wrist-comm while eating breakfast showed a bill from Gronl Skroinx. He choked on his coffee and Kobold-O's when he saw the number of zeros in the total. When he could breathe again, he read the itemized list.

He supposed he ought to be glad that she hadn't tacked on the broken scryward as well, but what *was* there was quite enough. That set with the fire-

resistance charm alone cost upwards of a hundred thousand, which made no sense when you thought about how little a chain mail bikini covered. In his albeit limited knowledge of lingerie, less was more, but the idea didn't hold water—or much of anything—when it came to armor. If a dragon breathed on you, you'd be a smoking pile of charcoal with pristine nipples and naughty bits.

The latter phrase decoupled itself from the preceding sentence and bounced around in his head. It brought with it the unbidden memory of Kol'daar in his banana-hammock, and Nunzio growled, annoyed with himself. Pristine nipples notwithstanding, the man was a lucky dumbass, and not Nunzio's problem anymore.

He checked the balance on his card with bated breath.

“Ohthankgod,” Nunzio sighed explosively. There was enough. Barely, but enough. The Collections Committee would not come to repossess his coffeemaker, nerve disruptor, or face.

He paid the tab digitally, feeling sick as he did so. No wonder the Mercenaries' Guild didn't like him very much, if he was always costing them out the ass like this. He took a moment to be grateful that he'd never botched a snag before, because he knew for a fact that if *this* was a fair example of how much magic cost, he'd probably totaled the entire sector by now.

For a long moment, he sat, staring around him unseeing, and listened to the sound of his coffeemaker coughing. Times of crisis called for serious self-reflection, didn't they?

This was a huge setback in his grand scheme of returning to Earth. Added to the pile of other stumbling blocks, it was easy to think that such a goal might be impossible. But Splinterpoint was impossible in many more ways, and if it found a way to exist, then surely there was a way back to Earth.

Not for the first time, he regretted ever laying eyes on Zinchalte. Really, that had been his first mistake.

Well, no, perhaps his first mistake had been his political science major in college. No one had told him when he enrolled how oversaturated the market for half-assed poli-sci graduates had been. He'd had to find out the hard way when he'd landed back in his parents' basement, unemployed, not even an unpaid internship on the horizon. And of course, the depressed economy meant that the night-security position at the local mall in his hometown had been the best he could get, and that was thanks to his second-degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do more than his higher education.

If he could go back in time, he'd stop himself from ever making the rounds that fateful night. He would have made Ralph, the other security guard, put down the cheese puffs and go walk the dimmed halls of Highview Galleria. Then it would have been Ralph to find Zinchalte in the jewelry store, picking through a display table of loose diamonds with the blasé attitude of a choosy customer squeezing all the fruit in the produce section.

Ralph would have been the one to chase Zin down and tackle him—well, actually, Ralph probably wouldn't have done either of those things. Ralph had been paunchy and lazy, occupying the awkward time of life after *Too Old For This Shit* but before *Two Days From Retirement*. His participation in such a chase probably would have ended in a coronary or a broken hip.

The point still stood that if it had been Ralph to happen upon a beautiful blue-skinned jewel thief in a *Mission Impossible* catsuit, neither Human would have gotten dragged along for the ride when Zin stuffed the stolen diamonds into the broken diport and activated the emergency 'home' setting. Home for Zin being Splinterpoint, of course.

Once beings figured out the means to travel between the dimensions that made up the multiverse, they discovered the real sticking point of interdimensional tourism: home addresses. Nunzio found it to be a pretty obvious setback, and not just from personal experience. Hadn't anyone watched *Sliders*, for crying out loud?

Zinchalte may have used a personal-pan-sized dimensional portal to end up on Earth in the first place, but it had been malfunctioning at the time. His landing in Nunzio's metaphorical lap had been unintentional, complete chance. Which meant that neither Zin nor the diport remembered the coordinates for his specific plane.

The kicker was that there were *magic spells* designed for this very situation. They weren't cheap, and neither was arranging a portal, either by magic or by science, to the revealed coordinates. Most people who landed in Splinterpoint ended up staying there for this reason alone. Most jobs, even if they were gotten through the Guilds, didn't pay enough to even dream of saving that much before the dismal life expectancy of the city caught up to you.

There had been a window of about four months where Nunzio could have had the spell performed. Granted, he'd been broke and tagging along with Zin, but it had been physically—or should that be metaphysically?—possible for him.

Nunzio's second mistake—or perhaps third, if he was counting college and the wasted years in a dead-end job—was of course the Burrito Incident. He'd gotten a hankering for refried beans and carnitas, and he'd walked unsuspectingly into the second-worst blunder of his life.

With the advantage of hindsight, the placement and timing of the mysterious street vendor offering just that, wrapped in a delightfully fluffy flour tortilla, complete with set-your-face-on-fire hot sauce, had been suspiciously perfect. If that hadn't set off alarm bells, then certainly he should have gotten the hint when he asked how much for a burrito and gotten a sinister laugh and the offer of a free sample, both worthy of a B-movie villain played by Vincent Price. The immediate and total disappearance of the taco-shaped truck as soon as the burrito was in Nunzio's hands ought to have clinched it.

In Nunzio's defense, he'd been *really* hungry, and he'd still been wading through his own bout of culture shock. The needle on his internal weirdness meter had been buried in the red for so long that the oddness of the situation didn't even merit an extra blip.

And the burrito had been delicious. Everything a burrito should be, the primordial essence of burrito-ness distilled into one cumin-laden paradigm of Tex-Mex cooking.

Because, really, the only thing worse than a *burrito* destroying your life would be a *terrible* burrito destroying your life.

His customer satisfaction had lasted only until he'd swallowed his last bite, which had been when the curse or whatever it was had kicked in.

There'd been an explosion of a kind, nothing physical, of course, but Nunzio would never forget the feeling of *something* bursting outward and the harsh, full-body sting, like every inch of him had been snapped by the multiverse's largest rubber band. Then had come the outcry amongst the immediate populace as everything within a city-block radius that was magical or more technologically advanced than an abacus had suddenly crapped out.

Zin had been haggling inside a shop nearby, and he'd rushed out to find Nunzio, panicked, naked and staggering in bewilderment on pavement that disintegrated to dust under his feet. It had been easy to surmise that whatever had happened was related to Nunzio, which was why the shocked onlookers who'd come to gawk came to the same conclusion, and from there to mob violence retaliation.

The two of them had fled posthaste, Nunzio leaving a trail of broken everything in his wake until he'd passed out. The physical destruction seemed only to apply while he was awake, which allowed Zin to manhandle him off to an unpopulated ruin outside of the Sector 31 limits, to wait out the effects of the curse.

But they never went away, and Nunzio had had to spend a solid month learning mental discipline by correspondence course—the missives written on parchment, held and read aloud by an oddly accommodating Zinchalte—in an effort not to destroy everything he touched. After a week, he'd been able to put clothes on and eat food again. After three, he'd been able to use technology without it frying in his hand. But magic, well... The best he'd managed was to shrink his range to direct contact, but it seemed no amount of training would allow him and magic to interact in any way.

The upshot of the whole humiliating and life-altering debacle was that there was no magical way back to Earth for Nunzio. Meaning he had to depend on science, which sucked.

With a heavy sigh, he shook himself out of his self-recriminations. Well, there was nothing else Nunzio could do at this point.

He had to comm Sakano to tell him he was going to pull the plug. If the automated withdrawal from his credit card went through, he'd have the Bankers' Guild coming after him to break his kneecaps for the massive overdraft.

Sakano was not the one who answered. A holographic projection of smooth, slimy, decidedly phallic, green tentacles writhed obscenely in midair above Nunzio's wrist, and he couldn't help the startled flinch backward that had him nearly falling out of his chair.

"Hello, you've reached Sakano Labs, barely a member of the Mad Scientists' Guild. Would you like to get exploded, liquefied, or completely ripped off today?" the tentacle monster asked. Nunzio didn't know how, as he couldn't see a mouth anywhere. Or eyes. Just tentacles.

"Uh, is Sakano in?" Nunzio asked, trying not to look directly at the squirming mass.

"Dr. Sakano is in the lab and cannot be disturbed," the tentacle monster replied with heavy sarcasm. "I can take a message down if you want, but I don't think he knows how to read."

“No, thanks. Can you get him out of the lab? This can’t wait. Tell him it’s Nunzio calling.”

Something in his tone must have alerted the tentacle monster to the direness of the situation. It appeared to perk up. “Oh, are you calling to complain? I’ll get him right away. Hold, please.”

“Thanks.”

The hologram went to a generic projection of a peaceful fountain accompanied by a crackling radio broadcast. Sakano *was* a bit of cheap bastard—which was actually a selling point for Nunzio. It came as no surprise that the scientist skimped on paying the Bardic Guild the twenty measly credits a month for actual music for his held calls.

—don’t for a minute think that you will be shown mercy if you are undeserving. The Edicts are clear instructions. If you don’t take the proper steps to cleanse your impurities, the Foes of Heaven will devour your soul before you can ever join your ancestors in the clouds. All things have their purpose, and demons are the punishers of the wicked—”

Oh, Christ, it was that same lame show from yesterday. He rolled his eyes as the host rambled on about the dangers of *not* mutilating yourself. Nunzio had been raised into Catholicism by his Italian American mother; he’d learned fast and early about the concepts of penance and self-flagellation—but mostly that had been *figurative*. Clearly, this guy was a nutjob.

After about a minute of judgmental rhetoric, the show cut off. The hologram dissolved and then resolved into a Human face. Sakano Ryouta was probably about a decade older than Nunzio, which meant that he was pushing forty. A pair of salt-and-pepper streaks at his temples was the only real clue, his narrow, angular face pale and unlined. Sooty smudges covered his face aside from a clean stripe across his eyes in the shape of his goggles, which were now pushed up into his Einsteinian mop of black hair.

He smiled obsequiously at Nunzio, speaking through his teeth, “Mr. Arquette! It is so good to hear from my number one investor! I suppose you’re calling for an update on MOM?”

“Well, sort of,” Nunzio hedged. “Who’s that answering your calls?”

Sakano’s smile became even more fixed. “That’s Kwiif. I trust she was not rude to you, sir. If she was, I can only apologize from the bottom of my heart. She’s new and still learning proper interspecies manners—”

Nunzio tried not to be surprised that a being comprised of prehensile cucumber dicks could be female.

“Her name is ‘Queef’? Seriously?”

“*Kwiiffelchilingush*,” came a shout, echoing with piqued pride as Kwiif apparently overheard the call.

“*Kwiif* for short,” Sakano said loudly, pointedly glaring off in his assistant’s direction. “She’s my new apprentice. Very new.”

“Very apprentice,” Nunzio added, getting the picture. The guilds tended to assign apprentices without considering personalities at all; clearly neither party had been pleased by the outcome. “She wasn’t rude to *me*, but you might want to have her rehearse a more professional greeting. And change your radio station; no one likes talk radio anyway.”

“I will speak to her about it,” Sakano promised, his smile now more of a grimace. “Would you like a progress update, Mr. Arquette?”

It would probably be the last one Nunzio would hear for a long time, under the circumstances, so he nodded. Sakano loved to talk about his inventions, and the Multiversal Origins Machine was his crowning glory, despite the fact that he hadn’t gotten it to work for shit.

That was basically all the man had to report, but he did so at length, with much gesticulation, exclamations, and maniacal laughter. Such theatrics were part and parcel of the Mad Scientists’ Guild’s shtick, as well as investing research into things no one else considered worthwhile. If you wanted a Death Ray, you went to the reputable Guild of Superscience. If you wanted a “Turning People Into Giant Fruit-Flavored Amoebas” Ray, you went to the Mad Scientists’ Guild.

Magic had already solved the issue of finding homeworlds for the rest of the population, and the Superscientists wouldn’t touch the project when Nunzio brought it to them. The main issue seemed to be the Mages’ Guild getting up in arms over infringement, but there were a slew of practical problems with trying to determine a multiversal mapping system, much less locating a specific universe. The dimensions were constantly diverging and merging. Existing tech could determine major dimensional families and minor iterations, but that was barely any help.

If the multiverse was an infinite housing development, and all the Earthlike universes were cookie-cutter houses in a neighborhood with no landmarks and

roads that shifted on their own, then Nunzio was the drunk staggering home after bar-close and trying to guess which faux-Tudor contained his family, friends, and student loans instead of, say, victorious world-conquering Nazis, or a populace that hailed the band *Aqua* as the pinnacle of modern music, or *both*.

The real trick would be to tell without actually traveling to these places. That was what MOM was supposed to do in theory, but to date Sakano hadn't managed it. It was disheartening for Nunzio, but mostly because rebuilding MOM was expensive—though apparently cheaper than a dozen steel panty and bra sets.

“MOM was running at full capacity for ten minutes! A record! The mysteries of the multiverse were nearly at my fingertips! Mwahahaha!”

“That’s a good sign, right?”

“Of course!”

“Then what happened?” Nunzio asked, but he already knew. Same old, same old.

“Well. It exploded,” Sakano finished, his arms dropping back down to his sides. The only result this ongoing experiment seemed to prove irrefutably was that Sakano could find a way to blow up just about anything, regardless of its components’ nonreactive natures. “I’ll have it rebuilt in about a week, sir. Incidentally, I’ll need more samples from you. If you’d stop in for—”

“No can do,” Nunzio said with a sigh. Time to drop the bomb. “Actually, I—”

“If there’s a problem with timing, I can send Kwiif over to help you with cell collection,” Sakano volunteered. “As a special, convenient service for my number one investor.”

Nunzio could not conceal the revolted shudder. “Please don’t. Seriously. Anyway, I don’t think you’ll need my samples for a while, at least.”

“Sir?”

“I can’t afford the research at the moment,” Nunzio said, point blank.

Sakano froze. “What?”

“I don’t have the money for it right now. If you could just put the research on the shelf, I’ll let you know when I can resume your funding.”

“But! I am near a breakthrough, I can feel it! Please, won’t you reconsider?”

“It’s not a matter of reconsidering, Dr. Sakano,” Nunzio said. He felt tired as he said it, even though he’d just gotten up. “If there’s no money, there’s no money. I can’t pay for your services for the time being.”

“But at such a crucial stage! You’d really do that to MOM? Have you changed your plans about going back to your homeworld?”

“Of course not,” he snapped, patience fraying. Where’d Sakano get off, bringing that into the discussion? As if Nunzio wasn’t already painfully aware how big of a setback this was. “I just never *planned* to go broke before that happened.”

Nunzio’s door thundered with a shower of powerful knocks, the kind that Nunzio had always associated with the police coming to bust up a rowdy party. As there was no law enforcement in Splinterpoint, that could only mean one thing.

Vorkra was outside, and she was *pissed*.

“I gotta go, man, but I’ll be in touch. Don’t throw in the towel yet,” Nunzio said hurriedly, and hung up on Sakano’s panicked rebuttal.

He opened the door and almost got punched in the face when two of Vorkra’s fists flew to knock again. Vorkra’s housecoat and slippers were the grease-stained set she wore when she was working on the failing pneumatic systems in the building, and her protuberant eyes were concealed under a set of dome-like goggles. Steam literally poured from her nostrils in her fury, and she seemed disappointed when Nunzio managed to duck beneath the blows.

“Nunzio! You inhospitable little prick! Are you trying to get me investigated by my guild?” she snarled.

“Uh, no?” Nunzio maintained his crouch. “Why do you ask?”

“That new guy next door told me how you *helped* him last night,” Vorkra spat.

Oh, great. Kol’daar had squealed on him. Nunzio faltered and then rallied. “How’s that inhospitable?”

“You failed to instruct him how to use his scry-cube, lied to him about how it works, and then *broke* the damn thing. That guy is so fresh from whatever backworld-bumpkin dimension he came from that he thought I kept enslaved demons! If he’d gone to the Hospitality Guild with that story—”

“But he didn’t, right?” Nunzio asked uncertainly.

“No, because he didn’t know how or that he could. But *you* oughtta know better. And breaking your scry-cube is one thing, but someone else’s?” In her rant, boiling spit flecked out of her mouth in scalding drops. “D’you think those things just fall from the sky? Do you realize that I hafta replace those? But not this time, because *you’ll* have to, because this is going on your rent. Which is due, right fucking now.”

Shit. Nunzio pinched the bridge of his nose. In the rosy light of day, he could admit that he’d been an asshole last night, but he still felt justified. Of course, explaining the situation to Vorkra would probably just get him evicted on the Feud-Free Housing clause in the lease. But he also knew his credit balance was practically a single digit.

“Uh. Can. Can I, uh,” Nunzio stalled, because this was the last thing he wanted to say. Well, no, second-to-last, as the last-last thing was, ‘I’m homeless and unemployed.’ He forced out through gritted teeth, “CanIworkitoff?”

That drew Vorkra up short. She actually pushed her goggles off her eyes to give him a disbelieving stare.

“*You* want an indenture contract? What about your guild?”

“I’m on probation.”

“Huh.” Vorkra clacked her jaw twice as she considered. Then she gave him a toothy smile. “I think I have just the job for you.”

“Oh?” Nunzio mind flashed through all the disgusting, tedious, and dangerous work it was possible for her to find in the building. Even cleaning the bathrooms required a biohazard suit, which itself may very well *be* a biohazard.

“Oh, yes,” Vorkra sniggered. “I think it’ll be a *learning* experience.”

The laughter signaled that the emphasis was clearly some kind of cryptic pun. Nunzio didn’t appreciate being the butt of cryptic puns. There was nowhere in any dimension where that was a good sign.

Chapter Seven

The next day saw Nunzio sitting behind a cheap desk in one of the conference rooms on the first floor, staring at the mountain of pamphlets that covered its surface. They had names like ‘Interdimensional Displacement and You!’ and ‘Gil’s Guide to Guilds’ and ‘You Think? How to Determine Sentience in Foreign Lifeforms.’ He’d had to read all of them yesterday, last night, and on into the morning.

It was a good thing his coffeemaker wasn’t sentient—he had checked, somewhere after the fourth pot—or he’d owe it for overtime.

The conference room held several rows of chairs and furniture for people with no butts, like the gaseous cloud that had been one of the first arrivals for Le Chateau Florida’s Splinterpoint Orientation Class. Other fresh meat for the SpOC trickled in intermittently as the start time approached, until a motley assortment of species had filled the room. The back row had filled up first, upholding another multiversal constant that said only losers and suck-ups sat in front by the teacher.

He stared at the empty front row that lay between him and them like a demilitarized zone.

Vorkra’s pun had indeed been the worst kind of foreshadowing. Nunzio wished he hadn’t signed the contract, but needs must. He had never been the kind of guy who fit well in a role that required un-ironic enthusiasm, and his only experience with orientation classes had been at the start of college. The presenters had all been the perky, lanyard-wearing, go-getter sorts who assured you that college was ‘rad’ and that on-campus alcohol poisonings and rapes had dropped ten percent since that unbiased study came out a few years ago.

Granted, he wasn’t here to hold these beings’ hands or functionally similar appendages, nor convince them to stop stealing dishes from the cafeteria. If anything, he was supposed to scare the bejeezus out of them, and convince them if they *wanted* to steal things they had to join the Thieves’ Guild. But Nunzio wasn’t particularly intimidating, either, at least not compared to the enormous cat-bear thing in the back row, whose teeth were so large and sharp its lips wouldn’t close over them. The resultant heavy mouth-breathing was audible even from where he sat, ten yards away.

The chronometer on the wall chimed. It was time to start, then. Nunzio scanned the room again and stood.

“Uh, hi, I’m your instructor, Nunzio,” he said awkwardly, while the class ignored him.

That was all he got out before the door opened and Kol’ daar hurried inside, clutching one of the enchanted scrolls provided to attendees in one hand, the dream catcher-harp in the other, and had a full-to-bursting pack slung across his bare shoulders. His loincloth and leggings were lightly scorched, and he smelled of barbeque.

“Sorry, sorry,” Kol’ daar said, rushing to sit down. The only place left was the deserted front row. The man slid blithely into the chair directly in front of Nunzio’s desk, throwing the pack down with a heavy clank. “Dungeon crawl ran long. There was this fire mage—Well, never mind. Did I miss anything?”

He’d known Kol’ daar would be here, but he’d tried not to think about it. While technically the thing with the scry-cube had been his own fault, letting his temper get the better of his admittedly poor judgement. But Nunzio would not be in this situation at all if Kol’ daar had minded his own business from the very beginning. Nunzio might have his hands full with the SpOC, but that didn’t mean he had to lay down his grudge.

The rest of the room still hadn’t noticed that they were supposed to be paying attention. Nunzio was a little grateful, because he indulged himself in a dark glare that seemed to bounce right off Kol’ daar’s guileless aplomb without making the slightest dent. He really needed to work on his intimidation skills.

“I was just about to start,” Nunzio told him coldly.

“Hey, teach!” someone yelled from the back row. “Where are the snacks?”

“Yeah,” someone else added, “the invite said there’d be snacks.”

“Snacks?” Kol’ daar perked up. “Great, I’m starving.”

Nunzio yelled to be heard over the rising clamor. “Refreshments will be provided only after you have completed the course! So, you all just shut up, and I’ll get started.”

This announcement resulted in displeased grumbling but finally the chatter died down. Nunzio sighed and started over.

“I’m Nunzio, your instructor for the Splinterpoint Orientation Class. You are all required by your lease to aver that you have attended this course and you understand what is expected of you here in Splinterpoint. Your oath will be recorded and is binding under all guild charters as long as you remain a resident

of the city. We'll do this at the end of the class, before the refreshment table opens up."

Several beings started grumbling again, but he talked over them. "We'll start with introductions. State your name, species, preferred pronouns, place of origin, how you came to Splinterpoint, and how long you've been here. For example, I'm Nunzio Arquette, I'm Human, my pronouns are 'he,' 'him,' and 'his.' I come from a planet called Earth in an unknown dimension. I got here by accidental interdimensional transport involving a citizen of Splinterpoint, which was nearly two years ago. Now, you. Go."

He pointed at Kol'daar. Kol'daar sat up straighter turning in his seat to address the rest of the room. He didn't seem nervous in the least.

"I am Kol'daar ox Huuf'ta, I'm Human, and my pronouns are 'he,' 'him,' and 'his.' I come from a land known as Hradica, where my mother, Huuf'ta ox Co'ahl't, is Maeri'su, the queen of all clans."

Nunzio rolled his eyes. Yeah, right. Funny how many people became royalty when there were no means to check their lineages. Splinterpoint was full of long-lost heirs, and maybe a few of them were even legitimate. But he had a really hard time believing a *prince* would be able to cope with being Gronl's indentured clotheshorse and wandering minstrel, much less let Nunzio's behavior slide without pitching some kind of hissy fit.

"I am not the heir to the throne, so my mother had me serve my people by sending me on a quest," Kol'daar went on, voice going a bit epic and misty, like he was about to recite an Edda or something. Nunzio half expected him to pick up his harp and start playing accompaniment. "There was an evil sorcerer long ago, who left his wicked artefacts strewn across the land in dark and dangerous hiding places. Many were found and destroyed, but there was one no one had ever located. The White Cup was said to be the sorcerer's last hold on the world, and it had to be destroyed if Hradica was ever to be free of the threat of his return.

"I and my loyal band searched for many months and through many hardships. At last, we found the cup, but when I took it up in my hands, its wicked magic activated. I found myself flung here to this strange place," Kol'daar wound down, spreading his hands theatrically.

A big-eyed Gray, the kind of alien UFO enthusiasts back home kept trying to autopsy, began to hesitantly applaud, and Nunzio glared it quiet.

"Thank you, Kol'daar," he said. "And how long have you been here?"

“Near a fortnight now,” Kol’daar replied and looked like he would have gone on, but Nunzio cut him off with a pointed, “*Thank you*. Next. And remember we have a lot of material to cover, so if we could all refrain from waxing poetic, that’d be *great*.”

Everyone else seemed to get the idea after that, keeping the origin stories to a couple sentences. Two purple-skinned beings that identified their species as Venusian apparently came from different realities. The Gray gave his name as ‘Phil,’ an obvious lie because he even added air quotes. The gas-cloud had no name and was the only genderless being in the room, preferring ‘zhe,’ ‘hir,’ and ‘hirs.’ The cat-bear was female whose name was a sound like rumble-hiss-snarl that no one could replicate to her satisfaction.

The preacher man Nunzio had run into on the stairs the other day was present. He introduced himself only as Reverend Wadsworth, no first name, and stared disapprovingly around him the whole time. The only other Humans were a group of three teenagers who wore identical school uniforms, had the same dark-brown hair all styled the same, and introduced themselves as one. They vaguely reminded Nunzio of Bratz dolls, generically beautiful, completely artificial, and entirely interchangeable. The only visible difference between them was the color of their eyes.

“I’m Red, that’s Riss, and that’s Rayl,” said the one with red eyes.

“We’re from Earth,” said Riss, the one with green eyes. “Probably in a dimension that no one knows.”

“We go by ‘she,’ ‘her,’ and ‘hers,’” added the amber-eyed Rayl.

“We don’t know how we got here.”

“We were on a school trip and got lost in the woods.”

“We fell asleep and woke up here.”

“We’ve only been here a few days,” Red finished. The three of them shrugged in unison.

“Are the three of you brood-mates?” asked Rumble-hiss-snarl.

“No,” they all responded. Their voices were so similar and in sync that it sounded like one person.

“Are you Humans?” asked ‘Phil.’

They turned and blinked at him. “Yes.”

Nunzio had his doubts about that, but there was still a lot of ground to cover. The introduction part was supposed to help people acclimate by realizing nearly everyone in Splinterpoint was a transplant, and they were all in the same boat as far as dealing with the weirdness that was this city. Next was to explain how dimensions worked, for which there was a pamphlet with several metaphors that were common throughout the multiverse. Nunzio decided to use the layer-cake one, because he didn't know what a 'ynarptig' or a 'wollendol' was.

"So if all the major dimensions are layers in the cake, then each slice is a collection of minor iterations," he explained.

"What is... *cake*?" asked the gas-cloud.

"It's a thing with layers," said Rumble-hiss-snarl. "Duh. Didn't you read your magic pamphlet?"

"You eat it," one of the Venusians tried to explain.

"What is... *eat*?" asked the gas-cloud.

"We like cake," intoned Riss, Red, and Rayl flatly.

"Yeah, I bet," Nunzio huffed, irritated at all the interruptions. "But cake is just the metaphor. Never mind, all right? But yeah, layers, sections of layers. That's, uh, the important part."

Kol'daar raised his hand. Nunzio wondered how long he could get away with ignoring that, but Kol'daar started to wave almost immediately. The motion made his admirable chest ripple lightly. Nunzio wished he hadn't noticed that, because the phrase *pristine nipples* came back to bounce around in his head, where it was quickly joined by *perfect abs*.

He cleared his throat and looked down at the pamphlets on his desk, pretending to organize them. "Yes, Kol'daar?"

"If we all come from such far and distant places, how do we all speak the same language?"

"We don't," Nunzio said, relieved it was a relevant question and not a request to use the bathroom or some shit. He also was glad that he'd read the right pamphlet to answer the question last night and didn't have to find it in the stack. "Splinterpoint has a collective consciousness as well as a collective unconsciousness. The Guild of Superscience first detected the field about ten thousand years ago. They learned that, basically, the psychic emanations of all

the beings in Splinterpoint tend to converge, just as the dimensions themselves do. They intermingle to such an extent that we're able to communicate no matter what language anyone uses. As long as you can read or speak, you can understand everything written or spoken in Splinterpoint."

Kol'daar nodded along, his eyes narrowed in consideration. When Nunzio finished, he said sagely, "So... magic."

"No. Not magic," Nunzio was clear on this point. If it was magic, then he himself would be unable to understand other beings here, much less be understood by them.

"So, then, *science*?" Kol'daar said the word with the pleased inflection of someone who has managed to use the word of the day from their desk calendar in a sentence.

Happy to rain on his parade, Nunzio corrected, "Not exactly. Science detected it, but doesn't cause it. They're not really sure how it happens, just that it *does* happen."

"*That's* convenient," 'Phil' said suspiciously. "It broadcasts our thoughts, or something?"

"Um, there's a section in your parchment about it that gives the pertinent information," Nunzio said, striving for a lofty neutrality. "I don't understand it, but neither do the Superscientists."

"Unless they just want you to *think* they don't understand," 'Phil' said. "How do you know you can trust these 'super' scientists?"

Vorkra had stipulated in the contract that he wasn't to deliberately fuck with the attendees, and he damned her for her foresight. While Nunzio fought seriously with the urge to explain the Earthling technology known as a tinfoil hat, Rumble-hiss-snarl spoke without raising her paw.

"You said that the dimensions converge. What did you mean by that?"

"Okay, well, let's go back to the cake metaphor," Nunzio said and wished he hadn't.

The gas-cloud still didn't get it, and everyone who *did* felt that explaining cake was more important than explaining what the cake metaphor was meant to explain. Nunzio tried to regain control of the situation by raising his voice but was drowned out by 'Phil,' who had covered his ear holes and started shouting phonetic nonsense, apparently determined to keep the Superscientists from

invading his head to translate anything. The Venusians seemed about to come to blows over which sort of cake best represented the multiverse, and the three weird girls watched the chaos with oddly rapturous expressions.

A series of notes punctured the bedlam, bringing with it a mild but pervasive buzz of magic. Nunzio recognized this, of course, and he whipped his head back toward Kol'daar, who was indeed strumming his weird harp. He wasn't looking at Nunzio, though, his attention fixed on the kerfuffle in the back row, a furrow of concentration on his brow. The song he played was lilting and gentle, some kind of lullaby.

The effects were immediate. The Venusians had gotten out of their chairs to grapple, and when the chords struck them, they froze. Baffled looks formed on their long faces, and they blinked at each other, then let go. Rumble-hiss-snarl dropped the chair she'd picked up to hurl at the two combatants, looking surprised that it had even been in her paws. The gas-cloud billowed down from the light fixtures, where zhe'd fled when shit started getting out of hand.

Everyone settled down, righted the furniture, and sat back down with various shades of sheepishness and confusion. Even 'Phil' had calmed, his voice not the frantic bellow it had been, but he still had his hands over his auditory organs. The Reverend Wadsworth, who had appeared unmoved by the whole fiasco, happened to be sitting next to him, and the man poked the alien in the side. Grays were apparently ticklish; 'Phil' squeaked and dropped his hands to flinch. Then he, too, seemed to mellow further, leaning back in his seat, a dopey grin on his face.

The only people who didn't seem lulled by the music were Kol'daar, Nunzio, and the trio of clone-girls. Red, Riss, and Rayl had turned as one in their seats to stare fixedly at Kol'daar. Their faces were back to being mostly blank, but Nunzio thought he saw something like dismay or upset flickering in their eyes. Then they performed one of their synchronized blinks, and whatever it was had gone.

Kol'daar finished his impromptu concert with a trill that reverberated sweetly off the conference room's walls. The feeling of magic was slower to recede, and Nunzio cocked his head at the man. Kol'daar returned the look evenly, his poise enviable.

Technically, the rules of the SpOC forbade attendees to use weapons or magic under penalty of eviction. That much had been made clear on the enchanted parchments. The room was supposed to be set up to recognize use of contraband tech and spells, but the counterspells hadn't been activated. Huh.

Under the circumstances, Nunzio was prepared to look the other way, and it only galled him a little.

He cleared his throat into the dreamy silence, drawing people's attention back to him. "Um... And thus concludes the talent portion of class! That was Kol'daar on the, uh—"

"Spiderharp," the man supplied quietly.

"On the spiderharp," Nunzio said, eyeing the instrument. "Say, is that enchanted at all?"

"No."

"Can I borrow it for a second?"

Kol'daar hesitated, obviously remembering the last time Nunzio had touched one of his possessions. But then he handed it over. Nunzio held the leather-wrapped hoop gingerly and held it up for the class to observe.

"So, Rumble-hiss-snarl asked how dimensions converge," he said. He pointed at the intricate weave of sinew strings. "They're kind of like this. The spaces between the strings represent universes, separate but interconnected in a way that isn't apparent when you're stuck inside one."

The webbed design of the harp grew more complex the closer to the middle of the circle. The strings formed a many-pointed star around the gap at the very center. Nunzio pointed this out to his still surprisingly attentive class.

"The more dimensions there are, the more closely they pack together, until there's no room anymore for the barrier between them. The barrier breaks down, splinters off, and the different universes meld together," he explained, pointing to the center of the spiderharp. "This is what Splinterpoint is. It's a pocket dimension that formed at the intersecting point of all these other similar dimensions.

"And I mean similar in the broadest sense. Similar atmospheres, matter composition, gravity, et cetera. Hardly anyone shows up in Splinterpoint that can't survive this version of nature." He shrugged. "It happens sometimes, and it can get ugly. Sector 27 had a being made of pure antimatter show up once."

"There wasn't a Sector 27 on the map I got," said 'Phil' with only a hint of mistrust.

"Nope, not anymore," Nunzio agreed. He let that sink in while he handed the spiderharp back to Kol'daar. "Any questions, or can I move on to the guilds?"

There were no objections from the peanut gallery, so Nunzio had them turn to the pamphlet titled ‘The Free Market Corrects YOU.’ It was about what the guilds did to oathbreakers, freelancers who they caught infringing on their professions, and clients who didn’t cough up payment after a completed contract. As such, it was the perfect starting point to encourage people to join up rather than upset the applecart of Splinterpoint’s non-governing bodies.

According to Vorkra, there had always been a problem for the guilds when people showed up and decided that since there was no government and therefore no laws, they could get away with every kind of depravity known to sentient life. It wasn’t that the guilds disapproved of murder, rape, and pillage; it was that these people ought to join up with the Assassins’, Torturers’, or Thieves’ Guilds to do it.

When they didn’t, the guilds had to work harder to enforce the monopolies on their trades, which was a waste of time and personnel. It didn’t take Ayn Rand to see how that was just two steps from the really dangerous kind of anarchy: the unprofitable kind. Down that road lay turf wars and the utter destruction of the economy.

The solution, therefore, was to expand the Hospitality Guild’s purview to include informing new arrivals of how the city worked, let them know that ‘lawless’ didn’t mean ‘no consequences,’ and discourage any freelance mayhem.

“So, say you like to eat, um, Twinks or something. It’s not *illegal* to do it, but if you go around snacking on people, there’s nothing to stop that person’s friends, family, and guild from putting a price on your head or coming after you themselves. Whereas if you joined the Assassins’ Guild, you could specialize in hits against Twinks, and then you’d get paid to eat dinner,” Nunzio explained, trying to put a positive spin on it. “Plus then you’d have your guild’s enforcers backing you up if someone still tried to retaliate.”

“So basically the guilds facilitate any axe you have to grind?” Reverend Wadsworth asked, showing interest for the first time. His voice was slow and sonorous, clearly crafted for sermons. Something about it was familiar, but Nunzio couldn’t place it.

“Not exactly,” Nunzio said with a shrug. “I mean, if there’s profitable contracts for it, then probably. But they don’t really cover personal vendettas. One good rule to remember is the interdimensionally famous Splinterpoignant Tolerance Aphorism.”

“What might that be?” Wadsworth asked dryly.

“‘Shut up, no one cares,’” Nunzio said. When the preacher man puffed up in offense, Nunzio clarified, “That’s the saying. ‘Shut up, no one cares.’ It doesn’t matter if you hate a specific group, be it religion, species, gender, whatever. It doesn’t matter if you’re a champion of justice for said group. Either way, no one’s going to have much patience for your rhetoric, not when there’s profit to be made, and in a place like Splinterpoint, you can’t avoid the ‘enemy’ forever. So, if you ever find yourself about to go off about inherent superiority or the One True Religion, just repeat to yourself—”

“Shut up, no one cares,” the class chimed not really at the same time, except for the Three Rs, who were as scarily attuned as ever.

Nunzio grinned. “Exactly!”

“What if you don’t *want* to join a guild?” ‘Phil’ asked. “How do you make a living without doing what They want you to do?”

“Well, there’s indentured servitude,” Nunzio said, carefully not looking at Kol’daar. “Typically you sign a contract with your boss, they pay you in room, board, clothing, any necessary medical supplies, and sometimes even a wage. In exchange, you do whatever labor you’ve been tasked. I don’t recommend it, but it beats slavery, hands down.”

“There’s slavery here?” the Venusian with a swollen eyestalk asked nervously.

“Nope. Slavery needs too much actual law to support it, and it’s, like, *incredibly* easy for people to escape from slavery here. Magic and tech are too readily available to keep anyone on a leash for long. Someone might be able to get away with it for a while, but eventually one of the slaves is going to bust out and bring the Hospitality Guild down on the culprit’s head like a ton of bricks.”

“Why the Hospitality Guild?” asked Kol’daar, intrigued.

Nunzio shrugged again. “I think way back they were founded by a bunch of escaped slaves from Dimension X or whatever. Also, I guess holding a bunch of beings prisoner, forcing them into servitude with no pay, and brutally beating them whenever you feel like it is an infringement of the Hospitality Code. Go figure.”

“So, I’m *free*?” the Venusian asked as if she didn’t quite understand what the word might mean.

“Yeah,” Nunzio said. Then he thought that maybe the moment deserved something more notable than that. He smiled at her. “Congratulations.”

Her eyestalks bobbed vigorously, and the other Venusian looked away, as if it was some kind of intensely awkward emotional display, like someone bawling loudly on the subway.

After that came a whole lot of fine print involving the guilds and the monetary system, basic concepts of science and magic, and the murkier blending of the two. Kol'daar still seemed not to fully grasp the difference between the science and magic, but Nunzio didn't really blame him. He vaguely remembered some Earth quote about any sufficiently advanced whatever being the same as another thing, but he couldn't remember who said it.

The gas-cloud was hopelessly confused by most things. Rumble-hiss-snarl took it upon herself to explain things to hir, but was hindered by 'Phil's' suspicious interjections. Nunzio relished poking at the Gray's paranoia to a degree that probably proved that deep down he was a real prick. Still, he could barely contain his glee when he got to explain the nanotech that the Medical Guild had released into the atmosphere to weed out any interdimensional plagues before they could take hold in the vulnerable populace. 'Phil' practically exploded trying to hold his breath, then pulled his colorless jumpsuit's collar up over his nasal holes like that would accomplish anything.

No one asked why Nunzio had a mountain of pamphlets instead of one of the enchanted parchments, but he worked in a warning about eating food from untested sources. He was pretty sure most people assumed he meant they'd get accidentally poisoned or something, but as long as the point got across, he felt like he'd said his piece.

Chapter Eight

Finally, he led the class in the recorded oath. Once everyone had averred they understood the information provided, Nunzio went over to the false wall behind his desk and hit the control pad in the corner. The wall dissolved, revealing a snack bar complete with little placards beneath each dish to list which species could safely consume what.

The gas-cloud hovered over Rumble-hiss-snarl as she scarfed things down, fascinated by the discovery of eating. Red, Riss, and Rayl descended on something like a dainty swarm of locusts.

Upon closer examination, it turned out to be cake.

“Devil’s food,” observed Reverend Wadsworth. He sniffed disdainfully. “I’ll pass. Is the orientation complete?”

Nunzio hastily swallowed his own bite of sinfully chocolatey cake. “Uh, yeah, that’s it. The SpOC is over. You’re free to go. Just, uh, think about what guild suits you and such. There’s quite a few for religious types, you know.”

Wadsworth muttered a vague acknowledgment and swept out of the conference room. Nunzio didn’t take offense. If he didn’t need to stick around to supervise and clean up afterward, not even cake would get him to stay with these chuckleheads.

Everyone socialized fairly well, no further arguments breaking out. The weird girls huddled together, whispering together in a corner. The Venusians appeared to be making amends, chatting together over a salad that looked like it was made of broken glass and insect legs. ‘Phil’ had cornered Kol’daar, already forgetting the Tolerance Aphorism with his rant about Them and Their shadowy presence in everything. Kol’daar handled this with the friendly ease that Nunzio was starting to think of as the most annoying part of the man’s personality.

No one was talking to Nunzio. He didn’t particularly mind, but it did reinforce the feeling that he was the guidance counselor chaperoning a high school dance. He contented himself with free food, which wasn’t excellent, but a damn sight better than the Kobold-O’s he’d been subsisting on for the last few days.

He wondered dismally what he was going to do for food after they ran out. His indenture contract was only for this particular SpOC. Vorkra loathed

leading them so much that he hadn't even needed to haggle much to get her to write off the cost of the scry-cube for just this one day's work. While he was glad that he wouldn't have to do this again, he didn't like the idea of going hungry until the Mercenaries' Guild got around to scheduling his secondary evaluation.

The attendees trickled out slowly while Nunzio contemplated the relative evils of asking Vorkra to extend his contract versus starvation. His wrist-comm chimed an incoming call. A glance showed it was Sakano, and Nunzio grimaced.

He reached for the 'reject' button, but then the comm activated by itself.

"Mr. Arquette, I really require just a moment of your time," Sakano announced as his hologram appeared in the air above Nunzio's wrist. The angle was bad because of the position of Nunzio's arm. Sakano recoiled from the view of Nunzio's lap.

Nunzio jerked his hand up to eye level to glare at Sakano. He tried to hang up, but the function had been disabled. "Dammit. How did you do that?"

"Don't underestimate me," Sakano said with a mysterious look. "I am a mad scientist, after all. Now, about the funding. You really can't back out now. MOM is almost ready, I'm sure of it. I know there have been a series of setbacks—"

"You mean a series of explosions," Kwiif said, somewhere out of sight on the other end of the line. "Have you started fixing the emergency exit yet?"

"A few *setbacks*," Sakano went on loudly. "But abandoning MOM at this point is simply unacceptable."

"You can't squeeze blood from a stone, Sakano," Nunzio said tiredly. "I really don't have any credits to spare. You've probably hacked my account by now, so you know I'm not lying. Why is this so important all of a sudden?"

Several tentacles squirmed into view. Sakano ducked out of the way with a surprised shout, and the hologram went jittery as there was some kind of scuffle that ended up with Kwiif in full view. Even though he was aware that it was only a projection, Nunzio couldn't help but hold his wrist out as if he could keep the revolting display at bay. He was usually good at coping with other species, but tentacle monsters were just icky.

"He's lost all his other contracts; that's why. If he loses you, he can't afford to keep up the lab," she explained with a squirming shrug. "Unfortunately, that

also puts my apprenticeship in peril. So, Mr. Arquette, you really need to find a way to fund us. I'm sure if I take over the main research, further explosions will be kept at a minimum. It's in your own interest to keep MOM going, isn't it? It'd be a real shame if we had to blow her up for good."

Nunzio felt his eyes widen. "You're holding *MOM* hostage? Sakano, I don't believe you. I know how much you love—"

"You'd do that to your own mother? What kind of monster are you?"

The interruption came from behind Nunzio. He turned in his seat to see that not all the attendees had left. Kol'daar stood beside the snack bar, a look of cold anger hardening his features, his knife-eyes flashing dangerously. The effect was ruined by a paper plate heaped with cold cuts and cheese in his hands.

"I'm not a *monster*, you racist prick," Kwiif said hotly. "You bipeds are all prejudi—"

Nunzio decided that this had gone on long enough. He let his control slip, and the wrist-comm fried itself. He might have overdone it a bit, because the durable band that held it on disintegrated. The hologram disappeared as the whole thing clattered to the threadbare carpeting.

"Dammit, I liked that comm," he said, regretting the expensive loss as he rubbed the sting away. There was also the small matter of how the hell the Guild was going to contact him about his upcoming evaluation, not to mention the pending call from Zinchalte demanding to be wined and dined. Ah well, he'd figure something out.

"Where are they keeping her?" Kol'daar demanded, coming to stand beside Nunzio's chair. "I will help you save her."

"Save—oh. Uh, look, they're not serious," Nunzio said, startled at the intensity of Kol'daar's reaction. "And it's not my mother, really."

"Blood does not a family make," Kol'daar replied firmly. "If she means enough to you that you'd pay her ransom—"

"No, no, really," Nunzio hastened to correct the base misconception. "MOM isn't even a person. It's a machine. Multiversal Origins Machine, MOM for short. I hired Sakano to build it. They can blow it up if they feel like it. Wouldn't even be the first time."

Kol'daar frowned, the sternness fading from his expression. "They work for you?"

“Worked. Past tense,” Nunzio responded dully, pinching the bridge of his nose. Last night’s sleeplessness was catching up without a constant stream of caffeine. He supposed he just ought to get used to the headache at this point. “But I guess I shoulda known better than to think a mad scientist would take the loss of funding lying down.”

“Mad scientist?”

“Never mind,” Nunzio told him. “It’s no big deal. He can’t do anything about it.”

Which wasn’t precisely true, but Kol’daar didn’t need to know that. The ready way the man had leapt to help him mollified his grudge just a bit—it really was clear that Kol’daar had never meant him any harm by his continual clueless blunders—but that didn’t mean Nunzio was eager to start sharing and caring. He could handle the situation himself.

“Are you finished with the snacks? I need to start cleaning up.”

Kol’daar nodded. “Would you like a hand?”

“No, that’d go against my indenture contract.”

“You’re indentured?” Kol’daar’s brows rose. “I thought Guild members couldn’t accept indenture contracts.”

“I’m on probation,” Nunzio snapped. “Remember that part?”

“Of course,” came the mildly affronted reply. “I don’t forget those I’ve wronged, however unintentionally.”

As Nunzio shot him a gauging glance, he realized that Kol’daar was standing quite close. He was even more attractive from this distance. He couldn’t be older than Nunzio, but there were tiny creases at the corners of his eyes already, from laughter or maybe bad vision. The barbeque smell still lingered slightly, mixed with a hint of masculine sweat in a not-unpleasant way.

That didn’t mean that the man’s presence was welcome, even if he *did* have perfect abs. Nunzio enjoyed his personal space, and clearly this guy was a close-talker, one of those people who got all up in your personal bubble. Whether it was a cultural thing or a personal quirk, Nunzio hated it.

He managed to scrape up some indignation and pushed his rolling chair away before he stood and began to stack the chairs. Kol’daar perched next to Nunzio’s precarious stacks of pamphlets on the desk and began to eat his snacks.

“Why are you still here?”

“I’m keeping you company.”

Nunzio rolled his eyes. “What part of ‘loner’ do you not understand?”

Kol’daar shrugged, chewing noisily. “The part where ‘loner’ means you can’t have a civil conversation once in a while.”

“A man in a loincloth and no shirt, who’s talking with his mouth full, is lecturing *me* on ‘civil’ conversation.”

“Well, just goes to show. Besides, Lolanna was telling me about you.”

“Oh, so it’s *Lolanna* now. My, my, you’re making friends left and right.”

“Well, she *did* invite me on the dungeon crawl. And ‘Proctor Solang’ was one syllable too many to shout in a fight, I guess.”

Nunzio gritted his teeth and started shoving the stacked chairs into the corner of the room. He refused to rise to the bait and ask what she’d said about him. He didn’t care about his reputation in the Guild.

Just like he didn’t care that in all the time he’d been enrolled as a bounty hunter, he’d never once been invited to go on a dungeon crawl. The closest he’d come to one hadn’t even been through the Mercenaries’ Guild, but that disastrous Tomb Raid Zin had dragged him on, the one that still haunted his nightmares, and the less he thought about that the better.

If dungeon crawls were anything like *that*, he didn’t even *want* to go, because he had adopted a no-kill policy, and that wasn’t really an option in a dungeon full of murderous treasure hoarders. He even understood that it was once again his disability that kept him from having to refuse the no-doubt profuse invitations he’d get without it.

He pointedly stepped around the sack of enchanted loot Kol’daar had brought with him.

“Could you get this crap out of the way? I’d move it myself, but I can’t afford to pay you damages,” he said crossly.

Kol’daar got up, licking his fingertips clean before he shouldered the pack and picked up his spiderharp. Good. He was leaving, finally. But Kol’daar just dropped the pack beside the exit, turned around, and started to play his harp.

Nunzio tensed, but the odd feeling of Kol’daar’s brand of magic never materialized. The man was just playing regular music. Something upbeat that wouldn’t be out of place at a Renaissance Faire. Nunzio stared at him.

“What are you *doing*?”

“Well, you don’t want to talk, so I thought this might be more enjoyable,” Kol’daar said, unruffled as ever.

“Okay, okay, stop that,” Nunzio said. “I am not in the mood for a serenade.”

“I’ll stop if you let me say my piece without being rude about it,” Kol’daar offered, still skillfully strumming and plucking the strings with his large, calloused fingers.

Nunzio huffed and crossed his arms. “Christ, fine. What? What is it?”

Kol’daar pressed his hand to the strings to stem the sound and began to speak. “Lolanna told me that you’re one of the best bounty hunters this sector has ever seen. She said you have never killed while on a hunt, not even in self-defense. She seemed quite impressed with you.”

Nunzio felt his jaw drop. “Lolanna said that? Was she *drunk*?”

“Ah, well, there’d been some ale, but that’s not the point. She just proved what I already suspected.”

“Which is?”

“That you are an honorable warrior,” Kol’daar said, pinning Nunzio with a look that dared him to argue. “And I wronged you. By accident, out of ignorance, but I stole your livelihood just the same.”

Well, the last part was true enough, but when he put it like that...

Nunzio almost pointed out that he’d vandalized Kol’daar’s stuff already, which didn’t seem very honorable. Fun, but not honorable, and definitely more trouble than it was worth. He was hesitant to call himself a ‘warrior,’ considering he mostly just ran around with a gun that looked like he’d gotten it from the special offer on the back of a cereal box—which he actually had, because Kobold-O’s were awesome that way. But Kol’daar kept talking, and Nunzio missed his chance to register his objections.

“Where I come from, when an honorable warrior wrongs another, there are steps to make amends. We could fight each other in a duel—”

“No. This is Feud-Free Housing. Vorkra would evict us both.”

Kol’daar nodded to the sack of loot. “The Guild took most of that first bounty as tithe, but I intend to sell that lot. I could pay you back the amount of the bounty.”

“The Guild probably will be watching for that kind of thing,” Nunzio shook his head. “They have us on record nearly stating that you were trying to assist me on the evaluation. Any money changing hands would definitely be a red flag. We’d both get booted out.”

“Then I could owe you a boon,” Kol’daar said, undaunted. “Like when I offered to rescue your mother just now.”

“MOM isn’t my mother.”

“Yes. But you get the idea. You could call on my services when you have need of them,” the man told him, lifting his spiderharp by way of example.

Nunzio eyed it, then Kol’daar. That was some handy trick the guy had pulled earlier, somehow using his music-magic to calm the rowdy class. And the sensors hadn’t registered anything out of the ordinary, either. *That* could be extremely useful.

“So you’re what, exactly? A magical bard-barian or something?” he asked dubiously.

“I’m a Songweaver. I hear the Orphic Noise,” Kol’daar explained. “When I Play, I can use the Noise to influence the world around me. Sometimes it is gentle, as before.”

He grinned suddenly, a sly expression with a dangerous glitter of straight white teeth, and then he plucked a couple strings. The zing of magic rippled across Nunzio’s flesh, and the remains of his wrist-comm, still on the floor where he’d dropped it, burst into pieces.

“Sometimes, it is not gentle,” Kol’daar finished smugly.

Nunzio wasn’t impressed. He’d seen a lot of magic since he’d left Earth, some of it vile, some of it wondrous, some of it simply utilitarian. Granted, the style of this magic was different than usual, but it was just another example of the vast variety of Splinterpoint.

What he found more interesting was the offer of a favor. If Kol’daar was from a society that prized honor so highly, surely the man was aware that favors were binding agreements not to be made lightly. It would be easy for Nunzio to exploit a freely given boon, turn a blank check of a promise into a millstone around Kol’daar’s neck.

Yeah, he could be just like Zinchalte.

Dammitall.

“You don’t owe me a boon,” Nunzio bit out, angry at himself, both for rejecting the offer and for being tempted to abuse it in the first place. “Don’t *make* promises like that in Splinterpoint, man. They’ll come back to bite you in the ass.”

Kol’daar’s smile fell and the first glimmer of frustration entered his tone when he said, “You are stubborn. But I am stubborn, too. My own honor won’t let me carry on until we’ve settled things between us.”

“There is no ‘between us’!” Nunzio insisted, throwing his hands in the air. His frayed temper snapped, tension of the past few days lashing out at the most obvious target. “For fuck’s sake! You don’t know me, I don’t know you, and this all has been just my usual bad luck finally catching up to me. I don’t need *you* trying to make yourself feel better by butting in with your stupid harp and your perfect abs, acting like you think you’re Prince Charming and my Fairy Godmother all rolled into one. You’ve done enough damage by *existing* in my general vicinity, so if you want to do me a favor, why don’t you save your damn pity and just *leave me alone?*”

Kol’daar couldn’t have looked more shocked if Nunzio had slapped him across the face. His hands dropped to his sides, the spiderharp dangling forlornly. Nunzio breathed heavily after his rant, the sound loud in the sudden silence.

“I see,” Kol’daar said quietly. He looked at the floor. “Then, as you wish. Farewell, Hunter Arquette.”

Nunzio turned away to continue with the cleanup. As he began shoveling the pamphlets off the top of the desk and into its deep drawers, he heard the chime of a comm-unit. He startled, at first staring disbelievingly at the bits of his wrist-comm before he realized that it was coming from Kol’daar’s pack.

Kol’daar paused in his exit to dig out the handheld comm. He didn’t look at Nunzio as he answered it.

“Greetings, Kol’daar,” Lolanna Solang’s hologram said.

“Greetings, Lolanna. What can I do for you?”

“Do you know the whereabouts of Nunzio Arquette? I have tried to reach him on his comm, but the call will not connect.”

“He is nearby,” Kol’daar said, chancing a carefully neutral glance toward him.

Nunzio glared back, but called out as he dropped his handful of pamphlets to approach. “*He’s* right here. Did you need something, *Lolanna?*”

Lolanna managed to give the impression of rolling her eye without actually doing so. “This is official Guild business, Hunter Arquette. Kol’daar, this concerns you as well.”

Nunzio felt a frisson of unease at her serious tone. Had the Guild decided to fire them after all?

“What do you mean?” he asked, reluctantly standing beside Kol’daar so she could see him in her projection. Kol’daar shifted slightly, clearly as uncomfortable as he himself was.

“A client has requested you both for a job. It seems there is a need for your individual talents.”

Nunzio goggled at her. “Huh?”

“The client requires someone who can break the most powerful enchantments, and someone familiar with musical magics,” Lolanna explained. “Kol’daar is the only member of the Guild with the latter qualification, but she knew your name, Hunter Arquette. Said you came with the highest recommendations. They’re also offering a million credits for each of you, upon the successful completion of the contract.”

“How flattering,” Nunzio muttered. Funny that no one had noticed his excellent service record until he’d screwed it up. And as many spare parts for MOM and boxes of cereal that a million credits would buy, there was still a very large stumbling block in the way. “That doesn’t change the fact that I’m out of business, at the moment.”

“Not necessarily,” she said. “The Guildmasters have agreed to allow you special dispensation to accept this contract. The client was adamant no one but you would do.”

Nunzio goggled harder. “But that’s completely against the Charter. I haven’t been given my secondary evaluation. I don’t even have my license right now.”

Lolanna glanced around her and then lowered her voice to a low murmur. “The Guildmasters have invoked the Extraordinary Circumstances Amendment.”

The pit of Nunzio’s stomach dropped away. “You’re shitting me. No way.”

“I do not shit,” Lolanna said, proving yet again that she was too uptight to successfully use slang, but Nunzio was too shocked to mock her for it. “I was present for the discussion.”

“What’s the Extraordinary Circumstances Amendment?” Kol’daar asked.

“Free rein to stop the apocalypse,” Nunzio summed up shortly. He felt sort of numb.

The Charter had only a handful of amendments, most of them covering obscure situations that would allow the basic rules of the Charter to be overruled. The Extraordinary Circumstances Amendment was invoked least often—which was saying something, because there was one amendment concerning the use of fondue as a siege weapon. For something to be considered an extraordinary circumstance in Splinterpoint, it basically had to threaten the sector, city, or plane as a whole.

“I don’t feel it a wise idea to discuss this further over an unsecured comm,” Lolanna said. “Both of you, report to Headquarters immediately.”

Nunzio bit back a curse. “I can’t, not immediately. I’m indentured for a little while yet.”

“Then I suggest you finish your duties quickly. I will be waiting.” Lolanna did not wait for further acknowledgement before she hung up.

Kol’daar met Nunzio’s eyes warily as he stowed his comm in the pack.

“You might as well go now,” Nunzio said, awkwardly aware that he’d have to put his personal issues with the man on the back burner if the world was at stake.

“Can you not explain to Vorkra that something has come up?” Kol’daar asked.

Nunzio snorted, running a hand through his hair. ‘Sorry I ditched my end of the contract, but I had to go save the world,’ might sound like a perfect excuse, but he doubted it was something he should be announcing. “Nah, probably not a good idea. This won’t take me long.”

“I will help you,” Kol’daar said, some of his good-natured arrogance returning with the statement.

“You can’t. Vorkra will—”

“I won’t tell her if you won’t,” Kol’daar told him, a thin smile sitting on his lips like the truce-offering it was.

Nunzio huffed again and capitulated. “Fine. Whatever. Knock yourself out—”

Kol'daar cut him off with a series of complex arpeggios on his harp. The humming pressure of magic washed over him as the chairs leapt into stacks, the pamphlets filed themselves, and the contents of the snack bar sealed themselves in their stasisware containers. Even the garbage bags tied themselves up and came to rest by the door as the last note faded out.

Nunzio glared. Kol'daar opened his mouth to say something, but Nunzio interrupted him before he could get the first words past the smug grin.

“Shut up, Mary Poppins, no one cares.”

Chapter Nine

They both had to run up to their rooms before they left. Kol'daar had to stow his loot, and Nunzio had to grab his coat and weapons. He mourned the loss of his sunglasses. When he had money again, he'd buy a new pair first thing. And a fedora. Maybe he'd seen the Indiana Jones movies too many times, but it didn't seem right that he was going to save the world without a hat.

He was going to *save the world*.

Christ on a cracker. The thought woke him up better than coffee could ever dream. His hands shook as he donned his holster and machete.

Kol'daar was waiting for him in the hallway when he left his apartment. He had strapped his harp across his back, two leather strips crisscrossing his chest, and a large sword with a ridiculously embellished golden scabbard—clearly part of his haul from the dungeon crawl—dangled from his hip. He looked every bit the barbarian prince, tall and proud, his face set in serious lines. Nunzio was reminded of his first impression of the man: that he was dangerous.

"It'll be easier if we just share a cab," Kol'daar said as they got into the rickety birdcage elevator.

"I'll pay you back once we get the bounty," Nunzio replied. He tapped the button for the lobby. "And no magic taxis. I'd only break it."

Kol'daar eyed him and glanced at the sword on his own hip. Then he pointedly crossed to Nunzio's other side, so the sword stayed as far away from the walking disenchantment as possible. He didn't bother being insulted; it was only common sense.

They didn't speak again until they'd gone outside and gotten into a hovercar. As they soared through a fuchsia sky above the city and its traffic, Nunzio felt Kol'daar's gaze on him.

Keeping his own gaze on the scenery, he growled, "What?"

"Are all people from your homeland immune to magic?"

Nunzio shrugged. "Probably not. We don't really have magic back on Earth. I wasn't immune when I got here."

"Something here *made* you this way?" While he felt the tone of shocked horror was a bit much, Nunzio nodded. "What happened?"

“Cursed burrito,” he said shortly.

“What’s a burrito?”

“It doesn’t matter, does it?”

“It does to me,” Kol’daar said irritably. Nunzio turned to look at the man, who crossed his arms and stared back. “I don’t relish losing my Heartsong to *any* curse, thank you very much. I wouldn’t be able to use my magic anymore.”

Loath as he was to admit it, that was a pretty good reason to want to know. And hadn’t Nunzio tried to warn the SpOC attendees earlier?

He faced the window again and in the briefest terms explained burritos and the amazing vanishing taco truck. He left out the part where he had fled naked from an angry mob and spent a week obliterating everything in arm’s reach. He also didn’t talk about how Zinchalte had flinched away from him, afterward—not that Nunzio blamed the guy, really, but having a lover literally shudder in terror at the idea of touching him again did not do wonders for his self-esteem.

It just wasn’t fair that apparently the same part of his brain that controlled his disability was the first thing to get short-circuited when lust entered the picture. He *had* gotten better at not letting the surge of destructive energy vaporize his clothes the second he got a hard-on—after about the third time—but that was it. He certainly wasn’t going to volunteer such information, however.

Nor did he mention what had happened in the tomb.

“And now, well, you’ve seen it happen. Spells break if I touch ’em, nothing I can do about it. At least I can get tech not to explode, if I’m trying,” Nunzio finished.

“That sounds *awful*,” Kol’daar said with feeling.

The contrarian part of Nunzio wanted to object, mostly because he hated pity. But Kol’daar was right. It *really* sucked. He settled on, “Tell me about it. It’s not completely useless, though.”

“I suppose so,” came the doubtful reply.

That got Nunzio’s dander up. He snapped, “Well, the *client* seems to think that it’ll help *save the world*.”

As he’d kind of suspected that if he ever lost control of his disability, one day he’d be known as ‘Nunzio, Destroyer of Worlds,’ that was definitely a step up.

Kol'daar fell silent for a moment. Quietly, he asked, "Is this world really at stake?"

"I guess so," Nunzio said. He glanced at the partition between them and the robot cab driver. It was closed, but that wasn't a guarantee they wouldn't be overheard. "We'll find out when we get to HQ."

Kol'daar took the hint and shut up. The silence that fell was tense and not a little awkward. The talk of the Burrito Incident had got Nunzio ruminating on unpleasant topics. He couldn't help but remember the ill-fated Tomb Raid, which had been before he'd joined the Mercenaries' Guild. It remained the only time he'd worked in tandem with anyone in Splinterpoint, though, and certainly set a terrible precedent.

He fiddled with the controls to his window, adjusting the tint up and down, and came to the conclusion he had to address a particular concern. He cleared his throat.

"So, your, uh, noise thing," he started nonchalantly.

"You mean the Orphic Noise?"

"Yeah, that. Does it let you know if there's magic around? Like, say, you'd be able to tell if there's an enchantment on something?" He tilted his head just enough to slant a glance at the man out of the corner of his eye.

Kol'daar didn't seem thrown by the question. He probably thought Nunzio was asking for his own sake, and that was fine.

"To be honest, I don't know. Magic here is strange compared to what I'm used to. All magic has distinct tonal patterns, but some of what you call 'technology' sounds similar," Kol'daar said after taking a moment to consider.

Nunzio supposed that answer explained why Kol'daar seemed not to be able to tell if something was based in magic or science. To the music-magically trained ear, magic and science were homophones. Go figure.

"Then if you hear anything weird—magic or tech or whatever—tell me. Don't touch it. I'll handle it," Nunzio instructed in his best brook-no-contradiction tone.

"You mean you'll break it," Kol'daar corrected lightly.

Nunzio twisted in his seat to glare, a defensive retort already forming on his lips, but Kol'daar just smiled at him disarmingly.

There was a sudden flip in Nunzio's midsection, but it certainly came from the hovercar's drop in altitude as they landed outside their destination.

"Don't worry about me, Hunter Arquette. I am a trained warrior and Songweaver, and despite what you think, I *am* learning to deal with this dimension," Kol'daar informed him. He pulled out a credit card from a small pouch on his belt, brandishing it at him by way of example.

Then he floundered a moment, glancing around for the card reader.

Nunzio snorted. "Yep, you're sure destined for glory here."

Kol'daar's pale eyes narrowed at him. Then he reached out his arm, leaning across the seat with a creak of his leather leggings. Startled, Nunzio pressed himself back against the cushioning as Kol'daar invaded his personal bubble. He heard the swipe of the card next to his head, but he found himself unable to look away as Kol'daar's smile became a smirk.

Like the close-talker he was, Kol'daar said, "Maybe so. But saving the world is glorious enough for both of us, isn't it?"

Nunzio didn't really care about glory and almost said so. He found his mouth was suddenly too dry to formulate a response, though, so he just snapped his jaw shut, nodded, and got out.

The Mercenaries' Guild of Sector 31 had made their Headquarters in a grand fortress, complete with iron-spiked ramparts, looming Gothic arches, and a drawbridge over a moat full of vicious black-and-green striped hippopotamus-lizard things. Nunzio still remembered the intimidating sound of their hungry bellows as he'd dragged his sorry ass into the building to sign up a year ago.

But that building had been lost six months later, when a giant lizard fell out of the changeable sky and smashed it and a good chunk of the surrounding area to rubble. It had been an accident, of course; the poor bastard had been just another new arrival. Representatives of the Hospitality Guild had eventually led the guy off to Sector 85, which was sized more appropriately for him to start his new life.

New buildings appeared in place of the old, as the city was wont to replace itself—another phenomenon related to Splinterpoint's unique interdimensional physics and position at a multiversal nexus. It was just as well, as there weren't any real resources on the entire plane. When things got destroyed by time, mishap, or mayhem, new architecture just showed up. The only reason Sector

27 had been wiped off the map was because it was literally a hole in the dimension, and even that was slowly shrinking as the space/time fabric healed.

Unfortunately for Sector 31, there was only one replacement structure that was large enough to house the Mercenaries' Guild. Nunzio was sure he wasn't the only one who found the new palace underwhelming by comparison. Not that they hadn't *tried*. Someone had gotten ambitious since the last time Nunzio was here and had added the Guild crest to the outer wall. The crest depicted an axe splitting a misshapen skull that had three eye sockets.

That it was done in white icing on a gingerbread wall just spoke to that enterprising soul's sense of either irony or authenticity.

He walked through the enormous gate made of red-and-white peppermint sticks, grimacing at the texture of the gumdrop lane beneath his boots. He didn't have to turn to know that Kol'daar followed; he could hear the other man's sticky steps behind him, like the jackass at the movie theater who got up in the middle of the flick to hit the john.

They passed through the front gardens, where a handful of beings were having a laser-tag game amongst the marzipan topiary shrubs and marmalade fountains. As they passed near a fondant sculpture of a half-naked chick, a stray laser blast sheared off her arms, instantly turning her into an edible Venus de Milo.

Both men dropped into crouches in case of further fire.

"Heads up!" came the belated cry.

"Watch it!" Nunzio shouted back in disgust. "We're walkin' here!"

"Oh, hi, Kol'daar!" someone else yelled. "Wanna join in?"

"No, but thank you!" Kol'daar responded.

"Drinks later?"

"Perhaps! Comm me!"

Fortunately, the laser-tag players moved off, and the two of them continued into the gingerbread castle without further incident. The stench of sugar and spice was truly cloying as they made their way to the information desk in the grand foyer.

"Hello, Officer Brutus!" Kol'daar called, stepping up to the desk.

"Hunter Kol'daar, welcome back," greeted the jovial information officer, a burly Dwarf with a Viking helm. He bustled over his holographic display of

rosters. “My, you certainly *are* eager to gain experience. And you’ve brought a new recruit, I see. Well, there’s a raid on the Grimm Grounds later this afternoon, if you’re looking for a group.”

“Actually, we’re here to meet with Hunter Solang,” Kol’daar said with an apologetic smile. “Do you know where she is?”

“Oh, so you’re the ones she’s expecting. She’s holed up in the Lollipop Lounge,” Officer Brutus told them. His chatty manner didn’t change at all, which made Nunzio pretty sure Lolanna couldn’t have told him the reason for their visit. “Bottom of the northwest tower. Turn left past the Strudel Staircase, fourth door on the right. Can’t miss it.”

Kol’daar thanked him and set off, leaving Nunzio to trail behind. He snorted to himself, mouthing ‘new recruit.’ Despite Lolanna’s evidently effusive praise, he really was a non-entity as far as the Guild was concerned. After all, he didn’t advertise like some bounty hunters. He didn’t participate in Guild-sponsored raids, dungeon crawls, or war games. Unless people were reading claimed bounty listings, there was no reason to even know Nunzio’s name, much less how he looked, and especially not the more obscure nature of his disability.

So, how had the client heard of him?

“Well, here we are,” Kol’daar announced, drawing Nunzio out of his thoughts.

Brutus had been right; they couldn’t have missed it. The door to the Lollipop Lounge was a giant, circular rainbow-swirled confection with a cherry-red jawbreaker for a doorknob in the center. Nunzio knocked.

“Who goes there?” Lolanna’s muffled voice called through the door.

“Candygram,” he replied, because he was *hilarious* and not at all nervous about finding out how he was supposed to save the world.

“It’s us, Lolanna,” Kol’daar added, giving Nunzio the side-eye.

The door swung open, and they entered. Lolanna, once again wearing her leather armor, closed the door behind them while Nunzio took in the room. Lollipop chairs with cotton-candy cushions sat in groups of three and four around lollipop coffee tables, which in turn were adorned with bouquets of suckers in spun-sugar vases. The gingerbread walls were embedded with lollipop portraits of sugary princesses and unicorns.

The circular windows were all opened in an obvious attempt to dilute the overpowering fruity aroma that was so thick in the air Nunzio could taste it. He wondered if there was such a thing as airborne diabetes.

Standing by one of the windows stood someone who could only be their client. She appeared Human, with a coffee-with-cream complexion, and a cloud of fluffy black hair framed her round face. She wore a close-fit T-shirt that said ‘Bay Falls Buccaneers’ above a crappy high-school-mascot pirate, skinny jeans, and beat-up pink sneakers. She couldn’t have been more than seventeen, and showed it in her taste in jewelry; her wrists and neck adorned with copious sparkly plastic bangles and necklaces.

Nunzio stopped dead in his tracks when he saw her, shocked. It was like being suckerpunched by an ad for Old Navy. She looked *normal*. He hadn’t expected that. She could have stepped out of any of the stores in the mall where Nunzio had worked. Just looking at her made him ache with homesickness.

Of course, she couldn’t be *that* normal, if she’d come here with a world-ending predicament.

“Nunzio Arquette, Kol’daar ox Huuf’ta, this is Margaret Stevens,” Lolanna introduced them.

“Call me Maggie,” the girl said, smiling welcomingly at Kol’daar. “Mr. Arquette, you have no idea how glad I am to find you.”

“Uh, actually, I’m Kol’daar,” Kol’daar corrected.

Nunzio collected himself, putting on his I’m-a-serious-adult face that he only adopted for job interviews. “*I’m* Nunzio Arquette.”

Maggie turned toward him, her smile freezing in place. “*Oh.*” Some of Nunzio’s dismay at this must have shown despite his efforts to keep his expression schooled, because she hastened to add, “I’m sorry, just, well, I was expecting... Um. Well, you know. You go looking for some legendary hero dude, you think he’ll be more, you know, like, *heroic-looking.*”

She seemed to realize she was just digging herself in deeper and stopped talking. Kol’daar snickered behind his hand. Nunzio slanted a quelling glare at him.

“It’s fine,” Nunzio told her. “I never considered myself a legendary hero dude, anyway. I’m more interested in why you’re looking for me in the first place.”

“Fair enough,” Maggie said. She shot a dubious glance at the chairs. “I’d say we should sit down and talk about it, but the furniture here is *weird*. Is this whole place like this?”

“If by place you mean the Mercenaries’ Guild Headquarters, then yes. The rest of Splinterpoint is weird, too, but at least it’s *mostly* not sticky,” Nunzio said.

“The information we’re about to discuss is too sensitive to speak of freely outside this location,” Lolanna reminded them sternly.

“Then we’ll stand,” Kol’daar said. “And perhaps close the windows so we won’t be overheard.”

No one looked pleased with that suggestion, but the logic was sound. They each took a window to close. When Maggie began to shut hers, a small, white, fluttery thing swooped inside. Nunzio, at the window next to her, twitched in surprise. His hand automatically started toward his nerve disruptor.

“Margaret, were you going to shut me out?” the fluttery thing asked, perching on Maggie’s shoulder.

It was a bird, Nunzio realized. A dove, to be exact, but Nunzio had never seen a dove with pink tail feathers that formed a heart shape, and large, extremely shiny, pink eyes. A single raven feather adorned the center of its breast. It looked like a Hello Kitty character come to life, which was not helping Nunzio’s urge to shoot it on sight.

“Of course not,” Maggie said, completely unsurprised. She noticed Nunzio’s pose, his hand inside his coat on the handle of his gun, and startled. “It’s all right, it’s fine! She’s with me. Seraphina, meet Nunzio Arquette.”

The dove cocked her head, blinking one rosy eye at him. “Huh. You’re sure, Margaret? He doesn’t look like much.”

“Sera! Don’t be rude!” Maggie looked embarrassedly at Nunzio. “Sorry, Mr. Arquette.”

Nunzio ground his teeth. World-ending predicament, he reminded himself. Get-out-of-probation-free card. Money. He could take a few insults from a talking bird. He let go of his weapon and forced a smile.

“It’s *fine*,” he said and slammed his window down.

When the windows were shut, the reek of candy intensified to near eye-watering strength, giving Nunzio visions of a world where Willy Wonka started manufacturing chemical weapons. The four of them gathered away from the door, standing in a loose square.

“All right, so enough with the suspense,” Nunzio said, attempting a businesslike tone that came out more peevish than he’d intended. “Lolanna said

that you've spoken with the Guildmasters. You don't seem like you're from around here, so it might come as a shock that they don't invoke the Extraordinary Circumstances Amendment for just any old bounty."

Maggie nodded. "She explained, yes. But it's totally necessary. Like, this is some pretty serious business."

"The fates of our world and yours are at stake," Seraphina said.

Nunzio decided that dramatic statements regarding the impending doom of untold billions of beings would carry more weight if not spilling from the beak of a bird that looked like she belonged on a Lisa Frank notebook.

"How?" Kol'daar asked. "And what are we supposed to do about it?"

"Some background information may be needed," Lolanna suggested.

Maggie stuck her hands in her pockets. "All right. Well, um. See, in my world, I sort of, like, do this magic thing. It started the day I got this songbook. Seraphina gave it to me."

"Margaret is a very special girl," the bird cooed. "I chose her myself out of everyone else on Earth. She's the only one who could be trusted with the power of the Heavenly Hymnal."

Kol'daar tilted his head as he studied Maggie thoughtfully with his piercing eyes. Then he smiled. "I think I see why. You have a lovely Heartsong. I don't think I've ever heard one so pure and clear."

The girl blushed hard enough that it showed despite her dark complexion and looked down, flustered. "Um, th-thank you."

It figured that Kol'daar would be a born flirt; the man was too self-assured not to be. Nunzio just hoped that this wouldn't turn into some kind of epic love affair. Besides his low tolerance for sappiness, the girl was too young. He shifted to put himself just a bit between the two of them; there'd be nothing inappropriate on *his* watch.

"So, what is this Heavenly Hymnal, then?" he prodded.

"It's a songbook," Maggie said to her sneakers. "It's really powerful. Like, I can't even tell you how powerful."

"*I* can. It's the most powerful thing in existence," Seraphina said. Her tone wasn't boastful, but Nunzio doubted a bird's frame of reference. She chirped tartly at him, "Don't give me that look. You cannot even *conceive* of the power of the Hymnal. It has all the knowledge of the universe in its pages."

She let this sink in with a dramatic pause. Nunzio pressed his lips together and nodded.

“Uh-huh,” he said. “And so you gave it to a teenager. Good job.”

“I know, right?” Maggie said in a long-suffering tone. “When I sang the songs from it, I got some powers and stuff. I mean, I should be worrying about school and studying for my SATs. But now I’m fighting monsters, demons, crazy cultists—you name it, I’ve probably clocked it one.”

“Sounds pretty rough,” Nunzio agreed. “If they’re keeping you that busy back home, what brings you to Splinterpoint?”

“I—I forgot the Hymnal in my locker. I usually would never, but it was finals week, I was distracted, and there hadn’t been any monster attacks lately, and—” Maggie sputtered, then buried her face in her hands, her bangles jangling wildly as she groaned, “Someone stole it. I’m such an idiot!”

Nunzio had only heard that level of bleakness in a teenage girl’s voice once before, and that was when his older sister had been dumped the night before the senior prom. At least Maggie seemed to have her priorities straight, since this might *actually* be the end of the world.

Kol’daar spoke up, “How do you know it’s here, and not just under some kind of glamour to keep you from finding it?”

Seraphina puffed herself up and addressed them proudly. “I am the Heavenly Hymnal’s Guardian. I can sense its presence anywhere in the world, no matter what kind of cloaking enchantment may be laid upon it. The moment it disappeared, it felt as if it had blinked out of existence. The only explanation is that someone took it outside our dimension.”

“We thought we were pretty much up a creek,” Maggie said. “I mean, I hadn’t thought about it before, but the multiverse is a pretty big place. We didn’t know where to start looking. If I’d had the Hymnal, there are things in there that would have helped, but, well, I hadn’t got the whole thing memorized, you know? I’ve had a lot to study. It’s senior year!”

“But then how did you get here?” Nunzio asked.

“Well, um, I guess, my Fairy Godmother?” she said bemusedly.

Kol’daar blinked and tossed a brief glance at Nunzio. He shifted awkwardly and asked, “I have heard of this sort of relation before, but I admit I don’t know what a Fairy Godmother is.”

“They’re kind of just a story.” Maggie waved her hands. “They’re magic ladies who show up to grant your wishes, so you can live happily ever after or whatever. I never thought they were *real*. But then, before I got the Hymnal, my friends and I didn’t think demons were real, either.

“So, anyway, this lady showed up in a pink tutu and told me that she was my Fairy Godmother. She came to warn me because someone had taken the Hymnal and brought it here.”

“And it *is* here,” Sera confirmed without being asked. “I can feel its presence.”

Maggie rocked back on her heels, blowing a lock of hair out of her eyes. “Anyway, my Fairy Godmother, uh, kinda gave us a lift here, too. We landed just outside your gingerbread castle. Then she told me your name and that we’d need you because you can destroy magic, which would really help if the buyer is doing what we think they’re doing.”

Nunzio absorbed this with a frown. This Fairy Godmother seemed suspiciously well-informed and had perfect timing—showing up just when needed and knowing just what to do. He supposed that kind of thing was sort of their shtick. While he was definitely the kind of guy to look gift horses in the mouth these days, no one else seemed especially worried about the lucky break. Perhaps he was just being paranoid.

Lolanna, who’d no doubt heard the story before, broke her silence. “The suspect, or suspects, in question may be attempting to corrupt the Hymnal.”

“And that’s bad,” Nunzio stated blankly.

“You could say that,” Maggie allowed.

“The Heavenly Hymnal contains all knowledge, but the foulest and most terrible arcane arts can only be found in its pages once it has been corrupted,” Seraphina explained. “If the Hymnal is well and truly perverted from its first edition, whoever has it would be able to wreak whatever havoc they pleased in our dimension, or any dimension they could reach from here—provided they can control it. It’s even worse if they can’t.”

Okay, that was pretty awful. He was starting to see why the Guildmasters had decided this was more important than his probation. Once again it astonished him that they’d given this book to a *teenager* in the first place.

“So, we have to find them and break the corruption spell?” he guessed.

Kol'daar added, "Then we retrieve the Hymnal?"

Seraphina and Margaret exchanged a loaded glance. Sadness welled up in the girl's eyes, which lingered on the single black feather on the bird's snowy chest.

"Yes," she whispered. "Please."

Chapter Ten

The tender moment ended when Lolanna cleared her throat pointedly. “But it may not be possible.”

Maggie looked up, saying hotly, “There’s still a *chance*.”

“I do not say it to damage your morale,” Lolanna replied stiffly. “It is unwise not to consider all outcomes.”

“What happens if the corruption spell can’t be broken?” Kol’daar asked uneasily.

Maggie grimaced, but didn’t seem about to answer. Seraphina sighed and said in a subdued tone, “If the corruption has spread too far into the Hymnal, it will render the book too... volatile.” She fidgeted in place on Maggie’s shoulder, not meeting anyone’s eyes. “In that case, the Hymnal must be destroyed.”

Nunzio wondered why the possibility of destroying the Hymnal entirely made Maggie so upset. Would she lose her magical powers, in that case? And Seraphina didn’t seem pleased either. Well, without the Hymnal, they’d both be out of a job, perhaps even defenseless against these monsters and demons Maggie fought back in her own world.

“Well, then, we’ll just have to stop the corruption before it gets that far,” Nunzio said as reassuringly as he could.

“And what do you need from me?” Kol’daar asked, crossing his arms over his pecs. He smiled and added, “Not just my heroic good looks, I assume?”

Maggie summoned a weak smile for him. “Nah, that’s just an added bonus. I mean, whoever has the Hymnal has to know how to use music-magic, too. Heavens know what they’re going to throw at us to keep it, or what we’ll have to do to break the corruption spell. I’ve gone solo before, but really, I prefer accompaniment.”

“I’m sure we’ll make beautiful music together,” Kol’daar said. Nunzio scowled.

“I shall accompany you, as well,” Lolanna announced briskly.

Maggie looked surprised, turning to the formidable woman to ask, “You can sing?”

“No,” she replied forbiddingly. “The Guildmasters appointed me to monitor the situation.”

“So, since we’ve established who’s playing second fiddle, how do we find the book?” Nunzio looked to Seraphina. “Can you tell where it is?”

“Not specifically,” the dove said mournfully. “Usually I could, but the corruption spell interferes with my perception of the Hymnal. I know it’s here, but I can’t pinpoint it.”

Kol’daar sobered. “When was the book stolen?”

“Four days ago. Well, today’s the fifth day it’s been gone, technically, but the day’s still young, right?” Maggie said, obviously still kicking herself for ever leaving it unguarded. She bit her lip anxiously. “The corruption ritual takes six days to complete, so we might be running short on time.”

Well, shit. Nothing like a race against the clock to get the heart pumping. Nunzio ran his hands through his hair, thinking hard. “Okay. Okay, so. You know the ritual, then?”

“Yes. It’s in the Hymnal itself,” Seraphina told him.

“Why would a *Heavenly* Hymnal include a guide to turning it evil?”

“Like I said before, it contains *all* knowledge under the Heavens,” she replied. “That’s why only a person who embodies the Heavenly Mandates may ever use it. A lesser person couldn’t resist the temptation to abuse such terrible power. That is why only Margaret, a pure innocent, is fit for the task.”

Maggie flushed with embarrassment and said awkwardly, “Can we *please* stop talking about my purity?”

“What does the ritual entail?” Kol’daar asked, coming to her rescue.

Seraphina coughed, delicately covering her beak with one wing. “Ah, yes. The caster must perform a song-spell regularly six times a day. The Hymnal must be kept on an altar made from the most wicked ingredients. Distilled essence of vitriolic thoughts, powder of sadistic urges, various entrails, that sort of thing.”

Something niggled at the back of Nunzio’s mind. While he chased the elusive thought, Lolanna touched her left temple, activating her cybernetic eyepatch. She projected a hologram of the digital listings of purveyors of magical ingredients. Seraphina fluttered over to perch on her shoulder, her large eyes squinted myopically as the hologram scrolled.

“It seems that these items are actually quite common,” Lolanna said as she scanned the information. “The suspect could get them almost anywhere in the sector.”

“The quantities necessary for the corruption of the Hymnal are obscene, though,” Seraphina told her.

“Well, that’s something. We’ll go around to the shops and ask who’s been buying up all the reagents,” Kol’daar said, sounding glad to finally have a course of action.

The connection pinged in Nunzio’s head at last. “Wait. That might not be necessary.”

Everyone turned to look at him. He patted his pockets. He knew he had it with him somewhere. Nope, not that pocket, or that one, or that one...

“Are you going to qualify that statement at any point, Hunter Arquette?” Lolanna asked after a long moment.

“Hang *on*, just need to find the damn thing.” He started emptying his pockets, casting his assembled tricks of the bounty hunting trade on the nearest candy table. Grappling hooks, a handful of sonic grenades he’d gotten as a freebie from Sakano, paperclips, chewing gum, collapsible duct tape, a couple bouncy balls, a large box of matches, a bottle of regeneration pills, sticky tracking devices... The pile grew.

“Are you a secretly a magpie?” Kol’daar asked, eyeing the random collection.

“Hey, you never know when your life will depend on some of this stuff,” he said defensively, casting another handful on the pile.

Kol’daar picked up a thin, square, foil-wrapped packet, skeptically squishing it between his fingers. “What’s this even *for*? What’s a ‘magnum,’ anyway?”

Maggie gave a shocked laugh, blushing deeply as she turned her extremely pure eyes away. Nunzio snatched the condom out of Kol’daar’s fingers and pocketed it again, his own face burning. He’d forgotten he’d even *had* that. He ought to just throw it out. The thing was likely as expired as his sex life.

“Look it up on your magic pamphlet when you get home,” he snapped. Finally, he located the slip of paper in the pocket with his code bug. He drew it out with a flourish and held it out for inspection. “Ta-da. Check it out.”

Everyone leaned in. Blatt Skroinx's besnouted face greeted them. The wanted poster stated not only the infractions Blatt had committed, but also an itemized list of the Mercurian Guild's shipment of stolen items. Their missing reagents included the ingredients Seraphina had named, including the total amounts. The whole shipment weighed in at several hundred pounds.

"Would that be enough for the ritual?" Nunzio asked, feeling a bit smug.

"Uh, yeah," Maggie said, sounding a bit stunned. "More than enough."

"Do you think this is the person responsible?" Seraphina asked.

"Hah, not likely," Nunzio said. He started shoving his assortment of stuff back into his pockets. "Even if he wasn't a waste of skin, he's already been taken care of. But he was working for someone. He'd never have done anything like this on his own."

Lolanna dropped her projection, already prepared to be the wet blanket. "The Mercurian Guild will have been... thorough in their questioning. There's no guarantee he is still alive, or that he gave them any useful information. Nor is it a certainty that the alchemists will tell us anything, if he did."

"It's a place to start, though," Kol'daar said. He clapped Nunzio on the back, making Nunzio jump at the contact and drop his handful of paperclips. "Let's get going."

Outside in the fresh air, they hailed a passing taxi. A pumpkin coach large enough for all of them pulled up, but it was magic. Nunzio rolled his eyes. It figured. He pulled Lolanna aside before she boarded it and quietly asked if he could get an advance on their promised million credits, so he could follow in his own cab.

Lolanna's eye narrowed at him. "Even the invocation of the Amendment doesn't allow for payment before the contract has been completed. It goes against protocol."

"What, so I'm supposed to just walk across the sector?" he demanded, trying to keep his voice down. "Did you miss the part where we're on a timetable?"

Of course, Kol'daar overheard the hissed argument as he was getting into the coach where Maggie and Seraphina were waiting anxiously.

"I can cover you," the man volunteered, hopping down. "You'll pay me back when we're finished, right?"

Nunzio really didn't want to be stuck in close quarters with him again, but he didn't have much choice. Sullenly, he boarded a second hovercar. He was determined not to engage in conversation of any kind, once again staring out his window as they took off, sitting as far from Kol'daar as possible on the bench seat.

There was a papery rustle from Kol'daar's side of the cab. Nunzio ignored it. After a few moments, Kol'daar hummed approvingly.

"Stho *that'sth* what 'magnum' meansth," he announced.

Certain he was being mocked by a homophobe, Nunzio turned to aim a withering glare at him. Kol'daar was apparently waiting for this moment, watching Nunzio with appraising eyes. He pulled a blue-raspberry sucker, obviously pilfered from the Lollipop Lounge, from his mouth.

"And that little package can hold the whole thing? I had no idea your weaponry was so advanced," Kol'daar said with an innocent smile. He paged pointedly through his enchanted SpOC parchment, eyebrows rising at whatever informative pamphlet he'd found.

"I can't believe you," Nunzio grumbled, feeling the flush crawl up his neck and face. "You just have to be insulting, don't you? As if flirting with the kid wasn't bad enough."

Kol'daar rolled his eyes, putting the sucker back in his mouth. "That was harmlessst fun. She needed sthome cheering up, that'sth all."

"Oh, so you'll flirt with a girl who's so pure the sight of a condom had her covering her virgin eyes, and you'll just trust she won't get the idea that you're interested in her," Nunzio said. "Great plan."

"'Condom'?" Kol'daar's brows furrowed.

Nunzio froze when he realized that Kol'daar had actually been talking about *guns* a moment ago. He cursed himself for walking right into the misunderstanding. The man renewed his paging quickly. Then his eyes went wide and round, and he coughed softly.

"Oh. Ah-*haa*."

The look he slanted at Nunzio was a different sort of appraisal entirely. Nunzio didn't know whether to be flattered or more mortified. Then Kol'daar's sly smirk from earlier made a comeback as he pulled the sucker from between his full, blue-stained lips with a slow, unmistakably suggestive motion culminating in a wet *pop*. "You know, I stand by my previous statement."

Nunzio felt his own eyes widen, his jaw hanging open a moment before he rallied enough to snap, “Christ, just shut *up*.”

“Why? Should I be worried about abusing *your* pure heart, too?”

That was too ridiculous to dignify with a reply. He turned his back on the man’s Cheshire-cat smile. Of course his heart wasn’t in any danger, regardless of its relative purity. Or lack thereof, given what his imagination was doing to the image of Kol’daar and the lollipop.

Besides, Kol’daar was only joking. Hadn’t he just said that he flirted because it was ‘harmless fun’? The equal-opportunity nature of his suggestive behavior ought to prove that much, at least.

Nunzio was just sexually frustrated. If he’d had been getting regularly laid, there would be no tension at all between the two of them.

He frowned harder. Not to imply there was tension between them in the first place. Sure, Kol’daar was as attractive as a Calvin Klein model, but his personality was... Well, so he maybe didn’t seem like that bad of a guy, even if he was overbearing and didn’t seem to understand that Nunzio found him obnoxious for his own reasons. And Nunzio certainly couldn’t be ingratiating himself, as he’d done nothing but be a jerk to the guy since day one.

This flirting was probably just a bit of turnabout. Nunzio wasn’t flamboyant like certain Twinks he could name, but he was hardly in the closet. If Kol’daar hadn’t cottoned on by himself, it was possible he had inside info. Lolanna had been so quick to expound on Nunzio’s career history to her new drinking buddy, no doubt she’d thrown in a few personal tidbits as well.

They arrived at the Mercurian Guild’s Headquarters with Nunzio silently vowing never to let Lolanna get any dirt on him ever again.

He exited the hovercar before Kol’daar could find a way to close-talk at him while paying. Since they’d flown over the traffic, they’d beaten the pumpkin coach. The building that greeted them was a futuristic number, all gleaming curves and improbable angles. The mild breeze blew the acrid scent of chemicals. Nunzio found it almost refreshing after the time spent in the Mercenaries’ Guild HQ.

When Kol’daar joined him on the sidewalk, Nunzio said, “They’ve probably been torturing Blatt. Might still be, if he hasn’t died of it yet. How well do you think Little Miss Purity and her little friend would react to that?”

Kol’daar crunched his sucker loudly and threw away the stick. “You want to go in without her?”

“Can’t hurt to try. If nothing else, we can have them loosen the nipple clamps before she gets here.”

Kol’daar half laughed. Nunzio scowled at him. “What’s so funny?”

“You. First you worry about her ‘virgin eyes,’ now you’re trying to spare her this distress as well.” Kol’daar cocked his head at him. “Should I be warning *you* about flirting with her?”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Nunzio said, more surprised than offended. Could it be Lolanna hadn’t spilled the gay beans? Or was Kol’daar just giving him a taste of his own paranoia? “Just because I don’t think a *literally pure-hearted kid* needs to see something like that doesn’t mean I want to be her boyfriend. And, aside from the fact that she’s a kid, she’s not my type.”

Kol’daar considered that a moment, then asked, “So what is your type?”

Nunzio snapped, “Completely irrelevant. Shall we?”

He stalked into the building without waiting for Kol’daar, but the squeak of his leather leggings never lagged far behind. The information officer at the welcome desk in the lobby was far less informative and welcoming than that of their own Guild. Eventually, they convinced the figure in the white, hooded cloak—less like a Klan member and more like an albino Grim Reaper—to get them the Chief of the Retribution Committee on a comm.

The hologram of another white-cloaked figure appeared on the desk in front of them. Testily, in a helium-high voice it demanded, “Yes, what is it?”

“We’re from the Mercenaries’ Guild,” Nunzio explained officiously. “This man, Hunter Kol’daar, brought you a being named Blatt Skroinx two days ago. We have need to question him, so—”

“You brought in Skroinx?” the Retribution Chief interrupted.

“I did,” Kol’daar confirmed.

“The report said you knocked him unconscious via a blow to the head.”

“I did.”

The Chief didn’t seem to need to consider the issue further. “I will have Sibling Verity escort you to the dungeon level. We have much to discuss.”

Nunzio found it a bit galling that once again fate seemed to smile on Kol’daar specifically. As it made his own job that much easier, he was willing to suck it up and deal. It wasn’t like he had money for bribes right now, anyway.

Sibling Verity was another white-cloaked figure, though not humanoid. The being's short, bulbous body was surrounded with five arms, and the hood draped oddly over what seemed like something along the line of antennae or eyestalks. Zhe beckoned to them wordlessly with one arm and proceeded to lead them out of the lobby.

Nunzio felt the tingling pressure of magic all around as they went deeper into the building. It wasn't as ubiquitous as it would be in, say, the Mages' Guild, because alchemy was a hybrid of magic, science, and—in the Mercurian Guild's interpretation—religion. Even so, Nunzio kept his hands to himself as they went, careful not to bump into anything.

The doors they passed were marked with alchemical symbols and sometimes complex arcane seals. Occasional snippets of chanting or dull explosions could be heard from behind them. They reached the dungeon level via a spiraling escalator that impressed Kol'daar to no end. He grinned like a loon for the entire trip. Nunzio just felt a bit dizzy by the time they reached the bottom.

"That was *fun*," the big dope said. "Why doesn't *our* Guild have one of those?"

Nunzio was spared from answering that when their silent guide opened one of the narrow doors and waved them inside. He steeled himself, prepared for the worst as he followed Kol'daar. Sibling Verity stood behind him in the doorway, a living blockade.

The room was well lit, surgical tables of stainless steel or some lookalike being the main feature. Blatt stood against the wall, blindfolded, his arms shackled to either side of his hips. He wore only a set of tighty-whities underpants that had grayed with age, his bristly hide exposed for easier skinning.

Except there wasn't a scratch on him. Nunzio felt his eyebrows rise to his hairline.

A humanoid white-cloaked figure turned to face them as they entered, looking up from where zhe was warming a branding iron in a laser beam. Zhe set the unsettling combination of tools down on one of the tables.

"Salutations, gentlebeings," said the high-pitched voice of the Retribution Chief. "I am Sibling Certainty. I believe you know Skroinx."

"Unfortunately," Nunzio said. "We have questions for him about the heist he pulled."

“So do I,” Sibling Certainty said. “I have been asking quite persistently for the past two days.”

“Uh,” Nunzio said, looking Blatt over once more. No, still no visible wounds. Unless they were healing him with magic in between sessions, it didn’t look like zhe was asking as hard as zhe could.

“You subdued Blatt to bring him in,” Sibling Certainty said to Kol’daar. “How?”

“Um,” Kol’daar said. He scratched the back of his head. “You already know. I just punched him.”

Sibling Certainty made an impatient motion with hir hands. “Yes, but how did you breach his invincibility enchantment?”

Chapter Eleven

“He’s *enchanted?*” Nunzio burst out.

“Indeed,” Sibling Certainty said dryly. “We were unaware of its presence, despite our preliminary sensory spells, until we attempted our truth-seeking upon him directly.”

At this, the Mercurian gestured to a stainless steel surgical table, which held numerous instruments of truth-seeking, from the aforementioned nipple clamps to thumbscrews, scalpels, knives, pins, spikes, and an assortment of less recognizable but no less intimidating tools of the trade. The weird thing about them was that they were all blunted, chipped, bent, and otherwise mangled.

“No wonder my nerve disruptor didn’t work,” Nunzio grumbled. He frowned at Kol’daar. “So how did you punch his lights out?”

Kol’daar shrugged, looking equally perplexed.

Still, this was an opportunity for Nunzio to show his mettle. If he could get Blatt talking by the time Maggie and Seraphina showed up, it’d put paid to their doubts about his skills. He’d never had the opportunity to break an enchantment on a person. It’d probably look good on his résumé, if he ever got around to writing one.

“Well, if he’s enchanted, I could lift it for you,” Nunzio offered.

Sibling Certainty tilted his head at him. “Oh? Are you a magic-user?”

“I specialize in breaking spells,” he replied evasively. “Won’t take a minute. May I?”

“I suppose you can do no *harm*,” Sibling Certainty said then gave an ear-piercing giggle at his own lame joke.

Nunzio and Kol’daar winced at the sound, but Blatt didn’t even flinch. As Nunzio approached, he found out why. The blindfold radiated a spell, likely one for sensory deprivation since Blatt didn’t react when Nunzio put out his hand and touched the pigman’s arm.

There was no sting, no feel of magic shattering under his fingertips. Nunzio blinked, releasing his hold. He tried again with a firmer touch. Nothing.

“Um,” he said and then attempted a punch to Blatt’s gut.

Mistake. Ow. Big mistake.

“Are you okay?” Kol’daar asked as Nunzio hissed and tried not to hop around like a moron.

“Fine. Just peachy,” he gritted between his teeth, shaking out his hand.

“While your method of spell removal is... unique, I do not think you managed to do anything to the enchantment,” Sibling Certainty said.

“That’s never happened before,” Nunzio declared.

He didn’t need to ask if there really was an enchantment; he’d almost broken his hand against Blatt’s flabby midsection. While there was such a thing as ‘hard belly fat,’ he thought that this was taking things a bit far.

He was certain his disability had never faltered in its destructive power. Just to make sure his curse or whatever hadn’t chosen the worse possible moment to lift itself, he yanked the blindfold down around Blatt’s thick neck. The sting was sharp as ever as *that* spell gave way. The impulsive action proved to be a bad idea, however.

Blatt blinked at him, then let out an angry bellow. “You!” He looked over Nunzio’s shoulder and spotted Kol’daar. “*You!*”

“We meet again, Skroinx,” Kol’daar said coldly.

His eyes flashed with loathing. Nunzio wondered what Blatt had done to get this kind of reaction from a man so chronically good-natured it bordered on a kind of mental illness. Blatt had only spent a day at Gronl’s, for crying out loud.

“You filthy, prancing layabout!” Blatt bared his rotting teeth. Nunzio pulled a face at the smell and backed up out of range. “I should have had Gronl sell your contract the minute I came home.”

“I doubt you could ever have *had* Lady Gronl, period,” Kol’daar returned. “And her home was never yours, or had she not made that clear enough?”

Blatt gave an enraged snort, rattling his chains. “When I get outta here, I’ll be coming for you. And your little butt buddy, there. I bet the two of you were in cahoots all along!”

“Hey!” Nunzio resented the ‘little’ tacked on to the unimaginative insult. He was six feet tall; just because Kol’daar and Lolanna both were giant-variety Humans, they made Nunzio look smaller by comparison. He also wanted to object that he wouldn’t cahoot with Kol’daar if you paid him—but they were, and he was.

“Be silent,” Sibling Certainty warned Blatt, “or I will replace the Blindfold of Insensibility.”

Surprisingly this worked. Apparently, invincibility enchantments didn't extend to psychological torture. Blatt forced himself to swallow any further invectives and settled for trying to vaporize Kol'daar with his eyes alone.

“As you see, the subject has been completely uncooperative. Neither physical nor magical means which would harm him have showed results. I have been unable to gather any information from him, not even who gave him the enchantment,” Sibling Certainty explained into the silence. “We do not know its make, and our alchemy cannot detect it directly. It is only by observing the effects that we know it is there.”

“Well, I for one think it's a bit of excellent timing that he stole your goods right around the time he came down with a case of the invulnerables,” Nunzio said as he watched Blatt, who shifted nervously. “Whoever paid him for your stolen reagents gave it to him. Perhaps that was the only payment he got, too, which was why he ended up mooching off his wife instead of hopping the first portal offplane.”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Blatt said, his eyes flickering around the room.

Sibling Certainty did not appear too interested in this speculation. Instead, zhe had approached Kol'daar, standing too close and making the man lean back in attempt to maintain his bubble. Nunzio smiled to see the close-talker get a taste of his own medicine.

“Are you certain the only action you took against Skroinx was a physical assault? Because I find that not only difficult to believe, but demonstrably impossible.”

The Retribution Chief managed to pitch hir voice to imply that not only was Kol'daar an idiot, but if zhe found Kol'daar was holding out on hir, zhe'd find an excuse to extract the relevant data with all the instruments of truth-seeking that had yet to work on Blatt. Zhe must be very good at hir job to manage that much implicit threat with a voice like the lead singer of a Chipmunks tribute band.

Kol'daar racked his brain. Nunzio saw the moment the lightbulb switched on.

“Well, I'd also just finished Playing,” Kol'daar said slowly. “But that wasn't an attack song, only one to buy time.”

“‘Playing’?” Sibling Certainty repeated. Zhe leaned back. “Demonstrate.”

Kol'daar glanced at Nunzio, who gave a nod. May as well; it wasn't like they had anything else to go on. The man unslung his spiderharp and took a breath. He looked at Blatt, who sneered toothily at him. Kol'daar's eyes narrowed, and he began to Play.

The first chords washed over Nunzio, a buzzing across his nerves. Blatt's beady eyes widened, and he squirmed in his chains. The purpose of the music-magic wasn't apparent to Nunzio, but the notes were sickly sweet. Then Blatt bellowed suddenly. Kol'daar ceased strumming.

“Owwww!” Blatt cried. He thrashed in his chains. “It *hurts!*”

Nunzio and Sibling Certainty both looked from Kol'daar to Blatt and back. Kol'daar wore a grim smile.

“What did you do to him?” Nunzio asked, unnerved.

Kol'daar glanced at him, his smile fading as he looked away. “Nothing too terrible.”

“Take it out, take it out, takeitout!” The flesh around one of Blatt's lower tusks was already visibly swelling.

“Doesn't *sound* like nothing terrible.”

“Relax,” Kol'daar placated. “I just gave him a toothache. Most of my work was done for me, to be honest. The swine has terrible hygiene.”

Sibling Certainty stepped up to Blatt, examining the inflamed tissue with a professional interest. Zhe prodded the base of the tusk. Blatt didn't show a reaction to the direct contact. Nor did anything happen when the Retribution Chief grabbed a large set of pliers from the nearest table and tried to extract the tusk forcibly.

“*In-ter-est-ing*,” Sibling Certainty said, punctuating each syllable with a fruitless yank. “It seems that the music weakened the invincibility spell, but only for a moment.”

Blatt didn't seem to feel any extra pain from these ministrations, even though his head jerked from the force applied. Of course, he whined and bellyached loudly the entire time anyway, cursing Kol'daar, the Retribution Chief, Nunzio, his wife, his luck, his tooth, and then his employer.

“That lowdown son of a whore *lied*,” he squealed. “Invincibility, my ass! I was gypped!”

“Who gave you the spell?” Nunzio asked. “The guy who hired you?”

Blatt, even in the throes of an abscess tooth, still retained his only talent: short sighted self-interest.

“I’ll tell you everything I know,” he caved ungracefully, “if you get me a damn root canal first!”

“I would gladly pull all your teeth,” Sibling Certainty said with feeling. “However your invincibility will not allow me to do so.”

“*What?*”

“At any rate, this enchantment of yours deserves more observation. Hunter Kol’daar, as the only one who has managed to be effective against it, I would appreciate your expertise. With your assistance, I will overlook the cost of replacing the Blindfold of Insensibility your associate ruined.”

“All right,” Kol’daar agreed easily, though he shot Nunzio a look-what-you-did glance. “If it’s a spell that involves music-magic, I have another friend who may be able to help, actually.”

“Oh? Can you contact them now?”

“Better than that, she’s on her way here,” Kol’daar said over Blatt’s persistent objections. “But could we move the, er, subject to a less... inhospitable place?”

“Certainly,” Sibling Certainty acquiesced.

“And can you have him put some pants on first?” Nunzio added. Seeing Blatt in his underwear was probably a form of torture on its own.

The Mercurians moved a clothed Blatt to a holding cell on the upper floors posthaste. Maggie, Lolanna, and Seraphina had arrived while they were in the dungeon, so having them brought up was a matter of informing the brick wall of a receptionist that they had security clearance. Nunzio was not surprised when they sent him out, though. Delicate magical matters were diametrically opposed to him, and despite a brief stint in the choir in high school, followed by the requisite drunken karaoke in college, he knew next to nothing about music. Besides, he was tired of listening to Blatt bitch nonstop about his toothache.

He sat outside the room in a futuristically uncomfortable chair, watching white-cloaked figures glide around on their errands. No one had offered to keep him company, but he was fine with that. He had some thinking to do.

It still shocked him that he couldn't lift the spell from Blatt. That everyone else was just as baffled by the invincibility spell wasn't much consolation.

Nunzio was a one-trick pony when it came right down to it. Hell, that had been his selling point for this world-saving trip. If Blatt was working for the being intent on the doom of Maggie's dimension—and the evidence supported that assumption more than any other—then this was probably only a small sample of what kind of magic they were up against. If Nunzio couldn't even manage to undo this much, how was he supposed to stop the corruption of the Heavenly Hymnal?

He didn't know if Maggie and Seraphina would even keep him around, once they found out. He didn't know if he'd be any help if they did. The idea of going home to *wait* for the end of everything sounded like its own form of hell, to be honest. Nunzio sighed. If the world was going to end because he couldn't break a spell, he'd rather be able to go out and get laid before the last hurrah.

But if he went with everyone, who was to say his talent for breaking things wouldn't just get in the way?

What if it turned out like the Tomb Raid?

Nunzio's mind balked at considering his current teammates, if that's what they were, ending the same way Zin's band of thieves had.

Worrying about it was pointless, Nunzio told himself. He stood and stretched, crossing to the windowed wall at the end of the hall for some distraction. On the way, he passed through an intersection with another hallway. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a dark shape. Odd, because besides his own group, he'd only seen the white-cloaked Mercurians.

He backpedaled and looked over.

Sure enough, there stood a figure clothed in a black trench coat. A familiar face, even. Well, he wanted a distraction. And maybe prove that Kol'daar wasn't the only one who could make new friends.

"Reverend," Nunzio called out, raising a hand in greeting.

Rev. Wadsworth looked over at him from where he stood talking to Sibling Verity, or a being of the same species. He said something quietly to the figure, touching hir lightly on the shoulder of one of hir arms, then made his way to Nunzio.

"Hello," Wadsworth said gravely, tipping his wide-brimmed hat in greeting. "Nunzio, wasn't it?"

“Yeah, you got me. So you decided to check out the religious guilds, huh?”

“As you see. I’ve been on something of a tour.” The stout man’s gaze skated around them, distinctly unimpressed. “Though I seem to have gotten a mite lost. Had to ask directions back downstairs. You as well?”

“Oh, uh, no. I’m here for... research,” Nunzio fibbed. “These guys are good for that kind of thing.”

“Really?” The man seemed skeptical, though of which part was unclear. “I had just come to the conclusion that these Mercurians seem... misguided. They lack proper discipline to keep themselves *right*.”

Nunzio didn’t know about that. From what he’d seen, the Retribution Committee got up to some pretty fucking strict discipline. Then again, it’s not like Sibling Verity was a blabbermouth, and he doubted the cultish alchemists put the dungeon level on the introductory tour.

“The Mercurians are an odd bunch,” he agreed noncommittally. “I think it’s the alchemy fumes.”

“That may be part of it.” Wadsworth took a small, gold pocket watch on a thin chain from his black waistcoat and checked it. He frowned, glancing from it to Nunzio. “What is it you’re researching, son? After the Philosopher’s Stone? Magical cure-alls?”

“Uh, it’s more... chemistry. Magic isn’t really my thing,” Nunzio hedged. He eyed the pocket watch and recalled the time he’d run into the reverend on the stairs. Was that the source of the enchantment he’d felt? Had he broken it, and that was why the man gave him a dirty look?

“I thought not.” At Nunzio’s uncertain expression, Wadsworth explained, “You didn’t use an enchanted parchment in class, either. And you made a point to ask about that fellow’s harp.”

So this guy was actually pretty observant. Wadsworth was definitely trying to get him to admit to breaking the watch. Well, Nunzio wouldn’t fall for *that*; he didn’t have the money to buy the guy a new one. Desperately, he decided on a tactic to throw the guy off the scent, one that ought to shut him up, too.

Drawing himself up, he replied loftily, “It’s a *spiritual* matter, Reverend. You understand.”

Wadsworth checked his watch again and then offered a thin smile that did not reach his eyes. “I do, in fact, understand. You’re an interesting fellow, Nunzio. Have you heard of the Holy Edicts?”

With a mental snap, Nunzio finally placed why this guy sounded so familiar.

“You’re that radio-show guy!” He didn’t know quite how to feel about that. It was as if he’d run into Pat Robertson at the grocery store.

Wadsworth nodded with false modesty even as his chest puffed out. “Indeed. I had no idea my work had such a wide listenership, before coming here. But I won’t object to the Will of Heaven. I will take the opportunity to shine my light on the dark places in this godless realm.” He advanced a step closer, his tone condescending. “There’s a place in Heaven for you, Nunzio, if you’re willing to take the necessary steps to save yourself.”

Great, the dude was trying to *convert* him now. The phrase barking up the wrong tree didn’t do the situation justice. The only part of Nunzio’s Catholic upbringing that had survived to date was the blasphemy, and he liked it that way.

“Thanks, but no thanks, preach. I’ve heard your show, and your methods are a little kinky for my tastes. Besides, what are you talking about godless? There are *tons* of religions here. Splinterpoint has more gods than they know what to do with.”

The smile dropped away. “Those are false faiths, false gods. They’re an affront to the Holy Edicts.”

Sure they were. Nunzio didn’t care. “Don’t make me bust out the Tolerance Aphorism, here.”

Wadsworth huffed a disgusted breath. “You are no better than the Mercurians. They would not submit themselves to the wisdom of the Holy Edicts, either.”

“Can’t imagine why not,” Nunzio said, failing to keep the sarcasm from his tone. He sincerely doubted the wisdom of going to established religious guilds to evangelize another religion entirely. No wonder this guy was getting the cold shoulder. He was surprised the Mercurians hadn’t just kicked him out based on his holier-than-thou attitude.

As the conversation ground to a halt, Reverend Wadsworth finally tucked his watch back into his pocket. “I must be on my way. I have another engagement.” He tipped his hat again. “Good evening, Nunzio. We’ll speak again, I’m sure.”

Not if he could help it. He watched the man depart in the direction of the descending spiral escalator and decided he'd better just wait by the door for his team. Being a loner was infinitely preferable to being talked down to by zealots.

Chapter Twelve

The sun had well and truly set by the time the others emerged from the room. Lolanna filed out first, followed by Maggie and Seraphina. Kol'daar brought up the rear while Nunzio roused himself from the half doze he'd fallen into despite the unforgiving furniture.

"Where's my damn root canal, already? I held up my end of the bargain," cried Blatt from inside the room. All four of Nunzio's teammates turned to glare over their shoulders. Nunzio felt lucky for once; his disability had saved him hours of *that*.

Three white-cloaked figures scurried up, no doubt waiting for their chance at the guy.

"We're dentists," the one in the lead declared flatly as zhe entered.

"Good, because my tooth is killin' me! Get me some laughing ga—"

The last Mercurian slammed the door shut behind hir, thankfully cutting off the whining.

Nunzio stood and straightened his coat. "So, how'd it go?"

"Not here," Lolanna said shortly. "We will explain in the cab."

"Great, *more* taxi-cab confessionals," Nunzio grumbled.

At least they had no trouble finding a non-magical cab for all of them this time. Granted, it was less of a cab and more of a double-decker VW minibus, but beggars couldn't be choosers. They piled into the seats at the back, away from the driver. Nunzio could tell he wasn't the only one who was exhausted. It'd been a busy day for them all.

"Okay, let's keep this short and sweet," Nunzio said quietly. "What was the deal with Blatt? Did you find out anything?"

"We did," Seraphina said.

Maggie ran fingers through her thick hair, smoothing the springy mass only to have it puff up the moment she stopped. "The bad news is that Mr. Piggy definitely gave the culprit the materials for the corruption spell."

"The further bad news is that Skroinx knew nothing useful about the suspect," Lolanna put in with a frown. "The meetings they had were

anonymous and under cover of a magical darkness. He didn't know the suspect's species but seemed to think of his employer as male."

"Shit." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "So it was a dead end?"

"Not entirely," Kol'daar spoke up. "Maggie and I examined the spell on him."

Nunzio shook his head. "I still can't believe he was invincible the whole time. How come no one noticed that? And how come only music-magic worked on it?"

"It was a song-spell from the Hymnal," Maggie told him. "It was pretty well done, but not perfect. Like the guy slapped it together in a hurry. The smallest mistake or even a well-meaning change to the Hymnal's spells can seriously mess things up."

"The flaws in the casting made it susceptible to interference from a stronger song-spell in his vicinity," said Seraphina.

Maggie nodded along. "Not just that. He was invincible to harm outwardly. But when the spell hiccupped because of Kol'daar's interference, and the thing harming him came from within himself, there was no way to help him until the spell was removed."

"But the Orphic Noise of it was subtle, very subtle." Kol'daar sounded almost as if he admired the workmanship. "Perhaps if I had met Skroinx before he'd had the enchantment, I would have been able to pick up on it from the start. As it was, it blended nearly perfectly with his Heartsong. Maggie was the one to finally notice the Dissonance."

"He was pretty Dissonant all by himself, anyway," Maggie muttered.

"He was *quite* unpleasant," Seraphina agreed, ruffling herself just from remembrance. "Such language is not suitable for any occasion."

Maggie rolled her eyes and smoothed her friend's feathers. "We managed to take the spell off him. And thanks to that, I got a pretty good idea of the culprit's vibration. His, er, magical signature," she said to Nunzio's questioning look. "I can set up a tracing spell tonight with Seraphina."

"Will you need my assistance as well?" Kol'daar asked.

"Nah, it won't be that hard," Maggie said, yawning as she added, "but thanks."

"Where are you two staying, anyway?" Nunzio asked.

“They will come to my home,” Lolanna said. Maggie looked surprised at the offer, or perhaps the way it was less of an offer and more of a declaration. “It may be dangerous for you two to be on your own in Splinterpoint. Aside from the suspect, this is not a particularly kind city.”

“Yeah, I think I’m getting that,” Maggie said. “That Sibling Certainty was such a creeper. Are there lots of his kind around?”

“Unfortunately,” Nunzio said. “You ought to be fine if you stick with Lolanna. She’s pretty much creeper kryptonite.”

Lolanna absorbed this with a slow blink and a raised eyebrow.

Maggie smiled. “Yeah, I see what you mean.”

“What’s kryptonite?” Kol’daar asked.

“Never mind.” Nunzio drummed his fingers against his thigh.

No one had said anything about his failure to break Blatt’s enchantment. Which meant he had to say it. He wouldn’t become this cozy little team’s dead weight, or worse, its downfall. Splinterpoint wasn’t home, but it was the only world he had at the moment. If his presence might compromise the goal of saving it and Maggie’s home dimension, he couldn’t just go with the flow.

“So, uh. I suppose you won’t need me anymore, though.”

Everyone looked at him. He kept his eyes on his hands in his lap.

“What?” Maggie asked blankly.

“Well, if music-magic is the only thing that can break enchantments from the Hymnal, I don’t see how I’m supposed to stop this corruption spell for you.”

“Oh, that,” Seraphina said. “Don’t worry, we didn’t expect you to.”

“What?” Nunzio met her pink eyes with his own shocked hazel gaze. He sputtered, his tired brain slow to process. “But I thought that’s why you wanted me in the first place.”

“No, you’re the emergency backup plan,” she explained as if to a particularly slow child. “In case we can’t stop the corruption spell.”

“We hired *Kol’daar* to help break the spell, if we can,” Maggie clarified. She bit her lip, turning to stare out the window. “We hired *you* in case we’re too late.”

Seraphina cocked her head at Nunzio. “You’ll have to destroy the Hymnal, if it comes to that.”

“Will that work? If it’s music-magic—”

“The Hymnal only *contains* the knowledge of music-magic. But it is itself only a magical artefact like any other.” The dove worried her beak against the black feathers on her breast before she went on. “With any luck, it won’t come to that. We were fortunate that there was a gap between when the Hymnal was stolen and when the culprit received the materials for the corruption ritual.”

“So how long is that, all told?” Kol’daar asked soberly.

“Skroinx said he delivered the goods the day before you apprehended him,” Lolanna said.

“Four days ago,” Nunzio did the math aloud.

“Then we have roughly two days left,” Seraphina said with finality.

Everyone lapsed into heavy silence for the rest of the ride to Le Chateau Florida.

Nunzio was sort of relieved that he wasn’t going to get kicked off the job, but it was hard to enjoy job security in the face of an oncoming apocalypse. And if that wasn’t a depressing enough thought, he still hadn’t gotten a replacement for his wrist-comm. Which meant that Kol’daar was going to be the go-to guy when the womenfolk got going tomorrow morning.

“I’ll get you if they so much as make a peep,” Kol’daar reassured him after the cab had dropped them off.

They took the elevator up together, despite Nunzio repeatedly hitting the door-close button before Kol’daar could get aboard.

That night, Nunzio had a terrible dream about the Tomb Raid.

The difference this time was that instead of an anonymous gang assembled by Zinchalte, he went in with Zin himself and Kol’daar, of all people. Zin had a red lollipop, and Kol’daar had a blue one, and the color of their stained lips matched.

The tomb was much as it had been in real life, the dark, dank stone maze complete with traps and hidden monsters, monsters and hidden traps. They’d known the vault was cursed. That’s why they’d brought Nunzio, because Christ knew he wasn’t cut out for anything else.

But that was okay. He broke the spell and vault wide open in one fell swoop. A mountain of platinum coins and gold-wrapped condoms poured out. Nunzio stood knee-deep in them, rejoicing in the glittering flood like Scrooge McDuck getting a tax return.

It wasn't until the screams started that he realized that the sting of dispersing magic had never stopped.

Tapping, somewhere.

It wasn't just the vault that was cursed, but the contents as well.

Still tapping, over and over.

He froze and knew that if he turned around, he'd see them all, see the blood and what the cursed money had done to their bodies before they died, and—

Where was that tapping coming from?

Nunzio's eyes popped open, then immediately squinted. Today's sunlight was a glaring red-orange that his Human eyes weren't adapted to process well. He should have shut the blackout curtains last night.

The tapping was coming from his door, the sound of fingers drumming across the metal plating.

"M comin'," he groaned as loudly as he could, which was pretty loud. The tapping ceased. He dragged himself upright and staggered to the door, slapping at the controls. "Whaddayawant?"

Of course, he'd meant to hit the intercom button. So when the door hiss-clanked open to reveal Kol'daar, Nunzio swayed a little in surprise. Kol'daar looked equally taken aback, staring down at Nunzio's face, and then lower. Oh, right. He'd gone to bed in just his boxers. Well, if Kol'daar could walk around town half-naked, Nunzio would be damned if he'd feel embarrassed in his own home.

Kol'daar was still staring, a fact that finally penetrated Nunzio's sleep-fog. He resisted the urge to cross his arms over his chest. Sure, he wasn't as built as a *barbarian prince*, and his Italian heritage had made him a little bit hairier than said prince, but he had nothing to be ashamed of. Bounty hunting was an active lifestyle. And he wasn't a bear or anything, he didn't have back hair or anything that deserved that kind of scrutiny.

"Hey," Nunzio said. "D'you need something? Did the girls call you?"

Kol'daar blinked and looked at point over Nunzio's shoulder. "Uh, yes. They called to let us know that the tracing spell is working, but it's taking a while. Lolanna is taking them to the Mages' Guild to see if there's a way to speed it up."

Nunzio gave a jaw-popping yawn and stretched. "You goin' with?"

"No," came Kol'daar's strangled reply.

He peered up at Kol'daar, who still avoided his eyes. "You coming down with something? You sound all hoarse."

Kol'daar cleared his throat. "I'm fine. Anyway, since you can't go to the Mages' Guild, they want me to stick around here so they can get a hold of us both. If something, uh, comes up."

Nunzio nodded. "Kay. I'ma get dressed."

"Please do," Kol'daar said, stepping back hastily. "I'll let you know if anything changes."

Nunzio rolled his eyes as the door shut itself. Weirdo. He began his morning routine, putting off getting dressed because *he* didn't mind wandering around in boxers, even if certain hypocritical shirtless neighbors seemed to have a problem with it.

A pot of terrible coffee later, he felt more Human. He threw the nightmare onto the pile of similar ones at the back of his mind. He didn't need a degree in psychology to decipher the meaning. If his subconscious spelled it out any more clearly, it'd start with a capital 'PTSD' and end with 'repressed everything' in parentheses. Anyway, there was too much to do today for him to sit and brood over his subconscious.

Of course, once he thought that, he realized he *didn't* have anything to do until the girls called Kol'daar again. Usually he'd spend his free time wandering the city, keeping abreast of any new fixtures and gossip. He wasn't like Zinchalte, with a thousand 'friends' to do it for him, after all. But without his wrist-comm, that wasn't really feasible.

Next door, the scry-cube turned on. Guess Vorkra had fixed it, then. It was *Praetor Judy* again, enforcing the Emperor's justice with an iron fist. Nunzio snorted into the dregs of his mug. Well, he wasn't going to sit around and listen to *that*. Time to hit the gym.

The ‘gym’ was not anything of the sort, of course. Nunzio didn’t see the point of paying membership fees just to have enough space to run through his Tae Kwon Do forms, especially when he could just take a quick trip up to the Chateau’s roof. He left a scribbled note on his door for Kol’daar. Then he donned a tank top, a loose pair of cotton-like pants, and the thin, space-age gripper-slippers, and ducked out the window onto the rickety, aged metal grating of the fire escape. As his room was located on the seventh floor, it was a short trip.

Splinterpoignant rooftops attracted aloof, jaded loner types like shit gathered flies. Another multiversal truth seemed to be that, secretly, everyone wanted to be Batman. Nunzio couldn’t criticize; he was no exception. There wasn’t anyone there when Nunzio got there, but the lighting probably had a lot to do with it.

It came from a sky that *looked* like The End Was Nigh, tainted a sickly greenish hue. The sun took up half of it, a bloated red giant clearly hanging on to its last couple million years of life by a radioactive hair. It baked the wide, flat expanse of tar paper beneath his feet and made him long for his sunglasses anew.

Well, whatever.

He turned his back to the massive sun and began his workout. The forms were second nature to him, and he moved through them slowly at first, then with gaining speed.

Aside from his necktie, they were the last direct vestiges of his life on Earth. He’d seen cooler, more efficient, more brutal martial arts since he’d arrived here, but the thought of learning any of them seemed as alien as the city itself. He really owed his mom for making him stick with the lessons when he was a scrawny kid, dealing with bullies. Of course, at the time he doubted she’d considered how useful the discipline would be as applied to interdimensional survival, but credit where credit was due.

He missed her. Mom, Dad, his sister Emilia, even her lazy schmuck of a husband, Gerald. Emilia had been pregnant when Nunzio had left so unexpectedly. She’d been saving the baby’s sex as a surprise. It was a strange thought that he had a niece or nephew out there who might never know him. He didn’t even know how he’d deal with being Uncle Nunzio, when he got home.

If he got home. Now more than ever, it seemed impossible. Even provided the world didn’t end and Sakano hadn’t blown up MOM for good, Nunzio was

well aware he had a snowball's chance in hell of getting back to the exact same Earth he'd left.

Of course, if he *did* make it back, he wasn't sure of his welcome. Was he a wanted man, blamed for the jewelry store burglary? Had they declared him dead? If he *was* legally dead, would they still try to collect his student loans when he came back? His disability would be easier to cope with back home; without magic to worry about, he could be *almost* normal.

He supposed that's what it really was, deep down. He missed *normal*.

Nothing about Splinterpoint was normal. Ever since he'd gotten here, he'd been just rolling with the punches of the bizarre and the unexplained. It was the only way to stay alive and relatively sane in this town. The beings who couldn't adapt generally didn't have much life expectancy.

Take the Burrito Incident, for example. He remembered standing out on the street while Zin went around spending his ill-gotten gains, staring at and being overwhelmed by all the magic, and superscience, and a sea of unfamiliar lifeforms. Despite the inarguable thrill of being Zin's... protégé, or sidekick, or kept man, his *whatever*, Nunzio had just stood there wishing so hard for anything *normal*, for a goddamned burrito, that when one showed up he hadn't looked the gift horse in the mouth.

Hah. He really should have known better. Probably was lucky the thing hadn't killed him outright. And afterward, if he hadn't adapted to his unwelcome ability, he probably would have starved to death.

And on that note, he couldn't quite squash the niggling worry that his destructive talent would desert him at the crucial moment, as it had yesterday. He hadn't realized how it had become a weird touchstone for him, the one constant in Splinterpoint, until it wasn't quite a constant. And if it *did* go away before he could find a way home, would he still be able to fend for himself?

He'd been pretty useless at first, *that* was for sure. When he'd found himself in Zinchalte's skilled company, the Twink had enjoyed teasing him for his lack of experience with the weirder parts of multiversal living. He had borne the patronizing explanations and ribbing in stride, as he'd borne everything else since leaving Earth behind. The whole experience was so outside of everything he'd known, it had felt like a dream, or an action movie, or a really weird indie porno once he and Zin had hooked up.

He honestly didn't know why Zin had taken a shine to him in the first place, other than that the Twink was prone to passing fancies. His cluelessness had

likely been the only reason Zin had left him out of the truly dangerous parts of his larcenous misdeeds, because it certainly hadn't been a matter of scruples. Much less protecting him out of emotional attachment.

After the Burrito Incident and the disaster of the Tomb Raid, when the gruesome realities of Splinterpoint had finally carved themselves indelibly into his brain, he'd understood just why Zin had treated him as a naïve backworld-bumpkin. No matter what Nunzio's feelings had been at the time, Zin had never been anything but *unattached*. Which he'd found out the hard way.

The fight that had finally driven him away from Zin had left him terrified, completely alone, and desperately wanting a way back to the safe confines of Earth. He wouldn't mind even if that meant going back to his parents' basement. *Getting* there was the hard part.

He'd never have tried to be a mercenary back in Delaware. It wasn't something that came up in the high school guidance counselor's office. But Nunzio needed money and lots of it for the research into the Multiversal Origins Machine. Few jobs paid that well in Splinterpoint; bounty hunting was the only one he felt qualified to do. The only skills he possessed with any real value in Splinterpoint's vicious economy were his marksmanship, his black belt, and his disability.

But he was *good* at it. Bounty hunting had come surprisingly naturally to him, his aversion to taking sentient life notwithstanding. That alone had felt amazing after months of getting kicked around by the random permutations of an uncaring multiverse.

His job and his research were his reasons to get out of bed and face the crazy. And maybe he'd become a bit of an adrenaline junkie since coming here. He'd be lying if he said he didn't feel pretty awesome when he was jumping around, shooting a damn *raygun*, using gadgets like the code bug and his wrist-comm, swinging on monomolecular wire, dodging laser blasts and magic missiles. Well, he didn't always need to dodge the latter, given his immunity.

Some days, he really did feel like Batman. With a *superpower*. Beat walking around a mall with a flashlight and a douchey hat.

Nunzio frowned.

Not that he *liked* risking life and limb every day. Clearly, he'd be happy to have a normal job again, someday. He hadn't gone native or anything. When he got home, he'd take up paintball or skydiving, something *normal* to get his blood pumping.

Damn, that stupid nightmare must have put him in a *mood* after all. Or maybe it was the apocalypse thing making him so introspective.

Well, enough of that. He started on the more difficult forms, letting his brain shut down entirely. His body took over.

This wasn't necessarily a bad idea during a workout. However, he was highly strung of late. The trip to the Mercurian Guild had been too easy. They hadn't encountered even one enemy to try to stop them. Nunzio wasn't a paranoid wreck like 'Phil,' but he *was* waiting for the other shoe to drop.

And then he heard it, literally, right behind him.

He whirled with a high kick, all instinct and muscle memory, no thought at all.

It was a testament to Kol'daar's reflexes that the man managed to duck and roll out of the way.

"Christ!" Nunzio drew himself up short, shading his eyes with one hand. "Don't sneak up on me like that!"

"Sorry," Kol'daar said as he straightened. His eyes were wide. Their pale color meant that the saturated sunlight turned them a bizarrely reflective orange. It would have made him look exotic if his pale skin wasn't doing the exact same thing. "I thought you'd hear me walking. I wasn't trying to sneak."

"Why are you here?" Nunzio demanded. At Kol'daar's affronted look, he rephrased. "Did something happen?"

"That's what I came to ask you," Kol'daar retorted, scanning the roof around them.

Nunzio furrowed his brow. "Huh?"

"I saw your note on my way to the privy," Kol'daar told him. "It seemed suspicious."

"How is 'Gone to roof' suspicious?" Nunzio asked, hands on hips.

"When it's scrawled across your door, it's suspicious," Kol'daar said defensively.

Nunzio blinked. Oh. Maybe he wasn't the only one feeling highly strung. "It's dry erase marker. I didn't have a Post-it Note."

"When the apocalypse is nigh and a fifth of the team of saviors vanishes with a vague note, it's suspicious."

Okay, he had to give him that. Still, “Saviors?”

“Isn’t that what we are?”

Nunzio snorted and lifted one arm in a half-assed shrug. “More like saviors-in-waiting.”

“Right,” Kol’daar said with a startled chuff of laughter. He shook his head ruefully. “I hate to sound impatient under the circumstances, but—”

“But you’re crawling the walls,” Nunzio said. “Yeah, me too. I was just blowing off some steam.”

Kol’daar gave him tentative smile. “I saw. Is this fighting style from your homeland, or did you learn it here?”

“It’s from Earth, but not exactly my homeland. The world’s a big place.”

“I find that I could also, ah, ‘blow off some steam.’” The man’s smile grew, his eyes sparking a hint of challenge. “Would you care for a sparring partner?”

Nunzio considered a moment. It wasn’t a terrible idea; he’d been itching for a reason to smack the smug out of Kol’daar for *days*.

If some buried part of him was itching for anything else, he could ignore it as he’d already done for so long. He was practically immune to Kol’daar’s perfect abs from sheer overexposure, anyway.

“Sure,” he said simply, drawing his limbs into Tiger stance.

Kol’daar’s pose was unfamiliar, as were his moves as they closed in, testing each other’s defenses. Nunzio blocked a series of punches, returned with a few knife-hand chops. Kol’daar dodged and danced away. Then he charged; he was *fast*. Nunzio still managed to spin out of his path, aiming a kick at Kol’daar’s flank.

With catlike grace, Kol’daar twisted at the last moment and caught his leg. Then Nunzio found himself flung through the air in an expert throw. He landed hard but rolled to his feet, glaring.

“That cannot be all you have to offer,” Kol’daar taunted, resuming his opening stance. “Come at me seriously.”

Pride stung, Nunzio bared his teeth in something like a grin. “You asked for it.”

The spar became fierce after that. He got the feeling that they were holding back only just enough not to actually break any limbs, but that was about it.

They flew at each other, speaking only the language of bodily harm. Kol'daar was no slouch, but Nunzio gave as good as he got. The stalemate seemed to incite them both to progressively harsher tactics as the fight dragged on.

His fist connected with Kol'daar's face with a satisfying crack, only for him to receive a knee to his gut for his troubles. He retaliated by sweeping Kol'daar's legs out from under him. The man bounced back with another throw. Nunzio was getting used to it, though; he landed on his feet and leapt right back into the fray. His opponent whirled to meet him.

In brutal motion, Kol'daar was a sight to behold. His eyes glittered in the light, a feral slice of teeth showing between his lips as he grinned. His chest glistened with a sheen of sweat as his breath grew heavy with exertion. He looked every inch the bloodthirsty barbarian, despite the fake-tan-accident tone of his skin. And, well, Nunzio was only Human. He supposed he'd overestimated his immunity to chiseled torsos.

Sensing his distraction, Kol'daar changed tactics. Instead of dodging away, he clamped down on Nunzio's wrists, snake-strike fast, and dragged him down to the gritty tar paper to grapple. The spar turned into a no-holds-barred wrestling match. This left Nunzio at a decided disadvantage. Kol'daar had weight, height, and leverage on him.

No, literally *on* him. In almost no time at all, he ended up pinned facedown on the roof, one arm twisted and held behind him, and Kol'daar plastered to his back. It had been a long time since he'd been so thoroughly manhandled.

It was nowhere near as unpleasant as it ought to be.

Alarm bells rang in Nunzio's head. With his free hand, he tapped out.

"Okay, game over," he gasped.

"Do you yield?" Kol'daar demanded.

His voice was low and rough, the vibration rumbling through his chest and into Nunzio's, the epitome of close-talking. Hot breaths gusted against the side of Nunzio's neck, incongruously raising goose bumps even as the heat of the man's body against his own sank straight to his groin.

"Y-yeah," he stammered, trying to stem both his, er, rising interest and the accompanying panic. "You win. Good job. Now get off me."

In his hyperaware state, with his adrenaline still going strong, he could have imagined the barest hesitation before Kol'daar released his arm and the weight

of his body fell away. Nunzio scrambled into a sitting position, his back turned to Kol'daar while he checked as subtly as possible to make sure his pants hadn't disintegrated.

They hadn't. He sighed, shoulders drooping in relief.

Chapter Thirteen

A large, heavy hand on his shoulder made him jump.

“You fought well, you know,” Kol’daar said, grunting a little as he levered himself down to sit next to him. “Don’t take it so hard.”

Nunzio winced internally at the phrasing, then winced externally when he stopped worrying about his libido long enough to realize he had lost the spar, fair and square. Damn it. Yet he wasn’t that surprised; he’d had his doubts about taking Kol’daar on from the first time he’d laid eyes on him.

He didn’t need to remember the banana-hammock right now, though. It had not escaped his notice that Kol’daar had left his hand to linger on Nunzio’s shoulder. Unsubtly, he scooted over to dislodge it and to put more distance between him and Kol’daar.

Think unsexy thoughts. Think unsexy thoughts. Blatt in his tighty-whities.

That worked like a charm. A horrible, brain-bleach-worthy charm. It served the double purpose of both quenching his socially awkward boner as well as providing a neutral topic to broach.

“Well, you did manage to one-shot a space warthog,” Nunzio allowed reluctantly. “I didn’t see it at the time, but it must have been a hell of a punch. You even made an impression on the Retribution Chief.”

“Makes me wish I could tell my family,” Kol’daar said. Nunzio glanced at him to see the man wearing a wistful smile. “They’d never believe it, anyway.”

“Why not?”

“You mean, aside from the interdimensional space warthog-man thing.”

Ah. Nunzio supposed he had gone a bit native, if he’d forgotten that part. He waved his hand dismissively. “Yeah, aside from that.”

“Well, I’m the runt of the litter, so to speak,” Kol’daar said lightly.

Nunzio boggled at him, which earned him a chuckle. Granted, the guy was no Dwayne Johnson, but certainly with that height and those powerful, sleek muscles, he deserved a more fitting description than *runt*.

“Is your family a race of Giants?”

“No, we’re Human enough. It seems like the rest of the multiverse breeds them smaller. Except for Lolanna. She’s the only normal person I’ve met here yet.”

Nunzio huffed a surprised laugh despite himself. Kol'daar seemed surprised, too, turning to look at him in disbelief.

“Lolanna’s a low-fi cyborg mercenary with the personality of an overachieving hall monitor. She’s not *normal*,” Nunzio said. “But neither are you. Aren’t barbarians supposed to be, I dunno, argumentative and obsessed with honor and, uh, mead and all that?”

“They are. Well, my people are.” He was silent for a while, gazing off, channeling his inner Batman. Eventually he said, “You miss your Earth? You intend on going back?”

“Of course,” Nunzio replied. He didn’t expound on his reasons, or the hazy doubts that had sprung up in his mind that very morning. He’d get home, or die trying, and that was the end of it. “Provided we save the world first, and I can find a way to do it. Don’t *you* want to go home?”

Kol'daar shrugged one shoulder, sighing. “I don’t know.”

That got Nunzio’s attention. He looked sharply at his unlikely neighbor, who met his eyes for a split second before looking away again.

He was uncomfortably aware that he barely knew Kol'daar, really. The only reason he was still sitting here was because there was shit else to do, and this was *his* roof. He’d lost enough ground to this guy already without ceding his outdoor Batcave as well.

And. Well. Nunzio could admit to himself, if no one else, that staring down the barrel of the End Times wasn’t something he wanted to do alone. And maybe Kol'daar felt the same way.

“Why not?” he asked. “I thought you said you were a prince. Shouldn’t you be back in—where was it again?”

“Hradica.”

“Back in Hradica, enjoying your rank? Kicking ass and taking names? Doing quests for your Queen Mum and all?”

Kol'daar made a noncommittal sound. He drew his knees up to rest his arms atop them. “That *is* what is expected of me, yes. But she has my four older siblings for that. She... prefers them, in that regard. As do our people. Like you said, I am an oddity. Songweavers are rare even in my homeland, and though we’re thoroughly bound by vows of honor, we’re not always trusted. It’s too easy for us to influence people.”

Nunzio gave that some thought. He'd seen it in action yesterday at the SpOC, how Kol'daar's music had calmed everyone down. If he could do that, then he could probably instill people with any kind of emotion he wished. It wasn't much of a stretch of the imagination to see how that kind of potent manipulation could be misused. One song to incite war for more gold, glory, and grog, another to keep people complacent, another to make them distrust outsiders...

Actually, that sounded like Fox News. *Magic* Fox News, with a good beat that you could dance to.

Another thought struck him, and he slapped his leg in realization. "Was *that* why Gronl had you playing for her customers? You were *Playing* for them?"

Kol'daar looked shifty. Nunzio raised his eyebrows and waited.

At length, he admitted, shamefaced, "It was part of my indenture. I didn't *make* customers buy things. I just... gave them more confidence when they were trying things on. Part of a Songweaver's duties *is* boosting morale of the warband, so it wasn't exactly an abuse of my—"

"Does Lolanna know you made her buy that diamond-studded corset?"

"No. Please don't tell her. She's scary."

Nunzio grinned then mimed locking his lips and throwing out the key. He wouldn't tell Lolanna, but more because he enjoyed this chink in Kol'daar's exemplary behavior too much to bandy it about. He'd save this for special occasions, only dusting it off when he needed a good threat—

And then he remembered that the world might end before he got the chance. His grin faded. Then he frowned at himself, because he wasn't planning on hanging around Kol'daar after they saved the world, anyway.

But for now, he may as well get them back to the topic at hand. He wondered if this counted as 'civil conversation.' If that wasn't a sign of the Apocalypse, he didn't know what was.

"People don't trust magic-users here very much, either. You don't need music-magic to do mind control. Hell, you don't even need *magic*. Some of the scientists get out of hand, too. You'll need a better reason than that, if you seriously think you want to stay."

Kol'daar was quiet again for a while. "I like that here, I can... be myself. I am just... not very good at being a stern leader like my mother and brothers and sisters all are. Back home, they said that I am 'too friendly.'"

“You *are* too friendly,” Nunzio agreed with feeling. “You’re so friendly you’re practically Canadian.”

“I don’t know what Canadian is,” Kol’daar said, shaking his head. “But you see? It’s not proper behavior for a Hradical warrior, much less a child of the Maeri’su. I should be, well, haughty and uncompromising in upholding my honor against any supposed slights. I can’t help it, though, any more than I can stop hearing the Orphic Noise.”

Nunzio would not sympathize. He would not. Certainly the picture in his head of Kol’daar smiling and apologizing and making jokes at people who were as humorless as Lolanna and as meatheaded as the jocks who’d made his own adolescence hell was a bit over the top. Kol’daar was a prince, not a band-class geek; his rank would have protected him from any real bullying. There was no need to break out the tiny violin solos.

Still, it couldn’t have been easy, living day in and day out with people who saw such things as kindness and humor as frivolous weakness. Who saw his skill with his spiderharp as a threat as much as a tool. No wonder he could deal with Nunzio’s irascibility without a batting an eye. If Kol’daar had really grown up in that kind of environment and *still* was this goddamned amiable, it really was some kind of congenital defect.

Either that or he was Barbarian Jesus. And just look what happened to the original.

Nunzio pointed out, “But you gotta set limits, man. It’s a multiversal truth that nice guys finish last.”

“I disagree. Since coming here, I’ve found that almost everyone appreciates a nice guy. I think it’s worked out well.”

“I literally waltzed into your home, broke your shit, and then you turned around and tried to make amends like it’s your fault. How’s *that* working out for you?”

“Like I told you yesterday, I *understand* why you are upset with me. It’s even deserved. So I don’t begrudge you your petty vengeance and your foul temper. I figure you’ll get tired of it eventually.”

Nunzio blinked at him, nonplussed.

Kol’daar smirked at him, that sudden sly look. “Besides, you’re funny when you’re angry. Mostly.”

His stomach flipped; that smirk *did things* to him, damn it. He scowled. He could only take so much from the man who'd just mopped the floor with him.

"And you're an idiot when you're breathing," he snapped, crossing his arms. "I didn't ask for your forgiveness, you know. Or your friendliness."

"True, but you have both anyway. Someday, I hope I will earn yours."

With those words, Kol'daar's smirk gentled to a real smile. It suited him, an expression that was more open, more hopeful. And—Nunzio realized as his breath caught in his chest—much, much more dangerous.

He had to put a stop to this. Hadn't he just vowed yesterday not to let this guy get under his skin? As cozy as this little heart-to-heart may have been, he wasn't about to let Kol'daar think he was going to win Nunzio over by being so damned reasonable and insufferably affable.

He was just about to marshal his temper into a blistering rant, like the one that had worked yesterday, when there came a clatter from the metal fire escape behind them.

Both of them startled, standing and reaching for weapons they hadn't brought with them. God, they were idiots; it was the end of the world and they left their apartments without weapons.

Nunzio hadn't realized how close they'd gotten to the low ledge of the roof during the sparring match; the glare from the sun off Kol'daar's gleaming body had probably blinded him. As it was, he could clearly hear when conversation floated up the side of the building.

"We will discuss the matter out here."

"We can discuss just as well in our room."

"We will be overheard in our room. The walls are thin, and 'Phil' is always listening."

The voices were all the same voice, really. That and the weird emphasis on the first person plurals at the start of almost every sentence signaled who had come out to talk. The Three Rs, those creepy girls whose names Nunzio couldn't recall. He wasn't interested in eavesdropping and was about to walk away without a care if they heard him or not.

"We should have told Torth that the Heaven Siren has arrived."

"We don't owe Torth any favors."

“We must not let her find the Hymnal. The corruption is almost complete.”

Nunzio stopped with his foot hanging in the air. No way. No fucking way. He almost fell over, but Kol'daar caught him. They exchanged glances of incredulous alarm and then ducked down behind the ledge Scooby-Doo style, pressing themselves to one side of the fire escape and listening hard.

“We were promised her soul.”

“We are *hungry*. We have been without souls for too long.”

“But we had cake yesterday. Cake is almost as good as souls.”

“We can't live on cake alone.”

Nunzio slowly rose and, ignoring Kol'daar's soft warning hiss, peered down the fire escape. The creepy lookalike girls stood on the landing of the sixth floor, less than twenty feet below them. Even with a visual fix, it was hard to follow who was talking.

He had the feeling it didn't matter. The things they said almost sounded like a hive mind talking to itself aloud.

“We had the pig's soul.”

“We don't think that counts. He wasn't Human and had a funny aftertaste.”

“Pork rinds,” all three chimed, turning their heads in simultaneous disgust.

Behind him, Kol'daar tensed. Nunzio felt a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. He leaned back down out of sight. They'd gotten to Blatt?

They'd lied about their Humanity during the SpOC, which he hadn't really believed in the first place. He hadn't thought they *ate souls*, though. Only a few things in the multiverse had the appetite and ability to do that, demons being the most common. Even so, demons weren't really *common*, even in Splinterpoint.

But Maggie fought demons in her home dimension. And hadn't she said that the attacks had dropped off suddenly, before the Hymnal was stolen?

“We think Torth should be grateful we took care of the pig for him. The pig was not part of the plan.”

“We were too late, though. The Heaven Siren had already talked to the pig.”

“But *we* weren't noticed. We walked right by her, and she never Heard us. Torth's song worked.”

Connecting the dots, Nunzio gathered a number of things. First, the ‘Heaven Siren’ was plainly Maggie. Second, this Torth had to be the guy casting spells from the Heavenly Hymnal, which was starting to seem more like a score to ‘Necronomicon: the Musical’ than a Singalong Bible.

Seriously, who gave that kind of thing to a *teenager*?

Third, his mind flashed on the Mercurian ‘dentists’ who’d been so eager to follow them into Blatt’s holding cell. They’d been weird, sure, but at the time it’d seemed like typical Mercurian weirdness. He’d dismissed it. One set of white robes was as anonymous as any other. Their enemies had passed them by, close enough to touch. Nunzio had a bad case of the crawlies at the thought.

“We should have attacked then.”

“We should take her soul now.”

“No. We wait until the Hymnal is corrupt. With its power in our grasp, even the Heaven Siren will be unable to stop us.”

“We can’t let her interfere. She has allies already. She may gain more.”

“No. We will isolate her. Make her suffer.”

“We know her allies. The idiot and the one with the harp both live here in the building. We will eat their souls first.”

Nunzio’s lips formed a long, silent ‘fuck.’ And how come *he* was ‘the idiot’?

“We don’t know which rooms are theirs.”

“We can search.”

“No. We won’t draw the attention of the landlady.”

There was a pregnant pause, during which it became clear that even demons who were bringing about Armageddon feared Vorkra. Nunzio had to bite his cheek hard to keep from letting loose a hysterical giggle.

“We will watch for them in the lobby.”

“We will follow them when they leave.”

“And we will ambush them.”

“Yes,” came the chorus of three voices as one.

A consensus reached, the Three Rs clambered back through their window. The faint sound of the pane snapping shut reached up to the roof, but Nunzio

didn't unbend fully at first. He cautiously peeked over the ledge again to make sure they'd really gone inside. When the fire escape proved deserted, he took a deep breath and straightened.

Kol'daar spoke first and kept his voice pitched low. "That was..."

"Too damn lucky?" Nunzio supplied and received a nod. He scraped his hands through his hair, thinking hard. "We have to get out of here. And let the girls know. D'you have your comm with you?"

Kol'daar nodded, reaching for a pouch on his belt. He drew the comm-unit out and tapped it. Nothing happened. He frowned and tried again. Then he shook it, smacked it a few times to no avail.

He leveled a reproachful look at Nunzio. "It's broken."

"Hey!" Nunzio felt his face heat. "Don't just assume I did it. *You* were the one jumping around and rolling all over the ground. It probably got jostled."

"It's Guild-approved for use in battle. Lolanna said it can withstand a direct hit from a magic missile."

Nunzio knew that, but he hadn't even felt the sting of breaking tech. Granted, he'd been pretty distracted—

And that was his problem, right there.

His control over his disability had slipped, and he hadn't even *noticed*.

Chapter Fourteen

He suddenly felt cold all over, despite the heat of the day. His breath stuck in his chest as he scanned Kol'daar covertly as possible. The man didn't seem damaged, aside from the minor scrapes and bruises from their sparring match. Another quick glance at the place where he'd been pinned didn't show any structural damage to the roof.

The breath slid out slowly. The lapse couldn't have been that bad, then. Or perhaps the comm-unit had acted as a lightning rod. Either way, even under the current circumstances, Nunzio considered the comm-unit a lucky break.

It could have been much, much worse. He could only imagine explaining to Lolanna, Seraphina, and the pure-as-driven-snow Maggie that he'd accidentally vaporized Kol'daar because he got too turned on to keep his destructive power to himself.

His surprise chubby had nearly doomed at least two dimensions. Jesus Christ. He swayed on his feet.

"Are you all right?" Concern colored Kol'daar's voice, and he put both hands on Nunzio's shoulders to brace him.

They'd been standing right up in each other's space to start with, had been ever since they'd been hiding. The dire threat posed by the Three Rs had distracted Nunzio from Kol'daar's close-talking. This was now even more of a hazard than ever, because Nunzio couldn't pretend even to himself that the man had no effect on him. And Kol'daar had *no idea* how he'd nearly shared the same fate as his fancy comm.

Nunzio shook him off roughly, retreating with unflattering haste. He refused to feel guilty about the hurt expression that flashed over his companion's face. This wasn't the time for any kind of emotional fallout, he reminded himself. He thrust his personal freak-out aside in favor of the *larger* freak-out.

"I'm *fine*," Nunzio declared, crossing his arms. When Kol'daar opened his mouth to point out that this obviously wasn't the case, he added, "Even if I wasn't, we still need to get out of here. Weapons first."

Kol'daar visibly swallowed whatever he'd been about to say, settling on a nod. He still watched Nunzio carefully, as if he might keel over at any moment. Nunzio glared with all his might until the man dropped his eyes.

“The fire escape drops down off the side of the building. If they’re waiting for us in the lobby, we won’t be spotted.”

The barbarian’s tone was cool and impersonal. It wasn’t a blatant snub—or wouldn’t have been, if Kol’daar wasn’t usually as informal as a flirty waiter handling a bar-rush crowd. Well, fine by him. Their impromptu bonding session aside, it wasn’t like they were friends to begin with. If Kol’daar finally decided he wasn’t worth the effort of being friendly at after all, they’d both be better off in the end.

Angry at the baseless disappointment sinking in his chest, Nunzio said clippedly, “We can head for a pay-comm outpost near here to get a hold of Lolanna and arrange a rendezvous.”

Thus decided, they crept quietly back down the fire escape, creeping over the rusty metal grating to keep it from rattling in its loose moorings. To be honest, he was kind of surprised the thing could support the weight of both of them at once.

Nunzio went to his window and hesitated when Kol’daar came with him instead of going into his own room.

“We shouldn’t split up,” Kol’daar said to his questioning look. “Just in case.”

Nunzio rolled his eyes, but with actual demons involved he couldn’t fault the basic horror movie logic. He ducked inside and immediately stripped off his tank top. Behind him, Kol’daar gasped softly. Nunzio glanced over his shoulder to see the man staring at him again.

“*What?* Christ, you’d think a guy who goes around shirtless all the time wouldn’t be so easy to shock,” Nunzio griped.

Even saying this, he felt a flush climbing his neck and face. He faced forward again to take off his pants and slide into his black jeans. This was about practicality. He wasn’t going to confront the apocalypse in *sweatpants*, for crying out loud.

He wouldn’t think about the weight of those pale, sharp eyes on his bare skin, or how Kol’daar’s mere presence seemed to suck the air out of the confines of the small, very messy apartment.

“No, that’s—I’m not—you just,” Kol’daar stammered and then seemed to gather himself. “You... have a lot of scars.”

Nunzio froze in reaching for his white button-up. Oh. So that was it.

He didn't really think about his scars; it wasn't like he had anyone to impress anymore. Kol'daar came from a world full of warriors. Surely he'd seen plenty of battle scars before. His scrutiny threw a new and unpleasant layer of discomfort onto the many of which Nunzio already was painfully aware.

His scars couldn't be that remarkable. There weren't *that* many. He was hardly Freddy Krueger. There'd just been a few jobs that hadn't gone as well as they could have. He'd still snagged his targets, though, and he had survived with all his original limbs intact. He wasn't complaining.

"I'm a *bounty hunter*. Comes with the territory, doesn't it?" More in his case, perhaps. Just because he used nonlethal force didn't mean the beings he hunted had any qualms. More than brooding on rooftops, that made him relate to Batman; that shit sucked.

As he spoke, he forced himself back into action, quickly throwing his shirt on and buttoning it with only a little fumbling. Then he unbuttoned it and rebuttoned it the right way, so the ends weren't all uneven when he turned around. He met Kol'daar's gaze with a challenge in his own.

"But the Guild has..." Kol'daar stopped and trailed off, realizing what was wrong with his statement before he finished.

Nunzio nodded and gave him a tight, sarcastic smile. "Typically, for everything short of hospitalization, the Guild's healers use *magic*. And regen-pills only do so much."

"You must be a very strong warrior," Kol'daar said.

His tone was careful but somehow not neutral. Whatever. They were too busy for Nunzio to bother deciphering the nuances. He stuffed his feet into his boots.

"Course I am. I'm goddamn badass," he asserted as he gathered his weapons and coat—and his tie, as an afterthought. "Let's go."

Collecting Kol'daar's harp and sword was faster because he didn't need to change his outfit. It made Nunzio feel a bit like a prima donna, but Kol'daar hadn't even ribbed him about it. Finally armed, they began the descent down the fire escape. The landing at the sixth floor they ran across so fast, they almost flew over it. This must have looked really stupid, because they were both bent over to keep below the windows, just in case the Three Rs were slow in getting downstairs.

Despite their best efforts to tread carefully, the fire escape rattled and groaned and wobbled alarmingly the lower they got. Nunzio was in the lead. Thus, when he stepped off the fourth floor landing and onto the top step of the stairs leading to the third, he was the lucky guy who found out that the aged metal had degraded to the point of snapping beneath his weight.

Arms windmilling futilely, he fell. He bit back the shocked cry, so it came out as a strangled grunt. His feet hit the lower steps, but these also caved. He had half a second to wonder if he could just drop onto the third floor landing, when, with a sudden metallic shriek, the lower levels of the fire escape jerked out of the wall and listed violently to the side.

He slammed into the handrail and clung to it at a forty-five-degree angle. The fire escape dangled and bobbed out over the alley, nearly forty feet below. Habit had him reaching for his wrist-comm's monomolecular wire, which was handy in situations like this. But of course, as his wrist-comm had ended up in the trash after yesterday's SpOC, it wasn't handy right *now*.

"I am fucking going shopping after this thing is over," Nunzio promised himself out loud, albeit through clenched teeth. He looked around frantically for a soft place to land, as it seemed he'd be going down—and not in the fun way—pretty quick. "I'm gonna get a comm, and a rappelling kit, and some goddamn sunglasses. And a fucking *hat*."

The fire escape groaned and shifted alarmingly, and he paused in his swearing to hold on for dear life. Kol'daar joined him on his precarious perch, crouched with his boots and one hand on the rail. In his other, he held his spiderharp at the ready.

"You have *weird* priorities," he said. He firmed his grip on the railing before giving it a hard, purposeful jounce with his powerful legs.

"What are you *doing*? This thing is *evil*. The weight's gonna—"

One more jounce, and the weight did. More supports farther up the fire escape buckled, and with a screech of tortured steel, the whole thing flipped over in midair. Nunzio flipped with it and lost his own grip in the process.

This was apparently what Kol'daar was waiting for, because he swung with acrobatic ease, using the momentum of the collapsing structure to fling himself outward. He caught Nunzio in a one-armed tackle as they began to plummet, already plucking a few strings on his harp.

With his goddamned *tongue*. That fucking Jimi Hendrix wannabe.

Even as the humming pressure of Kol'daar's brand of magic pressed on him, Nunzio was pretty sure they were doomed. Or at least *he* was. While he might not be able to break music-magic spells, he still was immune to their effects.

But he found himself dragged along by Kol'daar, whose *downward* momentum had shifted to *forward*. They soared across the alley, the cracked wall of the neighboring building approaching with wicked speed. Kol'daar kicked out with feet at the last moment, which bounced them off the wall and sent them into a dizzying spin.

Instinct alone had Nunzio curling up as they whipped around, preparing for impact. His back struck a filthy windowpane, which shattered in an explosion of glass shards. His unstylish coat—which he wore not just for its many pockets, but because it was made of a space-age fiber that made Kevlar look like clunky tissue paper—protected him from gaining any more scars when he landed right on top of the jagged pile. It did not protect him from Kol'daar's weight smashing down on top of him in the same moment.

While Nunzio struggled to retrieve the breath that had been knocked out of his lungs three times over, Kol'daar stood. Unruffled, even pleased, he picked a shard of glass from his leggings, checked his harp for damage, and then re-slung it across his back. He tucked his thumbs into his sword belt and stared out the window.

Outside, the fire escape gave up the ghost and fell completely. The earsplitting crash shook the floor. So much for sneaking out the back. Nunzio closed his eyes in resignation. When he opened them, he sat up.

“Wha-what the hell was that?” he choked out between coughs, unsure whether to glare or gape.

“That was me, saving you from evil architecture.”

Glaring, it was. “Oh, shut up. Who died and made you Legolas?”

Even the reference passing over his head couldn't dim Kol'daar's smug grin. He offered a hand. “Don't underestimate a Hradical warrior.”

Nunzio rolled his eyes and took the hand up. He glanced around at their surrounding as he stood.

Two rows of desks covered in papers and computer tablets filled the large, dingily lit room. The occupants were of a myriad of species, each one frozen with shock over their piles of paperwork. Eyes, eyestalks, and other less

common optical receptors all fixed on the pair of intruders. Nunzio elbowed Kol'daar, who was peeking over the edge of the window to give a low whistle at the wreckage. Kol'daar turned around and froze.

“Uh,” he said. “Hello.”

“Pardon the intrusion. Official Guild business,” Nunzio said with only a little bit of wheeze left in his voice. He reached for his badge, remembered he still hadn't gotten it back yet, and instead smacked Kol'daar lightly on the arm. He hissed out the corner of his mouth, “Show 'em your badge.”

Kol'daar fumbled with his belt pouch quickly, then brandished his shiny metal badge.

“Contact the Sector 31 Mercenaries' Guild for recompense of the damages, as authorized by Hunter Kol'daar ox Huuf'ta,” Nunzio informed the office drones.

They didn't move, except for an insectoid figure in the back whose wing casings started up a nervous chirping.

He spotted the exit and made for it hastily. Kol'daar followed at his heels, slamming the door behind them. The hallway outside the office was quiet, dusty, and deserted. Kol'daar let out a garbled sound.

Nunzio glanced at him and saw him literally biting back a smile, turning red from the effort. When their gazes locked, the big dope lost it, giving a loud peal of baritone laughter. Surprising himself, Nunzio followed suit, because, Jesus Christ, the look on those working stiffs' faces—and they could probably hear the pair of them laughing like loons right now, too, and that just made him laugh harder.

The contagious mirth bounced back and forth between them, inches away from hysteria, a reaction to the adrenaline of a close shave. Even so, the release of tension felt too good to fight it. They moved down the hall, trying to find the stairs. It was slow going. Every time they almost calmed down, Kol'daar would make a chirping noise, or Nunzio would stage-whisper, “Show 'em your badge,” and they'd be right back to holding their sides and leaning against the walls.

Finally, Nunzio sobered enough to say, “Seriously, we have to get moving.”

“Haha, ha, ri-ha-right,” Kol'daar agreed, winding down. He realized he was still holding his badge in his hand and started to put it away.

Nunzio glanced at it curiously. After that little display outside, he wondered what kind of rating the Guild had designated for the barbarian. When he read it, his eyes just about bugged out of his head.

“X-d20? Are you even *real*?”

Kol'daar looked over at him quizzically, though his smile still lingered. “Huh?”

The Mercenaries' Guild's rating system was convoluted at best, but the d-restrictions were usually used to warn potential clients of what kind of limitations a particular mercenary had, or of what kind of damages to expect in the wake of employing them. The near-mythical d20 restriction wasn't for clients, though. It was for the *mercenary*, designating that they were too powerful to be allowed out on any typical bounty hunt or bodyguard job. HQ saved the d20 members for the serious raids, the epic dungeon crawls, and, apparently, the invocation of the Extraordinary Circumstances Amendment.

Torn between grudging awe and incredulous disgust—this was just fucking *typical* of Kol'daar, really; Nunzio should just start expecting the guy to pull the most ridiculous, overpowered bullshit because apparently that was his *thing*—Nunzio didn't explain, just shook his head and started for the stairs.

They ended up spilling out of a service stair into the backstage area of the gay bar's tiny venue. As it was only just past midday, the area was empty besides the stacks of sound equipment. Nunzio led the way out into the bar proper with as much nonchalant stealth as he could manage.

Kol'daar didn't do stealth, or maybe it was just the type of establishment. Shirtless, six foot six of sculpted muscle, drop-dead gorgeous, and dressed like an aboriginal rockstar, Kol'daar was pretty much any gay humanoid male's wet dream come to life. In the nearly deserted bar, the heads of all the beings present turned to stare as Kol'daar loped with his usual easy, dangerous stride across the dance floor. One of the go-go boys turned to another and fanned himself, mouthing, ‘daaamn.’

Nunzio couldn't blame them; he'd done practically the same thing when he'd first spotted the man. But then he'd had to *deal* with the guy, and... Well. He supposed the Roof Incident proved that Nunzio still wasn't adjusted to Kol'daar's sex appeal, despite his obnoxiously pleasant disposition, unbelievable luck, and frankly absurd physical prowess.

It occurred to him that most people wouldn't consider any of those things drawbacks, but Nunzio had principles to maintain. And a job to do.

"The pay-comm outpost is a few blocks south from here," Nunzio said as they headed for the door to the street. "We'll call Lolanna and meet them at HQ."

"Do you think the girls have—"

"Nun-zi-oooo!"

The loud singsong cry was all the warning Nunzio got as a blue blur rushed out of a windowed, corner booth and headed directly for him. On edge as he was, he had his nerve disruptor drawn and wedged under his assailant's chin before the guy could get another word in edgewise.

"Oh, wow, whipping it out in public are we?" Zinchalte asked, comically wide-eyed, but he was smiling. His hundred-proof breath reached Nunzio even from the arm's length between them.

"Zin," Nunzio said, not a little dismayed.

Kol'daar had his harp at the ready, fingers poised over the strings. Wary eyes flicked back and forth between the two of them. "You know him?"

"Of course he does," Zin said, flapping a hand. He lowered his lashes at Nunzio. "Honey, don't get so excited. If you shoot in my face right off the bat, then neither of us have fun."

Nunzio snorted but eased the disruptor down. "Huh. So there's a Twink in Cream. Usually it's the other way around."

Zinchalte giggled, swaying toward him. He looked much as he had the last time Nunzio had seen him, albeit clothed now in the future-fop style the Twink had ever preferred. His full-length, skintight pantaloons had gotten dusty, dulling their faint silver glow. His flowing linen shirt and impeccably tailored peacock-green waistcoat also seemed worse for wear, rumpled and disheveled.

Unease prickled down Nunzio's spine. Zin never let himself be seen in such a less-than-immaculate state without dire cause and much complaint. He was as drunk as Nunzio had ever seen him, at an hour earlier than he was apt to get out of bed. He was *here*, a dive by his snobbish standards.

"What are you doing here, Zin?"

"Waiting for *you*, silly," Zin replied, rolling his eyes. "I've been trying to get you on the comm *forever*." He gave Kol'daar a long, appreciative up-and-down once-over. "Who's your friend?"

“Kol’ daar, meet Zinchalte. Zinchalte, meet Kol’ daar,” Nunzio rattled off quickly.

“Oh, so *you’re* the guy who snagged Blatt. I’d put my money on this one.” Zin closed in, wrapping an arm around Nunzio’s shoulders, which tensed immediately. “You’re quite the dark horse, Hunter Kol’ daar.”

Kol’ daar still watched Zin like he was an alien. Well, he *was* an alien, but Kol’ daar didn’t seem to stare at anyone else with that intense bemusement. The barbarian looked between the two of them, something dawning on his face before it was quickly smothered by a charming smile Nunzio hadn’t seen from him yet.

“I had no idea my reputation preceded me,” Kol’ daar said smoothly. He replaced his harp and half bowed. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Zinchalte.”

Nunzio frowned, unnerved by the formal manners on display as much as by the touchy-feely drunk draped over him. Zin hadn’t gotten this physical with him since before the Burrito Incident—and after the Tomb Raid and the fallout thereof, Nunzio hadn’t even *wanted* him to.

“If this is about the information on Blatt, I don’t have time right now.” Or money, but that wasn’t something Zin needed to know. “Gimme a couple days to get a new comm. I’ll get a hold of you then.”

“Hmnope.” Zin pretended to consider. “That’s not how things work here, or have you forgotten?” He walked two fingers up Nunzio’s chest, toying with his tie, and craned his neck upward to slowly purr in his ear, “You *owe* me. You haven’t become an oathbreaker since the last time I saw you, have you?”

Nunzio resisted the urge to shudder, both at the overfamiliarity and the threat in Zin’s question. No one liked oathbreakers. If no one killed them outright, they’d die of starvation, unable to find succor anywhere in Splinterpoint where their apostasy was known. It wasn’t a word Zinchalte threw around, mostly because he knew exactly how much his word was worth to people. If Zin told his wide net of informants that someone was an oathbreaker, that person’s reputation—and then the person as well—was pretty much shot.

“Of course not. But c’mon, I’m right in the middle of something, here.”

“Maybe I’d like to be in the middle of something, too,” Zin said, tipping his head to smile invitingly at Kol’ daar even as he leaned further into Nunzio. Once he was sure his implication had been divined, he added benevolently, “I’ll make it even easier for you. Forget dinner. You can buy me a drink here, stay and talk for a bit, and we’ll call it even.”

There was definitely something up with Zinchalte. If his drunken, disordered appearance here wasn't red flag enough, the easy out was a giant neon sign. Zin not collecting in full on a debt or favor was like the sun rising in the west back home, or the Pope celebrating Hanukkah. It was unprecedented.

A steal of a deal from the thief could only be the old bait-and-switch. The last thing Nunzio needed was to get dragged into whatever drama Zinchalte had brought to his door. But the life expectancy of an oathbreaker in Sector 31 was probably shorter than the time until the Hymnal finished its descent into hellish corruption.

And Nunzio could actually *afford* to buy Zin a drink.

Coming to a decision, Nunzio looked over to inform Kol'daar.

Who was still watching Zinchalte with an odd, glassy look in his eye, that weird smile still on his lips. Why Kol'daar was bothering to go into Prince Charming mode, now of all times—

Oh.

Huh.

Nunzio had been fuzzy on Kol'daar's orientation, but this development clarified things a smidge. Of course the backworld-bumpkin would be dazzled by the Twink. Even a little rough around the edges, Zinchalte was still beautiful, exotic, and available. Zin was *so* blatantly available it was a wonder he hadn't just bent over one of the empty tables around them and told Kol'daar to have at it. That wasn't even Nunzio being catty over an ex, because Zin had *done* stuff like that.

Hell, he wouldn't even blame Kol'daar if he took Zin up on the offer. Because Zin was available, exactly like Nunzio never would be.

Clamping down on any completely nonexistent, out-of-place emotions—like the sudden burn of jealousy in his guts, or the minor sadistic glee at being a cockblock for someone besides himself—he finally announced his decision.

“Hey, Kol'daar. You ought to go get in touch with Lolanna. This won't take long. I'll give you directions to the pay-comms and then meet you there later.”

Kol'daar's gaze flicked to him, taking in the way Zin absently stroked Nunzio's sleeve. His eyes narrowed. Then he shook his head lightly, smiling full force as he said, “No, we *really* shouldn't split up. If it won't take long, I'll join you two. Why don't *you* go get us *all* some drinks, and Zinchalte and I can get *friendly*.”

Zin giggled again, abandoning Nunzio's arm to latch on to Kol'daar's. "You know what I like, Nunzio. No rush, mind."

The pair of them shuffled off to the booth where Zin had been holed up to begin with, leaving Nunzio to stare after them and grind his teeth.

Chapter Fifteen

As if his day wasn't just getting better and better, on his way to the bar he was struck in the arm by a stray dart from a game between two all-day drunks. He plucked the little black projectile out, rounding on the pair of aliens with a sharp, "Watch what you're doing, asshats!"

This just made the rotund green dude stare at him in alarm, the pupils of his oversized eyes blown wide. "Hats with asses. Why are there hats with asses?"

His orange-furred boyfriend, who looked a bit like a refugee from the defunct Broadway version of *Cats*, put an arm around his shoulder and pressed a hallucinogenic drink into his hand. The orange dude glared at Nunzio, and when he spoke his voice was a harsh, rasping growl. "Don't give him a bad trip, Human. It's fine, Gsk; there are no hats with asses."

"Who plays *darts* when they're *tripping*?" Nunzio shot back and was ignored. Typical.

The puncture wound wasn't terrible. It barely even bled, though it stung like a papercut. The really annoying thing was that he had to listen to Orange Dude talk Gsk back from his bad trip the entire time he waited for the drinks. He toyed with the dart absently, tapping it against the bar.

He didn't have the funds to get Zin any of the top-shelf crap that he knew the guy liked. But when Zin was this wasted, he'd drink anything, so Nunzio had got them all Red Pixie Brews. They were a little strong to drink on an empty stomach, but fuck it. They were cheap and tasty. He deserved a treat before the world ended because Zin had delayed them here.

Besides, he didn't want to be sober for this conversation. He wasn't the least bit psychic, but he didn't need to be to have a premonition of doom. Whatever had made Zin so desperate that he would drag himself in his sorry state to Nunzio's low-class neck of the woods and drink himself stupid while apparently just *waiting* for Nunzio to blunder down the street could not be a good time. And watching Kol'daar get cozy with his vile ex was going to be just as bad.

God, what if they actually, like, became a *thing*? Would Zin *visit*? Would Nunzio have to see him around? Or even worse, hear those two through the damn thin wall?

No, he thought somewhere between relief and self-pity. If the world didn't end first, Vorkra was going to evict him for breaking the fire escape.

The bartender, literally some kind of sentient sloth, finally brought the drinks. After Nunzio paid, he grabbed the RPBs by the bottlenecks and ignored the 'cheapskate' remark he got for not tipping.

Back at the half-circle booth, Zin was practically sitting in Kol'daar's lap while he tied a frothy lace monstrosity of a cravat around the man's neck. They hadn't spotted him. He slowed his pace to gauge how awkward the conversation he was about to walk into would be.

“—And then Nunzio comes back up, and he's pretty cut up, so I give him some regen-pills. Even after that, he looks like he's about to faint, and I ask, 'What's wrong?'”

Nunzio stopped dead in his tracks. He knew Zinchalte was cold and dead inside; most people who lived their whole lives here were. But telling someone he barely knew the sordid tale of the Tomb Raid as a funny, getting-to-know-you story about a mutual acquaintance was pretty awful, even if he *was* completely shitfaced.

Zin went on, with relish, “And he just pukes, like, everywhere. I mean, *everywhere*, it was so gross. And he says, all dramatic, '*They all died.*' And I'm like, 'So?' I mean, really, he thinks he wants to be a mercenary, and he can't handle a party wipe? It wasn't like he even *knew* any of those people.”

He *really* hadn't had to relate the part where Nunzio had puked. That was just low.

Kol'daar said something quietly that Nunzio couldn't hear, and Zin laughed, “More like a weak stomach, hah! The *only* thing soft about Nunzio is his head. He didn't even bring back more than a handful of the treasure. Lucky for him, their rarity drove up the price, so I called it square between us.”

And *of course* he'd left out the part about how he'd told Nunzio to go back and get more treasure, if he had to roll through the pile of platinum and what used to be his team to disenchant enough of it to pay off the massive debt. Nunzio's subsequent flat refusal had led to Nunzio striking out on his own, be damned to any rumors Zin chose to spread about him.

The Twink probably had left out the *why* of the debt as well. According to Zin, Nunzio had *owed* him for that month the he'd had spent helping Nunzio learn to cope with his destructive power. And Nunzio had thought that maybe

Zin had done it out of the goodness of his heart, back when he'd assumed the thief had one. When he'd naïvely hoped maybe he had a place in such a nonexistent organ.

No, Zin wouldn't have told Kol'daar any of that. Wouldn't want to look like a greedy, callous, manipulative sonuvabitch in front of the hot guy he was trying to impress. And that *still* wasn't Nunzio being catty about an ex. That was just plain truth.

"Anyway, that was all the death he could handle. As far as I know, he hasn't killed anyone himself, not even in the line of duty. It'd be more impressive if he was some kind of pacifist, but most of the beings he's snagged end up tortured to death, anyway. He's just too squeamish to get it over with, quick and clean, by his own hand."

Nunzio looked at the bottles he held. They clinked together lightly as his fingers shook, so he clenched his hands and took a few steps back, out of earshot. He needed to calm down. He also didn't want to hear what Kol'daar, the Hradical barbarian prince, thought of Nunzio's worst experience played for laughs.

It was hard to believe that half an hour ago, Kol'daar had complimented him, that 'very strong warrior' remark. He'd said it all weird, though. Likely, he was just holding back a laugh at how much of an idiot Nunzio was, getting 'pretty cut up' for no good reason. Kol'daar probably strung his stupid spiderharp with the entrails of enemies he used as skis to get down the mountain of corpses he left in his wake every time he went on a dungeon crawl. Then he went back to the Chateau to polish his X-d20 badge and sleep the sleep of the righteous, with nary a nightmare to haunt his pillow.

Nunzio didn't claim moral superiority to anyone because of his no-kill policy. He knew what happened to the targets after completion of his contracts; he hadn't needed the SpOC pamphlet on it. He tried to choose people he thought almost deserved it, but who was he to judge?

He didn't want to go home to Earth a murderer. He just... couldn't do it. If that made him a squeamish coward, or got him killed, so be it.

Nunzio took a few deep, settling breaths. It helped.

Then he took a long swig from one of the RPBs, swished it around in his mouth, and spat it back into the bottle. For Zinchalte. That helped, too.

He smiled. Petty vengeance, thy name is Nunzio Arquette.

Steeling himself, he schooled his expression to one of bored blankness and headed back to the booth.

The lovebirds had changed topics to Kol'daar's harp. The warrior had taken it off his back and was pointing out the strings to Zin, who squinted at it with thinned, bleary pupils.

"It's actually just one string for the whole thing, see? It's thicker on one end for deep notes, thin on the other for the high notes, and you just weave it around the hoop and all around and around itself. That's how I can get whole chords from one strand being plucked," Kol'daar explained patiently, that weird courtship smile still firmly in place.

Someone ought to tell him that it didn't look good on him. Okay, so it was pretty impossible for Kol'daar *not* to look good, but that expression didn't suit him. It lacked the little crinkles at the corner of his eyes that he got with his other smiles.

Nunzio certainly wasn't going to break the news, though. He sidled up and handed out the booze, making sure the tampered brew went to Zin.

"Here's beers." He raised his own bottle. "Cheers, queers."

Despite his disdainful look at the label, Zin drank deeply. Kol'daar followed suit. Nunzio took a triumphant gulp from his own bottle to hide his grin. He sat as far from the pair of them as he could manage in the half-circle booth. With the heavily tinted window behind him, he focused on Zin.

"So what gives? Who roughed you up?"

"Oh, you know. Business acquaintances," Zin replied, gesturing vaguely with his bottle. He fluttered his pale lashes at Nunzio. "Worried about little old me?"

Nunzio rolled his eyes. "Waste of time, that."

Zin stuck his tongue out at him. A shiny barbell piercing gleamed in the center of the dark blue muscle.

"That's new," Nunzio observed for lack of anything better to say. He swigged his brew. God, he wanted this farce over with.

"I got it so I could give better head," Zin said cheerfully. "Wanna try it out?"

Kol'daar sputtered into his bottle. Zin pounded his back and made condescending shushing noises.

“Your friend is kind of innocent. How *adorable*.”

“Yeah, he’s new here. I guess in Hradica, people don’t offer oral sex unless they really want to put their mouths where the money shot is.”

“Who says I don’t?”

“*You* did. In no uncertain terms.” Nunzio took another drink, ignoring Kol’daar’s round eyes watching him like *he* was an alien, too.

“Oh, you can’t hold *that* against me. Not when there are better things to hold against me.”

“You’re right,” Nunzio informed him disgustedly. “Just not in the way you mean.”

“Is he always like this?” Kol’daar asked, eyeing Zin with furrowed brows, his come-hither smile wearing down around the edges. Perhaps he was debating if it was truly honorable to hit on a guy so brutally hammered.

Not that Nunzio cared what Kol’daar did either way. “He’s not usually this sloppy about it, but otherwise, yeah, pretty much.”

“I’m not sloppy. Unless you’re into that kind of thing,” Zin said with a wink for the barbarian.

Kol’daar resumed smiling smoothly at him. Nunzio drank more. He could feel the heat of alcohol in his belly, sloshing into his bloodstream. Finally.

“Seriously, Zin—”

“Seriously, are you still putting the ‘nun’ in Nunzio?” Zin interrupted. He looked between the two mercenaries, propping his head on his hand. “Or did you finally get a handle on your... little problem?”

He *had* to make it sound like erectile dysfunction, too. Bastard. Nunzio was busy scowling when, surprisingly, Kol’daar decided to join the raunchy banter.

“I was under the impression it wasn’t *little*,” he said. His sly smirk resurfaced briefly as his eyes slid to Nunzio’s.

The flush that rose to Nunzio’s face was due to the booze. Of which there was not enough in the multiverse for him to bear this conversation.

“Oh! So you haven’t found out firsthand?” Zin grinned and looked at Nunzio, pupils expanding like a cat’s who’d locked a canary in its sights. “You know, I might have had a change of heart. Maybe all you need is some practice.”

Great, now he was inexperienced as well as impotent, cowardly, *and* pukey. He could make this a drinking game at this rate, but he didn't have money for another round.

“Shut up, Zinhalte.”

“No, really. I could help. You know, we've had some pretty good times, but I think our next time could be *earth-shattering*.”

He crawled over Kol'daar's lap, eeling out of the man's questing hands, to slink around the booth in Nunzio's direction. It wasn't as sexy as Zin clearly thought it was; the Twink's inebriation prevented him from summoning the coordination to be his usual seductive self. Nunzio gave him a light shove when he got close enough. He fell back with an 'oof' and lay on the red, faux-leather cushioning, giggling inanely.

“Even with you *literally* crawling back to me, there won't be a 'next time,'” Nunzio said forbiddingly. “Not with you, not with anyone.”

He wouldn't look at Kol'daar. He'd finish his drink. Yep, that was definitely the best option.

Zin pouted as he sat up beside him. “Not with *that* attitude. No wonder your friend's so handsy with me. You're frigid, you know? Ice cold.”

“Are you *ever* going to cut the shit and tell me why you're here?” Nunzio demanded tiredly, setting his empty bottle down with a loud clank. The confusing double-sided attack of character assassination and sexual harassment made him wonder all over again why the hell Zin was even bothering.

The thief looked suddenly cagey. “Sure. If you do one thing.”

Ah, so here was the catch. Finally. Christ. Nunzio never thought he'd be glad for Zin to reveal his true colors. “What?”

Zin lowered his lashes and sighed. “Kiss me. Right now.”

The breathy command, the inviting posture, even the rumpled nature of his outfit all recalled the first time he and Nunzio had hooked up. It'd been right after one of Zin's first jobs after Nunzio had gotten to Splinterpoint. Nunzio still remembered the feeling of exhilaration of driving the getaway hovercar, of pulling over to hide in a cloudbank while hired henchmen whirred past, of falling into Zin's eager embrace right there.

There was no doubt in his mind that the moves were just as calculated now as they'd been then. The only difference was that now Nunzio knew it.

So he was already leaning out of range and subtly drawing his disruptor as Zinchalte closed in with puckered lips.

He needn't have bothered.

Kol'daar swooped in, hand cupping the thief's face and turning it to seal his own lips over Zin's. Zin's eyes flew open, sliding sideways to meet Nunzio's shock-wide gaze. Then they shut smugly, and Zin kissed Kol'daar back, putting all his considerable experience into it.

Kol'daar made a low, astonished sound. Nunzio flinched.

Right. So that was that, then. The man apparently had had enough of vying for Zin's attention and had taken the situation into his own hands. Good job, Kol'daar.

Nunzio stood, turning his back on the public display of lust. His head swam from the booze, even as his stomach churned. Perhaps he shouldn't have drunk his RPB so fast, but whatever. If the world was fuzzier than usual, that was the *point*.

Zin *had* seemed remarkably well-informed about Kol'daar from the start. He must have heard about the results of the Blatt-hunt and become intrigued. No wonder he'd let Nunzio off the hook so easily; expensive dinner with his celibate ex paled in comparison for a chance to jump a barbarian prince's bones. He'd used Nunzio as the bait in order to get Kol'daar's barbaric nature riled enough to make the switch for him.

Quite the neat twist on that tired old tactic. Good job, Zinchalte.

He marched unsteadily for the exit. As he pushed open the door to the street, he heard Kol'daar call out, "Nunzio! Wait!"

He didn't.

He should have.

A mass of green, squirming things as thick as young trees shot out and enveloped him, pinning his arms uselessly to his sides. He yelped as he was yanked off his feet and out into the reddish-orange glare outside.

A very disorienting second later, he was dangling upside-down in front of Doctor Sakano's begoggled visage.

"Ah, at last we meet again, Mr. Arquette!" Sakano cackled madly, rubbing his heavy rubber gloves together in delight. His white lab coat billowed in the wind generated by a hovering umbrella-copter behind him. The umbrella was

oversized for the single-seat gondola beneath the obnoxiously loud lawnmower engine which supplied power.

“What—” He didn’t get any farther than that, because he was whipped around to face his captor.

“MOM is almost complete!” Kwiifelchilingush shouted from wherever she kept her vocal chords. She was a lot bigger in person, though it was hard to gauge because the main twelve-foot-tall mass of writhing tentacles kept shifting. “Once she’s up and running, the Guild will give us a grant to keep the lab afloat.”

“That’s, ugh, great. Glad you solved the funding issue,” Nunzio mustered weakly, eyes darting wildly around for a nondisgusting thing on which to focus. “Thanks for coming to tell me in person. How’d you find me?”

Sakano grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around. “We saw you through the window! Saved a lot of trouble, to be honest! It really is our lucky day! Mwahaha!”

“Right,” Nunzio said vaguely, finding it increasingly harder to concentrate. “Uh, can you—”

“Unhand him, fiend!”

And that was Kol’ daar. Nunzio again found himself whipped unpleasantly through the air as Kwiif spun to face the other mercenary. He didn’t know why she had to; it wasn’t like she had a face to begin with.

Kol’ daar stood tall and furious in the bar’s doorway, his knife-eyes glinting with the dire promise of imminent violence. He reached for his harp, but it wasn’t on his shoulders. If Nunzio had a hand free, he would have facepalmed. The idiot had forgotten it on the booth’s table, just like he’d forgotten to remove the frilly cravat.

Neither fact stopped Kol’ daar. Hradical warriors had a lot of nerve—and dubious sartorial sense—in any situation. He bravely drew the enchanted sword at his hip and charged with a wordless battle cry.

Nunzio prepared for whatever crazy nonsense a man with an X-d20 license could accomplish.

Zzzot.

A smaller tentacle had ripped Nunzio’s forgotten gun from his hand, aimed, and fired in less time than it took Kol’ daar to take three steps. It turned out, having a lot of nerve was actually a bad thing versus a nerve disruptor.

The stunning bolt struck square in his perfect abs. Kol'daar toppled like a felled tree, provided said tree had fallen off a logging truck on the freeway. The large man became a large projectile, striking Kwiif so hard Nunzio felt the impact shake the tentacles surrounding him. They didn't loosen.

"Oww," said Kwiif. She picked up Kol'daar's horribly limp form with a few more tentacles. Another tentacle flung the sword carelessly aside. "What you want to do with this one?"

"Increasing the sample size is always good for the scientific method, apprentice," Sakano boomed, clearly enjoying himself. He spread his arms grandly. "We'll take him with us!"

As Sakano hopped into the pilot's seat of the gondola, preparing for takeoff, Zinchalte staggered into the doorway, holding Kol'daar's harp.

"Kool'daaaar," he caroled, blinking blindly into the glaring light. He shaded his eyes with his free hand. "You forgot somethiiiiing!"

"Him, too?"

"Sure, why not? For *science!* Mwahahaha!"

Zinchalte shrieked as his eyes adjusted just in time to see the wall of slimy green tentacles reaching obscenely for him. The thief had amazing reflexes, honed from years of avoiding suddenly sprung traps in the bowels of one abandoned tomb or another. He evaded the grasping tendrils and pelted up the street toward the Chateau.

Then he stopped dead in his tracks, about-faced on his heel, and flung himself into Kwiif's many waiting arms.

"Go, go, go *now*," he urged as he and the harp were wrapped up.

Nunzio tried to spin himself in Kwiif's grip to find out what had spooked Zinchalte, to no avail. He felt really, really weird, and he was starting to think it wasn't from the booze. His muscles quivered and tensed randomly, and the road squirmed just like Kwiif's body as she shuffled over to the rising umbrella-copter. She latched on to the gondola, drawing her three prisoners in close, securing them with many more tentacles.

Kol'daar's head came to rest just above his own. The nerve disruptor had still been turned up pretty high, the results of his failed attempt at Blatt. He hoped the man was as hardy as he looked, and that the lucky shot hadn't scrambled his already questionably intelligent brain.

Sakano crowed victoriously as they lurched skyward. The squirming ground fell away. Nunzio thought maybe he'd left his stomach behind.

“Nunzio, you have the weirdest friends,” Zin complained from somewhere downwind of him.

He couldn't move to glare. Couldn't even get his mouth to form words—though when he opened it, he found out his stomach was still with him after all.

The Red Pixie Brew made a break for it.

He heard a faint splattering under the rush of wind and the whine of the engine, followed by Zinchalte's cry of outrage and disgust. Then Nunzio's eyes rolled back in his head, and he knew no more.

Chapter Sixteen

Things came in fever-dream snatches. Angry voices echoed around Nunzio, but he couldn't make them out.

"...wake up, Mr. Arquette..."

"...ruined, just covered in it..."

"...know how much he drank?"

He struggled to open his eyes.

He was in a big steel freight elevator, whose horizontal doors were a grinning maw of square teeth. Someone had him slung upside-down, and he couldn't move. They were going to feed him to that happy mouth, throw him in and let him get swallowed up by the big dark shaft of a throat that went down into tombs made of bright whorls of candy.

Nope. Not gonna. He wasn't a rainbow, and he wouldn't help anybody taste one. He'd break it if they tried to make him.

He faded out, colors sweltering. Time didn't pass. It failed altogether, like an analog alarm clock taking a standardized test.

'Cause clocks didn't have hands. Well, no, they *had* hands, just not handy-hands. Most useless hands in the multiverse. Maybe that's why they were always facepalming.

Whoa. That was really *deep*. If this mercenary gig didn't work out, he was totally prepared to become a guru. Start his own radio show. Seemed to work for that preacher dude. Huh, that preacher dude had been weird though. Nunzio wouldn't be like *him*. He'd be, like, Slacker Jesus of Delaware or something.

Next, pointy things happened to him. He flinched and groaned. Spider bites. Or maybe tetanus shots. Or maybe a pony. Ponies weren't pointy, to his knowledge, but his arm hurt like a horse had kicked him.

He opened his eyes. The biology lab from his required college class wobbled and shifted around him as he sank through a gurney of some sort in the center of it all. The professor wobbled and shifted, too, because the professor was at least forty feet tall and made of prehensile cucumber dicks.

Look, she didn't have hands, either. Didn't stop her from getting her degree. Clearly, analog alarm clocks just weren't applying themselves.

Tentacle professor was talking about his mom. He hadn't even known they'd been friends.

"...samples for MOM. The grant depends..."

"...what have you done to him?"

"...did it to himself..."

"...always been a lightweight..."

Oh, bullshit. Nunzio could hold his liquor just fine. He tried to talk, but only pieces of words came out, bruise-purple sounds that floated in the air around him.

Someone hushed him; a large, warm hand smoothed his hair. He sighed and closed his eyes, leaning into the touch. Hands were *awesome*.

"...interfering with MOM's processes..."

"...drugged. I'm not familiar..."

"...fascinating! Further analysis..."

The voices were less angry now, discussing things. When Nunzio looked up again, the whole room was filled with hovering sounds, swirling like weather patterns up near the ceiling lights. Clouds in motion. Sounds and clouds.

Hadn't he been doing something? Something to do with those.

"...and the end of the world..."

Yeah, that, too.

"...preposterous! Do you think..."

"...just let him use your comm-unit already, this is *stupid*..."

Oh, right. He was supposed to call Lolanna and tell her... things. About the clouds? No, sounds. Both. And the end of the world.

Realization struck like lightning. He jerked into a sitting position and said, "The Heavenly Hymnal!"

Creepy doll-clone-girl-demons living just a floor beneath him. Hungry for his soul. And cake. Were they here now? He had to go. No, really, he had to get moving *right now*; time was running out. How could he have forgotten?

Nunzio's rubbery legs stretched bonelessly for the floor, miles away. No wonder he missed it and just kept falling.

When he came back to himself, the world made much more sense. His body wasn't made of rubber, there weren't any angry people shouting sentence fragments, and he wasn't remotely interested in becoming a spiritual leader of any kind. He felt like he'd been run through a clothes dryer, though, giddy and too warm. His arm still hurt. His mouth tasted like he'd thrown up recently. Ugh.

That's right, he *had*. On Zinchalte.

A giggle rose in his throat. He took a moment to bask in yet another petty revenge.

"Nunzio?"

He opened his eyes cautiously. The room that revolved slowly around him was smaller than the cavernous lab he vaguely remembered. Blood red light spilled in from one window, the last of the day's sun dying. From the microwave, fridge, and banged-up, mismatched armchairs, it appeared some kind of break room.

No coffeemaker, of course. What was the point, then?

He lay on his side on a scratchy tweed couch that sagged beneath his hip. His head was pillowed on something firmer that smelled of leather, sweat, and tentacles. Gross. He wrinkled his nose, pulling back to sit up.

Mistake. His head swam. He flopped back down. Okay, so not quite recovered then. He supposed the spinning of the room ought to have been a clue. He kept his eyes closed; he hated hallucinations. As if Splinterpoint wasn't weird enough without them.

"Nunzio?" It was Kol'daar. "Are you with me?"

"Mrrphhg," he said. Words were hard to do. He tried again. "What happen?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Kol'daar said, somewhere above him. *Hovering*, the big dope. "You seemed fine at the bar. Do you think someone slipped something into your drink?"

Nunzio thought back to the drinks, and how he'd spat into Zin's. He giggled again. "Bastard."

"Excuse me?"

"Notchoo. Zin."

"You suspect Zinchalte drugged you?"

“Nah,” Nunzio said. Then he thought about it. “Hmm, nah. Too drunk. No point. Wasn’t after *me*.”

And that got him thinking about how that scene at the bar had played out, and he frowned. He didn’t need the mental replay of that kiss.

“I don’t know about that,” Kol’daar said, something darker in his tone.

Still jealous, and for no reason. As long as Kol’daar and Zin were both willing and able, it was none of his business. *They* could have all the sex they wanted. It wasn’t fair. Just because Nunzio couldn’t let himself lose control that way—

A sudden worry struck Nunzio, and his whole body tensed. He hadn’t been horny when he’d been tripping, but he’d been *tripping*. Out of control.

“What’s wrong? Are you going to be sick?”

Nunzio shook his head. “Just... I didn’t break stuff? My control... didn’t slip?”

“While you were drugged, you mean?”

He nodded.

“No, you didn’t break anything.”

As he heaved an enormous sigh of relief, fingers carded gently through his hair. It felt nice, but left him pretty confused. Was that Kol’daar? His heart gave a loud thump in his chest. He turned his head away.

“Srsly,” he mumbled, vowels getting lost in the smooshing of his cheek against leather. “Why’re you here? Shouldn’t you be—” close-talking with Zin; no, he didn’t want to sound like a jealous douche “—savin’ th’ world?”

“I got a hold of Lolanna and Maggie,” Kol’daar said. “They’re checking out the Chateau, and then they’re going to come here.”

“Izzat a good idea? Those chicks with the ‘we-this, we-that’ sounded like trouble,” Nunzio said. “And speakin’ of, *we* should go meet ’em there.”

“Can you stand yet?”

Touché. “*You* should go meet ’em there.”

“Those girls were scared of Maggie, and they’ll *be* scared of Lolanna once they see her in action. Have a little more faith in your teammates.”

Huh. That was a weird concept. Nunzio wasn’t used to *having* teammates, much less ones he could have faith in.

“I kind of guessed that on my own,” Kol’daar said. “And you told me before. ‘Loner,’ and all.”

Oh. He must have said at least some of that out loud. Embarrassing. “Whatever. Still, you should go earn your pay. Protect ’em.”

“They can handle it. Besides, there’s someone else that needs protecting.”

Of course. Zin was on the run from something, too. Nunzio snorted again, but this time clamped his jaw tight to make sure he didn’t say anything else. So Zin knocked Kol’daar’s socks off with that kiss, set the hook with the old Twink-in-distress ploy, and hell, he probably even had a gold record of a Heartsong just playing away, music to Kol’daar’s ears alone.

“How did *you* end up with *Zinchalte* in the first place?” Kol’daar sounded completely baffled. A fair question, given Zin’s character assassination of Nunzio back at the bar. That dark note in the man’s voice as he asked belied the lingering jealousy Zin seemed so keen to instill, despite all the trash talk.

“I was as dumb as you are.” Nunzio didn’t want to talk about this. Not when he was coming down. Not ever, really. He ought to warn Kol’daar, though, if only to say ‘I told you so’ when the thing blew up in his face. “Zin’s all yours. Jus’ don’t trust him as far as you can throw ’im.”

“Hmm. I *could* throw him.”

“That a Hradial euphemic... Hradimism euphi...”

“What?”

Nunzio gave up with a sigh and stuck to single syllables. “You have real bad taste in guys.”

Kol’daar laughed, low and soft. “Yeah, probably.”

Calloused fingertips pushed strands of Nunzio’s hair off his forehead. He frowned, smooshing his face farther into the pillow to get away. Nunzio wasn’t a cat to pester when the man was bored from babysitting him.

A knock sounded through the room, and Kol’daar sighed and got up. As Nunzio’s head met the brown-orange upholstery, he realized belatedly where his head had actually been this entire time, and his eyes flew open wide.

Then he smelled the couch and gagged. Oh, Christ, that was *awful*, like wet Cheetos and tentacle slime. He lurched into a sitting position.

Kol’daar opened the break room door, unlocking it first. Kwiif occupied the hall, like a hair clog in the plumbing.

“How is the subject?” she asked clinically.

“Awake. More coherent. Don’t think he’s quite normal yet, but getting there. Food might help.”

“There’s muffins in the fridge,” Kwiif replied, tentacles sidling in around the doorframe. “I came to tell you that the other one has sobered up, finally. Would you like to talk to him now?”

Kol’daar glanced back at him. Nunzio blinked and tried to look uninterested. Wasn’t any of his business.

“Yes. You can let him go.”

A messy conglomeration of tentacles thrust themselves into the room, Zinchalte thoroughly caught up in them. He looked even worse for wear than he had at the bar, blue cat-eyes with their pupils at their narrowest in the harsh light. His pink-silver hair and fine clothes were marred by tentacle slime. His waistcoat was missing entirely, likely thanks to Nunzio’s supposedly weak stomach. The frilly cravat had been stuffed into his mouth as a finishing touch.

What the hell?

Kwiif dumped him unceremoniously into a threadbare, overstuffed armchair opposite the couch. Zin spat out the gag and glared around at them all with the full strength of his hangover. Nunzio stared owlishly as Zin began to clean the slime from his face as best he could with his sodden neckwear.

“Careful,” Kwiif said. “He’s a biter.”

“I know,” Nunzio and Zin said at the same time and then glared at each other.

“How’s the research into the drug going?” Kol’daar asked quickly as Kwiif’s appendages retracted.

“We’ve isolated the compound. Or, I should say, *I’ve* isolated the compound. Sakano is busy fapping over his MOM,” Kwiif said, some tentacles lifting in an approximation of a shrug. “Anyway, it’s my break time. Excuse me.”

Kol’daar stepped back from the door. Kwiif poured herself into the room, which was barely tall enough to accommodate her bulk. None of the furniture was big enough, or at least that was what Nunzio thought until she slither-shuffled up to him and said, “You’re in my spot.”

“Ugh. Sorry.” He hastily got up and staggered to one of the armchairs, impressing himself with his coordination.

Kwiif settled down on the couch, stray tentacles flung out in all directions, between furniture and over the coffee table. One opened the fridge and took out a plate of muffins, another retrieved an oversized bucket of crunchy cheeseballs from a cupboard. She offered the plate to Nunzio.

“They’re Sakano’s, so they *might* be nominally safe for Human consumption. Help yourself,” she said generously.

Nunzio took it gingerly. He hoped she hadn’t gotten slime on any of the muffins. “Thanks.”

They were blueberry muffins. Or, well, not *blueberry*, but they contained berries that were also blue. He only hoped they were supposed to be that color, and Sakano hadn’t done anything mad-sciencey to them. The way they moved a bit was probably just the drug working its way out of his system. Probably.

It didn’t matter. He was starving. Not even Kwiif’s never-still body could put him off his lunch now.

Kol’daar sat down on the coffee table. He leveled a harsh stare of warning at Zin.

“Are you going to stop your little tricks now?” he asked, voice several degrees colder.

Nunzio frowned around his mouthful. “What tricks?”

Kol’daar glanced at him and then back to Zin. “This guy kept trying to... get at you when you were ill.”

“Get at me?”

Kol’daar nodded but didn’t clarify. Zin looked shifty and haughty at the same time, so no help there.

“I was busy, but I heard the commotion a few times,” Kwiif volunteered. “I think he was trying to lick you.”

Nunzio blinked. He was missing something. He wished his head wasn’t so cloudy. “...Lick me.”

“Yeah, that thing you humanoids do with your faces,” she went on. The cheeseballs were slowly disappearing into the mass of tentacles. There weren’t any crunching sounds, and the cheeseballs didn’t reappear. Nunzio didn’t want to know how that even worked. “After about the fourth time, Kol’daar asked me to keep an eye on the guy.”

“You really *are* vanilla, through and through,” Zin said, shaking his head at Kol’daar. “Shame to waste all that leather on a man who won’t even tie me up himself. At least Kwiif knows the ropes, so to speak.”

“It’s a talent,” she said easily. “Runs in the family, I suppose.”

“If this Mad Scientist apprenticeship doesn’t work out for you, I know some people who’d just *love* to meet you.”

She shifted dubiously. “I’m not into the kinky stuff.”

“Honey, I hate to break it to you, but you *are* the kinky stuff.”

Kwiif huffed and drew herself up to her intimidating full height. “I am *not*. You bipeds look at me like I’m some kind of sex fiend, but it’s all your own propaganda that tells you so. It’s *your* messed up power fantasies projected on to a vulnerable minority. The ‘lust-crazed tentacle monster’ is nothing but a harmful stereotype that keeps us Infinipods from succeeding in a bipedal-dominated society.”

Nunzio was pretty sure that ‘propaganda’ wasn’t the right word, but he could see her point. Zin looked skeptical.

“Riiiiight. This from the being who had her tentacles all over me for an hour.”

Full of muffins and feeling much better for it, Nunzio furrowed his brow. What had happened while he was out? It didn’t surprise him that Kol’daar, once awake, had managed to get Sakano and Kwiif on their side with his nice-guy levelheadedness. But what was the deal with Zin?

He considered the available evidence. Zinchalte tried to “get at” him. Kol’daar sicced a tentacle mon—*Infinipod*—on his new boyfriend, and then he babysat *Nunzio* to discourage further philandering...? Nope, didn’t make sense.

“Don’t flatter yourself. I’m asexual.”

“The orientation, or the reproductive process?”

“*Both*. And I don’t appreciate your... escape tactics. They made me very uncomfortable.”

“I think he makes a *lot* of people uncomfortable,” Kol’daar grumbled.

And just look at how Kol’daar was staring at Zin. The man looked like a kicked puppy when he was well and truly rejected, like yesterday—Christ, only yesterday? That had been *forever* ago—after the SpOC, when Nunzio had lost

his temper. The look Kol'daar had for Zin was nearly as coldly contemptuous as when he'd argued with Blatt. And he'd pointedly put himself down smack between them. If he wasn't doing it as a jealous boyfriend—

No, Nunzio realized far too slowly. Kol'daar wasn't protecting Zin from anything. He was protecting *Nunzio* from *Zin*.

Kol'daar protecting him to the point of putting Nunzio's head in his lap and *petting his hair* was a matter for another time, though. It could just be because of the awful stink of Kwif's couch, right? Nunzio clung to the faintly plausible denial, not ready to consider anything else just yet.

"Did you drug Nunzio?" Kol'daar demanded of Zin.

"No! I've never had to resort to drugging anyone to get them to kiss me in my whole life."

"So you just harass and belittle them until they give in, just to shut you up?"

Nunzio giggled, despite his confusion. "Yeah, that's Zinhalte. He's a real charmer."

Zinhalte smiled falsely at him. "Why do you think *I* would try any of this? With *you*, specifically?"

"You... want to make my life harder?" he hazarded.

"Honey, I don't want to make your *anything* harder. I'm not suicidal."

Nunzio glared. "Yeah, I got that memo, thanks. Though this might surprise you, you're not my favorite person in the multiverse either."

Kol'daar nodded sagely. "I could tell. Back at the bar."

The man was a genius, clearly. "Gee, what tipped you off? The time I almost shot him, or the *other* time I almost shot him?"

"The first time did help, yes. But you were fine until he threatened you." The barbarian crossed his arms. "I might be pretty new to this land, but I know what happens to oathbreakers. Skroinx never shut up about it, really."

"I was within my rights," Zinhalte said, unruffled. "Nunzio owed me for some information I gave him on our old friend Blatt. When to call in the debt and how I do so are up to me."

"Just because you claim the right doesn't *make* it right," Kol'daar asserted, his voice like steel. "It doesn't surprise me that you were Skroinx's friend, you're just the same. I should have punched you like I did him."

“Ooooooh,” said Kwiif, absorbing cheeseballs by the dozen as she sat back and enjoyed the drama.

Zin scoffed at the notion that he had anything in common with Blatt. “Why didn’t you, then?”

Kol’daar wouldn’t look in Nunzio’s direction as he explained, “Nunzio *let* you... *He* let you, and he doesn’t let... anyone...” He cleared his throat. “I don’t know him very well, maybe, but it seems to me that Nunzio isn’t intimidated by much. I figured if he was putting up with... that, then you really had something on him. Hitting you would have made things worse for him, so I tried to, um, distract you, find out what it was.”

Nunzio stared at Kol’daar’s back. So the fixed smile had been fake all along? All that courtly flirting, getting rid of Nunzio, grilling Zin about their connected past—which Zin, being the gossipy little blabbermouth that he was, just *had* to dish out with plenty of bias.

The way he’d jumped in to stop Zin from stealing a smooch, like a soldier throwing himself on a grenade to spare the rest of the troops in the foxhole.

Noble idiot. Nunzio had had that situation under control. He hadn’t needed a... a barbarian with shining torso to rescue him from a drunk and handsy Zinchalte, like a damsel from a dastardly suitor. He felt like he ought to be more upset over this, until he had a vision of Zinchalte with a sinister curly mustache, ala Snidely Whiplash.

Nunzio coughed, spraying muffin crumbs. “Right. You couldn’t hit him, so you hit *on* him. Masculine wiles versus masculine wiles.”

“I wasn’t fooled for a minute,” Zin said, sticking his nose in the air. He glanced out the corner of his eye at Nunzio, adding smugly, “But playing along had its perks.”

“Seriously, why do you want to kiss me so bad? No means no, Zin.”

The thief rolled his eyes. “It doesn’t *have* to be a kiss. I just thought that would be the most fun option. Well, the most fun option I’m willing to chance, anyway.”

“It’s his tongue piercing,” Kol’daar said. “It’s enchanted. Isn’t it, Zinchalte?”

Zin tensed as if someone had tazed him. His face performed an odd contortion, lips and jaw apparently trying to open and clamp shut at the same time. He glared at Kol’daar, who tilted his head with narrowed eyes.

“But he can’t tell anyone. Can you, Zinhalte?”

The same thing happened.

Nunzio cottoned on with a shit-eating grin. Christ, that was just perfect. He had to try this out.

“Is your tongue piercing cursed? Really? Seriously? Are you sure? Who did it? Why’d they want to shut you up?”

While Nunzio cracked up at the various facial gymnastics that Zin went through at each question, fish-puckered cheeks and the infuriated looks and all, Kol’daar said loudly, “It’s really *too* bad that Nunzio can’t undo music-magic spells.”

That had them both turning to gape at the man. He looked supremely smug. Kwiif had to be going over on her break, but she appeared as raptly intent as a being with no eyes or face could. Zin was the first to recover.

“You’re lying.”

Kol’daar gave him a wintry little smile. “Even if you make out with him all day long, you won’t be rid of your curse.”

“Nunzio. Tell him he’s wrong,” Zin said, dismay and disbelief warring for dominance on his face.

“Music-magic?” Nunzio asked Kol’daar. “You know for sure?”

“It’s more subtle than the one on Blatt. I had to, uh, touch it to Hear it,” Kol’daar confirmed, only a little awkward as he remembered *how* he ended up touching it. “It’s only on the barbell, not woven through his Heartsong.”

“So does that mean it’s not the same caster?”

“Why not ask him?”

Nunzio zeroed in on Zinhalte, watching the soft blue of his skin turn chalky. His eyes were wide with rising panic.

“Zin, are you working with the guy who has the Heavenly Hymnal?”

Zin jerked in his chair, face pursing.

“I’d say that’s a yes,” Kol’daar said darkly.

Chapter Seventeen

“Look,” Zinchalte said, raising his hands defensively as Kol’daar stood up and picked his way through Kwiif’s stray tentacles on the floor. “I’m—It’s not what you think.”

“So you’re *not* working with the guy who has the Heavenly Hymnal?” Nunzio asked.

Zin jerked again, hands clutching the armrests. When the spell’s hold loosened he glared at Nunzio. “Stop that!”

“I’m just asking,” Nunzio replied innocently.

Kol’daar retrieved his harp from a corner of the room. He’d apparently cleaned off the slime it must have gotten covered with in their dramatic kidnapping from the bar.

“What are you going to do with that?”

“We won’t find out anything if there’s a spell silencing you. I’m going to try to remove it.”

“Oh.” Zin smiled and relaxed visibly. “Please do. I want to cooperate. This is all just a big misunderstanding.”

Kol’daar raised his spiderharp, fingers poised on the strings. Zinchalte obligingly stuck out his tongue, the piercing gleaming evilly in the red light of the sunset.

Before he could Play, the wall next to the couch flashed to life, bathing them all in cold blue light. Sakano’s huge head peered at them.

“Kwiif! Your break ended five minutes ago,” the mad scientist said. “I need you to recalibrate the mazzaprazzers in the hickimadoo.”

Kwiif had no eyes to roll, but somehow managed to convey the sentiment as she levered herself off the couch. Kol’daar sidestepped rapidly to avoid tripping over her stray tentacles.

“Coming,” she sighed. “Just when it was getting good, too.”

Sakano turned as a gong sounded from somewhere in the lab. “And inform our valued guests that their friends have arrived. You can collect them on the way down. Sakano, out.”

The wall went dark, and Kwiif did something strange with a section of her tentacles. Nunzio gathered that it was supposed to be an obscene gesture. “What a gorblach. Wouldn’t know a mazzaprazzer from a vorging coil. Well, come on; you heard him. Let’s get going.”

“Wait,” Nunzio said. He jabbed a thumb at Zinchalte. “Can you grab this guy again?”

“What? Why?” Zin demanded as he stood. “I’m cooperating, here.”

Nunzio nodded his disbelief. “Sure you are. But I don’t think we should just *trust* that you’re not up to something. You’re working for the enemy, man.”

“I’m—” Whatever he’d been about to say was cut off by his silencing curse.

Kwiif took hold of him before he recovered. “No biting this time, all right?”

She slither-shuffled out ahead with Zin’s loud complaints suddenly muffled as she retracted him inside her shifting body. The mercenaries followed her down the hall to the lab’s aboveground lobby. Kwiif stepped out first.

A high-pitched scream rang out. “Oh no, we’re too late! *Heavens*—”

“Calm down, jeez,” Kwiif grumbled. “You’d think you’d never seen an Infinipod before.”

She got out of the way so Nunzio and Kol’ daar could step forward. Maggie and Lolanna stood waiting in the lobby, which looked and smelled a bit like a dentist’s office waiting room, aside from the glaring addition of a steel freight elevator. Maggie’s eyes were huge with shock and terror as she beheld Kwiifelchilingush in all her X-rated, nightmarish glory.

“Don’t worry,” Kol’ daar said as he rushed out with his hands splayed. “Kwiif is a friend. She and her boss are helping us.”

This just made Maggie transfer her horrified expression to him. Her arms were half-raised above her head and stuck there, but it didn’t look like a gesture of shock or surrender. Nunzio wondered about what she’d been about to say—sing, rather. He’d yet to see her music-magic in action.

“So,” Maggie started, slowly lowering her arms. “That’s not a, a s-sex-crazed tentac—”

“Don’t even start with me,” Kwiif cut her off testily. From somewhere inside her bulk, Zin was still complaining indistinctly. “I’ve got work to do. If you’d all just follow me, we can head down to the lab.”

“By all means, we should head to a more secure location,” Lolanna said. Her eye settled on Nunzio and narrowed, scanning him up and down. “You seem to have recovered from... your incapacitation.”

Nunzio nodded and was just about to assure her he was no longer tripping balls, when Seraphina fluttered down from the light fixture and perched on her shoulder. “I am pleased to hear it, Mr. Arquette. We were worried for you.”

Nunzio stared. Because Seraphina wasn’t bright, snowy white anymore. Black feathers darkened her in splotches, like she had been spliced with a Holstein cow. The splotches drifted inkily across her body, pulsing ominously.

“Uh. That’s something that’s actually happening, right?” He waved at the bird. “I’m not having an acid flashback, right?”

“It’s real, yes,” Seraphina chirped. She sounded like she had a head cold. “It’s a sign of the End Times.”

“Yes, yes, portents of doom abound with you people, I’m sure,” Kwiif interrupted. She’d gotten the freight elevator open. “Let’s talk about it in the lab, shall we?”

The elevator was large enough that there was room for all of them, but only barely. Nunzio resigned himself to standing next to Kwiif. He still found her unsettling to look at, but Maggie couldn’t bring herself to do that much. Her purity seemed to interfere with processing Kwiif. She stood in the corner with her back to all of them.

“I can’t even,” she said. “Nope, nope, nope. Can’t *even*.”

Kol’daar kept himself between the girl and the Infinipod out of chivalry, or whatever passed for it with Hradical warriors. Mussed as he was from his own tangle with Kwiif’s slimy appendages and sporting five-o’clock shadow, Kol’daar looked more barbaric than usual, even as he tried to coax Maggie to turn around and meet Kwiif properly.

Nunzio snorted; the guy really never let up with the friendliness.

The sound made Kol’daar glance at his way. When their eyes met, he stopped in the middle of whatever he’d been saying. Nunzio blinked and looked away, wiping the unconscious smile from his lips.

Dammit. Must still be a little bit dopey from the drug. Or maybe the muffins *had* been laced.

“So,” he turned to Lolanna hurriedly, “how was *your* day? Did you guys have any luck at the Mages’ Guild?”

“The one being who knew anything at all about music-magic has been ‘out sick’ all week,” Lolanna said darkly.

“Well, that’s suspicious. Was the guy named Torth, by any chance?”

“Incidentally, yes,” Seraphina said.

“His residence has been vacated.” Lolanna tapped her eyepatch. “I looked into it while Maggie and Seraphina found out why the tracing spell is not working.”

“What, it’s not working at *all*?”

At his exclamation, Kol’daar and Maggie stopped their chatter. The girl refused to turn to face Kwiif, but she did explain into the tense silence. “Not exactly. The thing is, it *is* working, but it’s not *helping*. It’s pinging off everything.”

“There’s too much interference from this plane’s magic and superscience.” Seraphina ruffled her feathers, looking about as happy at this news as Nunzio himself was. Her cooing voice turned raspier as she went on. “This ridiculous dimension, with its foolish abuses of powers meant for only those most pure, is dooming itself to destruction. You all *deserve* it.”

Nunzio’s eyebrows climbed for his hairline. “Wow, harsh.”

Seraphina sneezed delicately, covering her beak with her wing. “Sorry. I didn’t mean that. It’s only that we are quickly running out of time to find our culprit.”

The elevator dinged. Kwiif opened the doors and shuffled out.

The cavernous room stretched out around them, a missile silo full of mad science and bad lighting. Nonreactive tabletops held beakers and Bunsen burners with purple flames that heated mysterious chemicals in suspended glass flasks. Huge, bizarre machines whirred and beeped and blinked little lights. There were even imposing metal slabs strewn around, each with built-in limb restraints for different common multiversal body types.

Without the drugs skewing his perception, Nunzio decided it looked nothing like his college’s biology lab. He might have actually gone to class if it had looked like this, just for the spectacle.

Sakano materialized out of the guts of the nearest machine, a mecha which appeared to be some kind of cross between a Transformer and a garden tractor. His goggles reflected the light of the laser welder in his hand, which he used to

gesture imperiously at Kwiif. “It’s about time. Those mazzaprazzers won’t calibrate themselves, you know. Get moving, apprentice.”

Grumbling, Kwiif went to do her master’s bidding.

“Welcome to my laboratory!” Sakano spread his arms wide as he approached, grinning maniacally. “I am Doctor Sakano! Soon, you will all witness history in the making!”

Nunzio interrupted before the man could gain more steam. He still remembered how long the sales pitch had been when he’d been looking for someone to build him a way to get back to Earth. “No offense, Sakano, but unless we figure out how to stop the end of the world pretty quick, we’ll *all* be history.”

Sakano almost literally deflated, hands dropping to his sides. “But I have a speech written.”

“Save it for when you know it will be remembered for more than a day.”

“If you want to help us figure out a way to save the world, you’re more than welcome to join us,” Kol’daar offered.

Maggie backed him up. “It might help to have a scientist on board.”

“Pro bono,” Nunzio stipulated, because those two didn’t think like true residents of Splinterpoint. “Science for the good of all. For free.”

Lolanna spoke, though in a far different tone than her habitual bark. “Ryouta?”

He pushed his goggles up onto his forehead and squinted myopically. “*Lola?* Is that you?”

“Though it has been many years, I am still Lolanna Solang.”

As if in a dream, he approached her and reached up to run a possessive thumb beneath her eyepatch. She leaned into the touch.

“Have you been taking care of my work?” Sakano’s voice held the tremble of turbulent emotions running under the surface.

“I must,” Lolanna said softly. “Since no one else may repair me. Will you help us?”

Sakano gave her a grin only half as maniacal as was his wont. “For you, anything.”

A wide, pleased smile broke over her stern features.

Everyone stared. Nunzio was pretty sure his jaw was on the floor. He'd never seen Lolanna smile more than a faint twitch of her lips. Either he was hallucinating again, or the world was really, *really* ending. And if the scene wasn't quite so shocking, Nunzio was certain he'd have drowned in sappiness. He half expected music to swell and Sakano to sweep Lolanna into a passionate kiss—or, actually, it would probably be the other way around.

Then music *did* swell; Kol'daar had whipped out his harp and begun playing a sweet, romantic ballad. Maggie snorted and covered her mouth to muffle her giggles as mad scientist and cyborg both remembered where they were and who was watching. Lolanna regained her stiff formality, and Sakano cleared his throat, flipping his goggles back down like that would hide the blush on his cheeks.

“Silence,” Lolanna commanded, giving Kol'daar a narrow look from her eye.

Kol'daar grinned unrepentantly, but he ended his serenade with a flourished trill.

“If you're all finished, we have things to discuss,” Seraphina reminded them acerbically. She hopped back and forth on Maggie's shoulders restlessly. “The Sin Trinity was not at the apartment building, and every moment we delay, the closer they come to corrupting the Hymnal.”

Nunzio frowned. “Sin Trinity?”

Maggie sobered quickly. “The girls you overheard before. They're demons from our world. They're kind of the big bad that my friends and I fight all the time.”

“Hatred, Avarice, and Betrayal.” Seraphina clucked her disapproval. “The worst failings of Humankind. We'd hoped to catch them while they are possessing separate homunculi; it weakens them.”

“What are homunculi?” Kol'daar asked.

“The magic-created false bodies they inhabit when they are incarnate,” the dove explained. “We can exorcise them from Humans, you see, but only because Humans have souls. But they can't be forcibly expelled from a soulless homunculus unless the body is completely destroyed.”

Nunzio blinked. “Huh. So that's why they're creepy-alike. They really *are* doll-clones.”

“You think they’re creepy now, I hope you don’t see ’em when they’re Merged.” Maggie shuddered illustratively. “It took the whole team to defeat them last time. And now they have a silencing spell cast over their Dissonance, so I can’t even Hear them.”

“I couldn’t, either.” Kol’daar stroked his stubble, thinking hard. “Is this being they’re working with, this Torth, a demon from your world, too?”

The girl and dove both shook their heads. Maggie said, “Demons, at least the ones from back home, can’t use music-magic. Their essence is too Dissonant to contain the Song of Life. The Hymnal must be corrupted completely before they can even touch it.”

“Though he *might* be from our world. Hardly anyone here has music-magic. Besides, who else would know the Hymnal’s power?” Seraphina pondered.

“But what kind of name is Torth, seriously? That doesn’t *sound* like anyone from my world.” Maggie threw her hands up in frustration, bangles clattering. “*Heavens*, we’re no closer to finding out anything than when we came here.”

“Don’t lose heart,” Seraphina cooed, cuddling her splotched head against Maggie’s cheek. The passing of an inky patch over one eye turned it from pink to blood red. “We’ll find them and *destroy them all*.”

Kol’daar eyed her worriedly, but all he said was, “Actually, we have another lead.”

Nunzio turned to shout in the direction of the Infinipod. “Hey Kwiif! We need you to bring out the prisoner!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Kwiif hollered back from a distance. “Hold your shirt on.”

Nunzio quickly related a highly sanitized version of what had happened with Zinchalte while they waited for Kwiif to lumber back to the group. Kol’daar remained silent for the account, and Nunzio didn’t look in his direction. To be honest, he wasn’t sure how dear, pure Maggie and the increasingly judgmental Seraphina would react to the news they’d hired two queer dudes for their little crusade. The response was anticlimactic.

“So you used to date an *alien*?” Maggie asked, nose wrinkling.

“*Date* is a strong word.” Of course, ‘fuck buddy’ was even stronger and more accurate, but not for such innocent ears. “We had a thing. Which is over. Very over.”

Kwiif finally reached them. Maggie stared in unconcealed disgust as tentacles parted and unceremoniously disgorged Zin onto the concrete floor of

the lab. Kol'daar patted her on the shoulder not occupied by her feathered friend.

“Do you need me for this part?” Sakano asked Lolanna. “My apprentice and I have experiments to monitor.”

Ignoring Kwiif's disappointed groan at being deprived of the conclusion of her break-time drama, Lolanna shook her head. “No. We will inform you of the pertinent results of the interrogation.”

“Come along, Kwiif! MOM waits for no man!” Sakano gestured grandly as he lead his disgruntled assistant away.

“I will never, ever eat cheeseballs again,” Zin sputtered and gasped, wiping slime from his face. When he stood and faced the group, Seraphina and Maggie both gasped in recognition.

“*Lady Twinkerina?*”

Zin grimaced in blatant dismay. He recovered quickly to summon an angelic smile. “Hello again, my, er, two doves.”

“You recognize him?” Lolanna demanded.

“Well, kind of,” Maggie said, round-eyed. “I mean, he's less... girly now. Without the tutu.”

Nunzio boggled as pieces connected in his head. “You mean, he's—”

“My Fairy Godmother,” Maggie confirmed.

Chapter Eighteen

Once again, shock silenced the group. At least now Nunzio knew how the girls had gotten his name and knew his power. But nothing else about the revelation made sense. There were too many questions popping up in his head, so of course the most inane one slipped out.

“You do drag now?”

“I was drunk,” Zin said with a careless shrug. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“You oughtta work on your stage name.”

“I was *drunk*. And there were other things on my mind.”

“So he’s *not* working for the enemy?” Kol’daar asked.

No wonder Maggie and Seraphina had seemed so confused by the sudden appearance of a Fairy Godmother, if Zin was what they meant. Nunzio pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to think around the image of Zin in a tutu, pretending to be a gender that didn’t even exist in Twink culture. Hazy recollection of the kidnapping came to him.

“You were running from something, back at the bar. You saw someone—*someones*,” he realized aloud. “The Three Rs. The Sin Trinity. Do you know them, Zinhalte?”

Zin’s face puckered, his body jerking. “*Stop* that!”

“I *knew* Blatt wasn’t good enough of a smuggler to pull off the Mercurian heist on his own. And someone had to steal the Hymnal in the first place. But both of those jobs would have been easy pickings for a high-class thief like you,” Nunzio reasoned aloud for the benefit of the class.

Maggie gasped again, this time with betrayed tones. “*You* stole the Hymnal from my locker?”

Zin twitched again, confirmation enough.

“And then turned around and warned them?” Kol’daar’s high forehead knotted in further confusion. “Why?”

Zin drew a calming breath and said carefully, “I want to cooperate.”

Nunzio nodded slowly. Even back at the bar, Zinhalte *had* said something about telling them everything, if he could get a kiss from Nunzio. He’d been trying to remove the curse and spill the beans the entire time.

“If the spell keeps him from talking about the Hymnal, how could he warn Maggie and Seraphina in the first place?” Lolanna asked.

“Actually, he never got specific, now that I think of it,” Maggie said thoughtfully. “It was all ‘if you wish to find what was yours’ and ‘those who wish you harm.’ I figured that was typical cryptic Fairy Godmother stuff, though. It was obvious what he meant by it all, at any rate.”

This came as no surprise to Nunzio, who was depressingly well aware of Zin’s way to imply things without actually saying them straight out. The puzzle fell into place as best it could with the missing pieces still trapped behind the Twink’s tongue piercing.

Nunzio paced a circle around Zin, watching him closely for every twitch and tic. As he began to monologue he wished he had a deerstalker and a pipe; this was some serious Sherlock Holmes shit going on. “You took the jobs for the easy money. Maybe you only consulted on Blatt’s heist without his knowledge. He would have ratted you out when we questioned him if he’d known about it.

“And then something else happened. You realized how big and horrible this was, but too late. You don’t want the world to end any more than we do; even with your diport, Splinterpoint is home—and the only place you can get away with high crimes. But you didn’t want anyone to know *you* were the one who backed the demons bent on destroying the world, so you sold Blatt out to me because you figured he’d do all the squealing.”

“You were counting on Hunter Arquette to break Skroinx’s invulnerability enchantment, and thus his loyalty to your master,” Lolanna added. “You didn’t know that Blatt wasn’t as well informed as you, or that Hunter Arquette has no effect on music-magic spells.”

“And then Torth figured out you’d set them up, so he silenced you,” Nunzio finished.

“And then I got involved,” Kol’daar said. “When it wasn’t Nunzio listed on the Mercenaries’ Guild claimed bounty postings, you panicked. You went to find Maggie and Seraphina and told them the name of the man who you thought would be able to break the corruption spell.”

“Why didn’t they just *kill* him? Eat his soul like they did the pigman?” Seraphina rasped and then had a coughing fit. Maggie stroked her feathers soothingly.

Nunzio really didn't like the direction the dove seemed to be headed, but he answered anyway. "He's a big deal in the Thieves' Guild. Bumping him off would attract a lot of attention, the kind that screws up wicked machinations. The spell might have worked on someone else, but Zinchalte makes double entendre like breathing. For a being with no interest in heterosexuality, he sure knows how to beat around the bush."

Seraphina recovered enough to give a scandalized chirp. "*Language*, Mr. Arquette."

"Uh, sorry, it just slipped out."

"And I bet they didn't count on him double-crossing them to warn the very girl he stole from," Kol'daar said.

"I don't think *anyone* counted on that," Maggie said dryly, clearly recalling her reaction to the news she had a Fairy Godmother. "But when the demons found out Seraphina and I were here, they went after him."

"And he came to me, hoping I could remove the spell on him. But he couldn't *tell* me about the spell, and things got awkward," Nunzio finished.

"All this speculation has been just lovely, but there *is* more to it." Zinchalte spoke obliquely, still unable to confirm or deny anything directly. He looked pointedly at Kol'daar. "You should finish what you started in the break room."

Maggie, Seraphina, and Kol'daar set to work without delay. They put Zin up on one of the slabs and had him stick his tongue out to expose the evil jewelry in question. Maggie's music-magic was vocal in nature, and she had a very pretty, soulful, mezzo-soprano voice. Kol'daar backed her up on the spiderharp.

Nunzio parked himself a moderate distance away, in the unlikely event his disability would interfere. He could feel the magic even from where he sat at Kwiif's work station. She was quietly focused on a huge supercomputer, which looked like it'd come directly from a Buck Rodgers movie set. Lolanna went to find Sakano; there was obviously a lot they had to catch up on.

At loose ends, there wasn't much for him to do but dwell on things. The ever-approaching deadline of the Hymnal's corruption wasn't appealing food for thought. If this dimension, Maggie's, and countless others on down the line were all less than a full day away from destruction, Nunzio didn't want to waste the finite time feeling helpless.

Instead, he watched Kol'daar strum his harp.

He was pretty sure that he remembered those skilled fingers petting his hair to calm him during his bad trip. The Roof Incident he could rationalize as a purely physical reaction to stimulus. But the Lap Incident stuck out in his mind, at once embarrassing and oddly... *tender*.

He really ought to be more upset about the whole thing. It was kind of creepy, wasn't it? Being unconscious, some guy he barely knew taking advantage of his weakened state to... Well, make him comfortable while he recovered. Repel Zin's shady, definitely not-honorable advances. Pet his hair...?

Maybe Hradical warriors pet each other's hair all the time. It wouldn't be the weirdest custom Nunzio had discovered in Splinterpoint. The man had probably only meant to care for a fallen comrade. That was what Nunzio chose to believe, anyway, now that he was sober enough to lie to himself.

Still, it had been a long, long time since anyone had taken care of him in any way. Certainly longer than he'd been in Splinterpoint. Zin didn't *do* caring, even when they'd been technically 'a thing.' That Kol'daar had taken it upon himself to do so wasn't significant, though, because... Well, he was an honorable chump, and too nice for anyone's good.

And as thickheaded as Kol'daar could be, the barbarian *had* to have picked up on certain things by now. Not the least of which were the complications Zin got a kick out of rubbing in, Nunzio's 'little problem.' Even *if* Kol'daar's actions today weren't just another example of his touchy-feely, close-talking, too-friendly ways, or his ubiquitous sense of honor—which was a big if, in Nunzio's opinion—then surely he had enough self-preservation to steer well clear of any further entanglement with Nunzio.

And that was for the best. That was what Nunzio had intended from the start. He didn't even *want* to be entangled. Not in the least.

After this, they'd go their separate ways. Nunzio would get evicted, and he'd move to another run-down, low-magic building in the sector. He wouldn't have to listen to *Praetor Judy* through the wall. He wouldn't have to hear about any dungeon crawls or Heartsongs or what Lolanna said when she was drunk. There would be no more d20 parkour nonsense. And certainly there'd be no more Incidents deserving of a capital letter between them.

He wouldn't see Kol'daar laugh, head thrown back and so-pale eyes crinkled, or feel that sudden kick in his chest when that smirk turned to him, sly and playful.

Like now, as Kol'daar suddenly met his gaze, grinned, and fucking *winked*.

Nunzio froze, caught red-handed, and a blush crept up his face. He quickly looked away, spinning in the office chair that Kwiif had offered him.

"For the record, there is only one teenage girl on our team," he muttered to himself.

Kwiifelchilingush snorted. "Keeeeeep telling yourself that, Human. By my count, there's at least five. Don't worry, I'm sure one of you will become a woman soon. My credits are on Hunter Solang."

Nunzio scowled at her. Unfazed, she continued fiddling with the switches, buttons, and knobs on her supercomputer.

"What're you doing?" he asked after a moment.

"Research. Hunter Kol'daar commissioned me to investigate your drugging, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. Uh, actually, I don't think you need to worry about that," Nunzio said a bit sheepishly.

Now that he was sober and could think in a straight line, he was pretty sure he knew the vector. That Gsk guy must have spilled some of his hallucinogenic drink on the dart that had struck him. The tiny amount that had transferred to his bloodstream from the tip of the dart had seriously messed with him. He'd bet that wasn't meant for Human consumption, but it wasn't like it was some mysterious unknown, if they sold it at Cream.

But when he explained as much to Kwiif, she didn't seem satisfied.

"Huh. Well, that *would* explain the hallucinations. Those shouldn't have happened, if the compound was alone in your system. In fact, I doubt you'd even have noticed anything amiss."

Apprehension sank in his stomach. "You mean there was more than one compound involved?"

She hit some switches on her workstation, and a nearby ancient dot matrix printer screamed to life. She picked up the end of the folding sheets and brandished it at him. Nunzio took it to be polite, but he'd only barely passed every science class he'd ever taken

"Um. This is... nice. What's it mean, in layman's terms?"

"This compound was quite unique. It was some kind of nanotech, completely unmagical in and of itself, but my simulations bear out that it can't be created by science. It's baffling, to be honest."

She sounded quite happy to be baffled, but he supposed that's how scientists worked. If no one was baffled by anything, they'd be out of a job. Nunzio, however, was not at all happy not to know why there was this other compound in his system and was about to demand more information when Zinchalte halted the improvised concert with a peevish shout.

"Can I get a glass of water?"

"If you get it yourself," Kwiif yelled back. "I'm doing science, here. Mwahaha, and what have you."

Distantly, Sakano shouted, "Kwiif! How many times have I told you! Laugh from the *diaphragm*! Mwahahahaha!"

Kwiif gave a hateful sigh. "Racist. *Some* of us don't *have* diaphragms."

Zin wandered off to find a drinking fountain, guided by Seraphina. Kol'daar dragged Maggie over, despite her reluctance to be anywhere near Kwiif. She seemed to be getting over the shock but didn't seem to know where to go from there. She sat in another spare office chair, torn between staring and desperately not wanting to *see*. Kwiif, for her part, ignored the girl as too unbearably racist to even bother with.

Kol'daar didn't sit. Instead, he stood next to Nunzio and leaned half on the computer's angled interface, propping himself on his elbows.

If Nunzio turned his chair, he'd be eye to thigh with the man, right at the top of the leather leggings. Right where the man's bare hip peeked out from under the sword belt, between the gap left by the front-to-back drape of the loincloth. If he just turned his chair.

"No luck yet?" Nunzio asked Maggie instead.

"No, we've already cracked the spell, tracked down the demons, and saved the world." She looked at him from under her cloud of hair. "You missed it. There goes your paycheck, huh?"

Nunzio supposed he deserved that. "I thought Kol'daar said that the spell wasn't anchored to Zin's Heartsong. Wasn't that why it was so hard to undo Blatt's spell?"

"Yes, but this one has its own tricky parts. It has *layers*."

"Then shouldn't it be a piece of *cake*?" Nunzio grinned weakly at the groan this drew from the girl.

"I don't think they put it on him all at once," Kol'daar said. "It could be they reinforced it at some point."

“And they did much better with this spell than the one on Mr. Piggy.” Maggie spun listlessly in her chair. “There’s no Dissonance to exploit. That means we have to find the right Key. *Keys*, because of the layers.”

Nunzio knew about as much about musical terms as he did about science. Back home, he’d joined the high school choir for one semester as a sophomore. He wasn’t very keen on singing, but he’d had a somewhat debilitating crush on a senior in the bass section. Choir was the only class that had given him an opportunity to moon over the guy up close. As a result, he could remember very little about the technicalities of music.

Even so, he tried to keep Maggie’s spirits up. “But that doesn’t sound so bad, right? I mean, there are only so many keys to write a song in.”

“If we were speaking about non-magic music, you’d be right. However, the Orphic Noise has nearly, if not completely, infinite Keys.” Kol’daar sounded as put out about the situation as Maggie, which drove home how serious the problem was.

“While we’re talking about impossibilities, I think now’s the time to break it to you,” Kwiif spoke up. She turned to Kol’daar. “I don’t think I can finish the research you commissioned.”

“Why not?” Nunzio asked before Kol’daar could. It was more his business that the barbarian’s, no matter who was paying for it. The mystery compound was in *his* damn bloodstream.

Zin and Seraphina came back as Kwiif sighed again. “The samples broke down several hours ago. Most nanotech does that in any biological system, but *your* system takes care of that rather quicker than most. It’s a wonder the Medical Guild hasn’t started charging you for their high nanotech turnover rate in this sector. Anyway, without more of the compound itself, my computer simulations will only yield so much data. I think they’re about tapped out.”

“Did you figure out what this compound does, other than break MOM?” Kol’daar asked.

“No. Nunzio has the printout, but I can’t make freech or snelp of it. Anyone else is welcome to take a look, though. If you figure it out, I’ll even put your name on the article when I publish my research.”

Of course, everyone in the peanut gallery tried. Nunzio wished he’d thought to set the printout down somewhere so they wouldn’t all crowd around him like that. Kol’daar’s hand found his shoulder, braced so the big guy could lean

down over it to see the paper. He couldn't even shrug it off, not with everyone else clustered in so close. He'd either elbow Maggie in the eye or crash headfirst into Zin.

"*This* looks familiar," Seraphina rasped.

Maggie shared a significant look with her. "I was thinking the same thing."

"What is it, then?" Zin sipped his Erlenmeyer flask of water noisily.

"Well, it looks kind of like song-spell, but... it's wrong." Maggie frowned and tapped a row of six sixes. Nunzio didn't remember numbers being a part of choir class; clearly, he was out of his depth. "A spell from the corrupted Hymnal?"

"No." Seraphina sounded alarmed. "Remember the Scourged Saints?"

"Oh, Heavens." Maggie rocked back in her chair, taking the printout with her.

"*That* doesn't sound good," Kol'daar's voice rumbled. His breath tickled Nunzio's neck when he spoke. He didn't budge to follow the printout.

That was the last straw. Nunzio got up, forcing Zin to backpedal rapidly to get out of his way. He stepped up to Kwiif while the others kept up their examination, ignoring Kol'daar's very quiet huff.

"It's *not* good," Seraphina said. "The Scourged Saints were a sect of extremists who'd decided to punish anyone who didn't live by their own interpretation of the Heavenly Mandates."

Maggie's face had gone ashen. "They did a lot of *very* shady things, including adding demonic magic into holy song-spells. Any means to further their ends, emphasis on *mean*."

"What were their ends?" Nunzio asked. "And what does this compound have to do with them?"

"They wanted to rule the world, what else? When my friends and I went up against the Saints, eventually we found out that they'd made a... Well, not a poison, because it didn't *kill* anyone."

"It's not in your system anymore," Kwiif reassured Nunzio as he felt himself start to sweat. "I can scan you to make sure, if you like."

"Yes, do that." While Kwiif dug out her scanner, he asked Maggie, "So what did it do, if not kill anyone?"

“It wasn’t magical, so none of us could Hear it, but somehow the Saints used it like a tracking device and also—”

“The *fuck*?” Zin took the words right out of his mouth. “*Tracking device*? You mean, they could be on their way here right now?”

Kwiif began waving the whirring little scanner across Nunzio. “I doubt they had time to trace it. I’ve been running simulated tests on the computer all afternoon because the samples degraded so quickly. If the original vector was still present and intact, then maybe there’d be a—”

The scanner made an angry *bwoop* sound as it passed over one of Nunzio’s pockets.

No one moved for a long moment.

Then Kwiif scanned the pocket again.

Bwoop.

Grimacing, Nunzio slowly reached inside to draw out his credit card and a small, black dart. The one he’d been playing with when he’d paid for the drinks.

“Shit,” he said. “I *am* a magpie.”

And then something upstairs exploded.

Chapter Nineteen

The overhead lights in the lab went out. Red, yellow, and blue alarm lights began strobing as a genderless voice broadcast the warning, “INTRUDER ALERT. STAY FROSTY. INTRUDER ALERT. HOLD ON TO YOUR BUTTS.”

Seraphina took wing, screaming more like a crow than a dove. “The elevator! Come on!”

Nunzio dropped the dart like it had burned him and reached for his disruptor. It wasn’t there; he’d never gotten it back from Kwiif after the kidnapping. Maggie leapt to her feet, and Kol’daar was already running back to the slab where he’d left his spiderharp.

“Don’t freak out,” Kwiif shouted after him. “It might just be Sakano.”

“It’s not *me!*” Sakano’s defensive yell sounded much closer than it had last time. “This time.”

“To arms!” Lolanna bellowed from about the same distance and closing.

“Kwiif, where’s my gun?”

“Where’s *any* gun?” Zin held out his arms to demonstrate how very defenseless he was.

“The guns, including yours, are all in the armory at the back of the lab.”

Which might well be miles away in any direction, for all he knew. “Go *get* them, then. We’ll try and hold them off over here. Hurry!”

For once, Kwiif didn’t waste time grumbling. Her malleable Infinipod body shifted rapidly into a vague cylinder, and she rolled away through the pulsating lights, gaining speed as she went.

“How are *we* going to hold them off?” Zin demanded.

Nunzio drew a handful of sonic grenades from his pocket and brandished them at the Twink. “The old-fashioned way.”

Zinhalte raised a fine silver-pink brow skeptically but then offered a smile that was as close to honest as he ever got. “Just like old times.”

Kol’daar rushed past, grabbing on to the thief and yanking him along. “Reminisce later, blue man. Now is the time for glory!”

“Why aren’t we running away?” Zin shouted to be heard over the repeating intruder alarm. “Doesn’t this place have an emergency exit?”

“It’s under repair!” Sakano sounded even more defensive than before, so Nunzio could guess whose fault it was that repairs were necessary.

Everyone converged around the elevator doors, hiding in the cover of the various lab tables and machines strewn about. Kol’ daar threw Zin behind one tall supercomputer and flung himself behind another.

Nunzio didn’t hide. This was his fault. He had no idea how the bad guys had planted those tracking darts at the bar, much less why they’d bother, but he should have suspected something was up. *No one* played darts while tripping balls. If he hadn’t been so distracted by Kol’ daar and Zin, he might even have realized sooner that something was weird about the situation.

He was an idiot, but he was damned if he was going to let his carelessness about the dart doom these people, or the world. He would *not* let this end like the Tomb Raid.

He ran to the elevator, glancing up to see the indicator lights show the progress of the descent. Whoever was coming down was only halfway there when he mashed his hand against the maintenance panel next to the doors and let loose. The sharp sting of his power crawled up his arm while the metal plating dissolved beneath his fingers, which then struck against wires and circuits. He yanked them out, for good measure, even as he disintegrated them.

The whirring of the elevator ground to a halt with the indicator lights showing that the elevator was stuck three-quarters of the way down.

“That oughtta buy us a little time,” he said as he turned back to the others. “Sakano, is the emergency exit completely impassible?”

Sakano poked his head up from under a lab table. “Not *exactly*. It’s just very... structurally unsound.”

Another explosion sounded, the whole lab shuddering with the force of the concussion. Smoke streamed from the seal between the horizontal elevator doors. Something landed on the other side with a heavy *thud* and started pounding on them. The doors jerked with each impact, dents the size of trash can lids appearing as if the heavy steel had been replaced with tinfoil.

“I’ll take unsound,” Nunzio said over the ringing in his ears. “Where is it?”

“Back by the armory. Sort of.”

Maggie cried, “We’ll be too slow on foot! Dr. Sakano, you have anything, like hoverboards or something?”

“Uh, well, there’ve been budget cuts recently—”

The doors groaned, and the something behind them gave a roar that made Nunzio’s teeth hurt.

“Do you have *anything* that could take us?” Kol’daar demanded.

“The Gardenbot 4000!” Sakano waved his arms frantically in the direction of the mecha he’d been working on earlier. “I built it for *landscaping*, but it could manage *escaping* as well! I added the weapons systems just this afternoon!”

“If it’s for landscaping, why are there weapons at all?” Maggie asked as they all rushed for mecha.

“Who *cares*?” Zin retorted.

The thing was at least six meters tall, a cockpit in its chest. Lolanna clambered up into the pilot’s seat and booted the thing up. She maneuvered it into a crouch, offering its upper limbs to Maggie and Sakano. Maggie leapt up onto the top of the hot tub-sized watering can that the Gardenbot had in place of a hand. Sakano plastered himself to the flat surface of the massive planting trowel that capped the mecha’s other wrist. Zinchalte nimbly shimmied up to the mecha’s head, where he clutched at the two sharp-pointed horns that jutted up from its samurai-like helm. Kol’daar and Nunzio each took a leg, standing on the garden-tractor feet and latching on to the thing’s ankles like two oversized toddlers with separation anxiety.

“Hold on,” Lolanna warned as she straightened the mecha.

The Gardenbot 4000 lurched into motion. Nunzio bit back an unmanly squeak as the foot he stood on rose ponderously and then fell. A lab table crunched under its heel. Chemicals spattered up onto his coat, which steamed in reaction but thankfully did not corrode further. Best thrift-store find of Nunzio’s life.

“Kol’daar, get higher up!” He scrambled to take his own advice.

The next step squashed a supercomputer, jarring everybody. With a cry and a splash, Maggie fell into the watering can. Nunzio barely managed to keep his hold on the mecha’s thigh.

“Watch it, Lolanna!”

“Do *you* wish to be the pilot?” she retorted icily. The leg he’d wrapped himself around began to lift, and he saved his breath in favor of not falling off and getting stepped on.

“We’re going too slooow,” Zin singsonged anxiously from his perch. “Hey, Goggles, doesn’t this thing have a jetpack or something?”

“Little red switch next to the self-destruct! Which is the *big* red switch! Don’t touch that one!”

“*Why* does it have a *self-destruct*?” Maggie’s thoroughly exasperated voice echoed tinnily up from watering can.

Kol’daar had managed to find purchase on the mecha’s tool belt. He reached out to Nunzio with one hand. “Hurry, Nunzio!”

Nunzio flailed at him. Lolanna found the switch. The mecha shot up into the air, bathing the lab in hot white-blue light from its rear-mounted propulsion unit. Nunzio stopped reaching to concentrate on clinging desperately.

The lab sped by beneath them. Despite the roar of the Gardenbot’s thrusters, the rush of wind, and the ongoing intruder alert, a colossal metallic *boom* echoed clearly off the distant walls. This was followed by the resounding clatter of elevator doors smashing into more of Sakano’s equipment.

“The Sin Trinity!” Seraphina screeched from somewhere nearby. She sounded out of breath from trying to keep up with the mecha. “They’ve *Merged!*”

“Heaven Siren!” bellowed a terrible voice, three notes of tandem dread scraping the very air raw. “We will eat your soul!”

It drew out each syllable as if singing them, but there was no tune, just chaotic dissonance—or maybe Dissonance, because Nunzio couldn’t describe how awful that sound was. It was worse than nails on a chalkboard, worse than a chicken bone in a garbage disposal, worse than a record needle shredding a vinyl pressing of the ambient screams from the seventh circle of Hell. Worse than a *Nickelback* single. It was *bad*.

Part of the ceiling exploded over their heads, and the obnoxious intruder alarm died a horrible death. Lolanna flipped the mecha in midair as she dodged the debris. Nunzio wished she hadn’t, for two reasons.

First, they now flew more or less facing backward, so they could gauge the enemy. He hadn’t known it until he saw, but he *really* hadn’t wanted to see the Sin Trinity.

When he was ten, he'd put several of his sister's Barbies in the microwave as revenge for her telling the whole neighborhood how she'd seen him making his Batman and GI Joe figurines kiss. So he'd nuked her dolls for a long time, until his mom had caught him and made him stop. The result of his wrath had been a single conglomeration of melted plastic bodies, warped limbs, and distorted, scorched faces.

The Sin Trinity looked like that, kind of, only worse. And bigger. *Lots* bigger. It had to be about the same size as the Gardenbot. It was also a bit better put together, because the demonic entity could *run* on its six legs, and use its six arms to hurl supercomputers and steel slabs at them as it bounded across the lab after them. Its three grotesque faces were twisted in rictuses of evil, hateful pleasure, made more awful and terrible by the strobing lights and sharp shadows.

Second, the sudden shifting of the Gardenbot finally shook Nunzio loose.

For a heartbeat, he understood exactly how the proverbial coyote felt when the rocket-powered roller skates chucked him off a cliff, only Nunzio didn't have a sign with 'yipe' painted on it. His lips formed the 'F' of his favorite swear word—

And he didn't get farther than that, because Kol'daar latched on to him with both arms around his thighs. Still, his momentum carried them both, and he flopped painfully backward and downward. Kol'daar grunted and held on, his face mashed against the small of Nunzio's back. They both dangled upside-down from the tool belt, suspended by Kol'daar's knees hooked over the lip of the belt, like a trapeze artist.

Kol'daar hollered something unintelligible against Nunzio's coat. It didn't take a super genius to figure it out, though. Nunzio heaved himself into an airborne sit-up. The barbarian gave his ass a helpful one-handed shove.

He yelped at *that*, because clearly getting goosed was the most upsetting part about this situation. Still, he gave a forward lunge powered as much by shock as terror. He managed to snag hold of the tool belt and, after a graceless scramble, ended up straddling it, one leg pinned between it and the metal hull of the mecha's torso.

"Thanks!" Nunzio offered his hand and reeled the dangling barbarian into a less precarious position.

Some large, shiny supercomputer whizzed by them, followed by Sakano's horrified, "Nooooooooo! MOOOOOM!"

Right. Nunzio cringed as he listened to MOM's metal-screeching crash landing. Of course the demon monster thing would wreck MOM. Because long ago the multiverse had decided that Nunzio couldn't have nice things. He'd been a little too busy to get his hopes up this time, but regardless that didn't stop Murphy's Law from kicking in. As they flew over the wreckage of his pet project, the remains exploded in an impressive fireball as an added insult to injury.

The Sin Trinity gave another baleful howl. This time, the blast came up from the ground, flinging lab materials and machinery around like confetti. The Gardenbot veered sharply. Kol'daar and Nunzio knocked their heads together. Maggie, who'd almost managed to climb out of the watering can, fell back in. Sakano wept maniacally, still moaning about the loss of MOM.

"That Dissonance attack is more powerful than any I've seen before," Kol'daar said, scowling as he rubbed his forehead. "We can't let it hit us."

"At least it has terrible aim," Nunzio replied. "Too many sets of eyes, maybe?"

"Where are the weapon systems?" Lolanna brought the trowel-arm up to the cockpit in order to hear Sakano's response.

The scientist stopped sniveling long enough to shout, "Right joystick! Red trigger!"

The Gardenbot's daisy-shaped shoulder plates released, revealing twin Gatling guns. Lolanna opened fire. The projectiles looked like nothing if not massive watermelon seeds, spat out at bullet speed. They peppered the Sin Trinity's hide, bouncing off harmlessly. It didn't even slow down.

"Don't let me fall off," Kol'daar commanded Nunzio. Not knowing where else to grab, he latched on to the man's swordbelt while Kol'daar drew his harp off his back. His gray eyes narrowed with concentration as he Played a complex note. Nunzio's skin hummed with the familiar feel of music-magic as the pulse of sound lashed out.

When it hit the Sin Trinity, the creature dug its feet in, arms rising to block. The force of Kol'daar's song-spell knocked it back, skidding and tearing up the floor in the process. When it straightened, one of its arms fell off.

"Yeah!" Nunzio crowed. "How d'you like *dis* chord?"

The three faces twisted in rage, mouths horrifically gaping to screech. "Impudent mortal! We will suck the meat from your bones!"

“Give it a *rest* already!” Nunzio made jokes because it was that or start jibbering in terror.

Kol'daar didn't let the puns or the threat break his focus. His fingers flew across the strings of his harp. The Sin Trinity renewed its pursuit and dodged faster than anything that large had a right to. Still, two spells struck it in its misshapen chest, tearing through like circular saws. Its body split like a half-peeled banana, the heads on the left and the right listing off to either side.

Yet still it charged onward and *gained* on them.

Jesus fucking Christ. Hello, nightmare fuel.

This time, when it opened its mouths, the Sin Trinity wailed its Dissonance at a decibel that made Nunzio's skin crawl and his ribs rattle. Kol'daar strummed a rapid cascade of minor chords. The spell met the attacking noise, and the very air between them and the Sin Trinity exploded.

Magic spilled everywhere, stinging Nunzio like a sandstorm. The Gardenbot's flight dipped and veered erratically. Sakano's mournful cries cut off at the same time. Kol'daar jerked, his song-spells ceasing as his every muscle tensed. His eyes rolled back in his head. Blood trickled from his ears. Nunzio strained on the man's belt to keep him from keeling over, pulling Kol'daar close in the process. The harp jammed against his chin, but at least it didn't fall.

Nunzio, the only one unaffected by the magical shitstorm, was also the only one to see the hellish delight on the creature's faces as it bore down on them. The Gardenbot rapidly lost altitude. They were going to crash, and whoever didn't die on impact was going to be devoured, soul and all.

The Sin Trinity leapt into the air, its five remaining arms catching the Gardenbot's feet. The monstrous heads gnashed their teeth in triumph.

“Heavens, help me!”

The pure, clear voice rang out in bell tones, followed by a wordless, gospel-ish chorus springing from nowhere—or perhaps the Heavens, wherever those were. A wall of magic hit Nunzio, so strong and sweet it took his breath away. Much like his first experience with Kol'daar's music-magic back at Gronl's shop, time slowed. No, more than that, it seemed to *stop*. Except for him, and the sudden rush of sound and light off to his left.

Maggie rose out of the watering can, born aloft on her song-spell, arms raised beseechingly. She glowed brighter than the paused strobe alarms or the

Gardenbot's frozen jets. As Nunzio watched, she gave a pirouette. Silvered armor formed over her chest and shoulders. Her algae-stained jeans and shirt morphed into a billowy white dress.

The hemline was a bit high, if *purity* was the point, but maybe that was part of why she was called *Heaven Siren*. Lust wasn't part of the Sin Trinity.

Speaking of, Nunzio looked to the looming atrocity. It too was frozen in midair, its heads less than a couple meters away, each mouth still stretched ghoulishly. He carefully relaxed his hold on Kol'daar, who did not budge in the least.

Huh. Well, while there was time, he might as well do something useful, if he could. It *was* his fault the Sin Trinity even found them all. No one else would die because of him and his carelessness.

Maggie had sprouted wings now, wide and white, spreading from her back like an avenging angel's. The chorus went, "Lalala, whooaaah, shalalala, whoah-oh-oh."

He retrieved his sonic grenades. He had three of them. Sakano, knowing his aversion to killing anyone, had designed them to be nonlethal, merely incapacitating to most lifeforms. But if sounds were what made the Sin Trinity vulnerable, he didn't know if they would kill the thing—if you *could* kill evil incarnate, if it even *counted* as killing in that case.

The grenades weren't magic, but... Maybe if he tuned them?

Now a golden halo gleamed on Maggie's brow, her cloud of hair held back from her face as the light coalesced into a solid circlet. Her song seemed to be drawing to a close, the chorus gearing up for a big finish.

He dredged his mind for any useful information retained from his misspent choir class, and came up with a very basic chord, C, E, and G. Coincidentally, they were also the initials of his crush. Christ, he hoped this worked; otherwise that mnemonic device would just make him pathetic. And then probably dead.

Quickly, Nunzio programmed the grenades. He pulled the pins and chucked one bomb each into the Sin Trinity's maws. Or tried to, anyway. When they left his hand, the three little bombs hung in the air, suspended ominously by the same magic that froze everything else, until time kicked back in as the last note faded from the air. His aim was true as ever, despite the pause. The grenades dropped down into the bottomless darkness of hideously large gullets, just before the Sin Trinity surged into motion once more, this time to recoil from the floating, angelic teenager.

Kol'daar and his harp lurched as the momentum returned, and only sheer panicked reflexes had Nunzio grabbing on in time. Kol'daar shuddered against his chest, groaning as he began to recover. The Gardenbot drew up short; thankfully Lolanna had come back online as well.

“Sin Trinity!” Maggie—or rather, Heaven Siren cried, her wings snapping out, her whole being blazing with light as she soared after it. “Abomination, you will not escape the Judgement of the Heavens this time! *Bellicoso Blessing!*”

The song-spell swelled in the air, knocking the Sin Trinity back to the ground. Its flesh smoked and blistered, but nothing at this point could really make it more nightmarish than it already was. The creature landed hard, crushing more of Sakano's lab in the process.

Baring teeth, it snarled in its earsplitting triad of chaotic voices, “Heaven Siren! We will not submit to Judgement any longer! The Hymnal is ours! And yours will be the first tormented soul in perdition where *we* will—”

The sonic grenades went off, a perfect three-part harmony of *kaboom*. Whether it was the chord or simply the explosion that did it, the tears in the Sin Trinity's body blew wide open. Three pieces of monster, made no less horrific for the sundering, went flying in as many directions.

What Nunzio had failed to take into account was the combined strength of three grenades going off in tandem.

Heaven Siren threw her wings in front of her to deflect the wave of noise, but the Gardenbot wasn't so lucky. The intense vibrations rattled the mecha, nuts and bolts shaking loose. The legs, already crushed and mangled by the terrible strength of the Sin Trinity's grip, fell off entirely. Now unbalanced for the force provided by the jets on its back, the thing flipped ass over teakettle, sending both Sakano and Zinchalte flying. Nunzio and Kol'daar, half-wedged as they were in the tool belt, held on for dear life.

Lolanna roared, wrestling with the controls. The Gardenbot stabilized. But in the next moment, they finally found the back wall of the lab by crashing into it. Luckily, they were still facing the wrong way, so the propulsion unit crunched first. The tool belt snapped and fell away, taking the two men with it.

The fall wasn't that bad, only a drop of about fifteen feet. Nunzio landed jarringly on hands and knees and rolled. Next to him, Kol'daar coughed and held his own ribs with a bloodied arm. After a moment where nothing else exploded, Nunzio climbed to his feet with a groan.

“Kol’ daar,” he said. “You all right?”

“More or less,” Kol’ daar grunted. He sat up, wincing. The blood came from a nasty case of road rash across his left bicep, but in his right hand he held aloft his undamaged spiderharp. “I can still Play, and that’s the important thing.”

“Look out below!” Lolanna shouted, drawing their attention upward.

As she unbuckled herself and abandoned the cockpit, the remains of the Gardenbot gave a metallic screech and began to peel away from the wall.

Chapter Twenty

Nunzio and Kol'daar hauled ass to get out of the way, scrabbling over overturned lab tables and other debris. They made it by the skin of their teeth; Nunzio felt the gust of wind from the damaged hulk's passing. The mecha smashed into the ground, shaking it and knocking him off his feet in the process.

Something snagged hold of him before he hit the ground. He half expected it to be Kol'daar, given the man's twice-proved expertise in the matter. It wasn't, though.

"What the *hell* just happened?" Kwiif asked as she set Nunzio down.

"We just lost MOM, apprentice. We won't make our deadline, and we won't get the grant."

"Ryouta!" Lolanna said, looking up, naked relief bathing her face.

Sakano mournfully drifted down toward them. His head and his hands were the only visible parts of him. His lab coat had sealed itself around him and inflated like a giant beach ball.

"So, that's it? No more MOM, no more lab, no more apprenticeship?" Kwiif asked, her tone somewhere between belligerent and forlorn.

"Fear not, Kwiif," Sakano said, finding a silver lining as he neared the ground. "We still have the schematics. And everything in the lab is *insured* against monster attacks. We won't need the grant anymore! We'll collect the insurance money, sell this all for scrap, and move to a cheaper facility!"

When he touched down, he immediately tipped and began to roll. Lolanna stopped him with a foot and righted him. His rubber-gloved hand flapped uselessly toward a ripcord at the front of his personal flotation device, completely inaccessible.

Between a twenty-ton *landscaping* robot with a weapon system and *this* glaring design flaw, Nunzio was starting to reconsider his investment in Sakano's research. There was mad science, and then there was just *stupid*. How the man managed something occasionally competent, like sonic grenades, or Lolanna's eyepatch, was a complete mystery. Was he some kind of idiot savant?

“Uh, a little help?” Sakano said. Lolanna obligingly pulled the cord. Sakano’s coat deflated with a flatulent noise.

Heaven Siren flew over to them, landing lightly on a pair of steel-toed ballet slippers.

“What happened to the Sin Trinity?” she demanded. Her entire attitude had changed to one of serene command. Joan of Arc, eat your heart out. “Why’d it explode? Was that you, Kol’daar?”

Kol’daar’s back straightened. “No, my lady.”

“Uh, actually, that was me,” Nunzio owned up. Everyone gaped at him.

Kol’daar was the first to recover. “But, how? You have no magic.”

“There was no time for you to attack,” Lolanna said, almost accusatory.

“Actually, there was. While Mag—I mean, Heaven Siren was doing her little twirly dance.” Nunzio gestured a vague circle. Everyone looked at him like he’d lost his marbles.

“‘Twirly dance,’” Heaven Siren repeated, unimpressed. “Do you mean the Miracle Modulation?”

“Uh, maybe? The part where you grew wings and a halo.”

Heaven Siren hummed, narrowing her eyes at him. “Explain.”

He did, as quickly as he could. There was plenty to be doubtful about, but it seemed no one had a problem with the part where time stopped, or that Maggie had a literal song and dance to become her superheroine alter ego. No, it was the part where he’d actually thought to use *strategy*. Except for Sakano, who seemed to think since the sonic grenades were his invention, *he* was the real hero of the hour.

“*You* know about major chords?” Heaven Siren looked him up and down, as if she could tell he had pulled that one out of his ass.

“*You* tuned grenades?” Lolanna said to Nunzio, brows rising skeptically.

Kol’daar smiled, though, clapping Nunzio’s shoulder. “That was clever of you.”

“Quite ingenious, if I do say so myself,” Sakano said, puffing up with pride.

“Yeah, well, I’m not a *complete* idiot,” Nunzio said, then remembered how he’d kept hold of the tracking dart. He grimaced, shrugging off the lingering hand as he added, “Uh, well, *mostly* not a complete idiot.”

“Still, that should not have harmed the Sin Trinity,” Heaven Siren said thoughtfully. “Perhaps the spell that has silenced them to my Hearing has weakened them to mundane harmonies as well. This Torth person would have had to modify one of the Hymnal’s song-spells for it to work, and he’s proved incompetent at adaptations once already.”

“Fascinating!” Sakano leaned in, stroking his chin. “The immutable properties of demonic entities are well documented by science. This Hymnal can change the unchangeable?”

“Yes. Think of it as a master blueprint, holding all Creation’s designs. Blueprints can be *altered*.”

“And they gave this to a *teenager*.” Kwiif huffed in disgusted disbelief. “I’m an adult, and Sakano still only lets me use the safety laser cutters.”

“You are not ready, apprentice.”

“You are so full of it.”

Reluctantly, more because he had to know if his record was intact than out of anything resembling regret, Nunzio asked, “Did I... kill it?”

Heaven Siren shook her head slowly. “No one can kill them. They are creatures of pure evil, and they feed on—”

“Souls,” Nunzio said, at the same time Kol’daar said, “Cake.” They exchanged a glance, whereupon Kol’daar cracked a wan grin. Nunzio’s own lips twitched in response, but he quickly schooled his expression and looked back to the girl.

She gave them both the side-eye, but nodded. “Ye-es, I suppose. Souls especially, but even so, those are *delicacies* to them. Mainly, they draw power from the evil that lurks in the hearts of people. Their very presence creates disharmony, and from that they get stronger.”

Suddenly, the fight that had almost broken out at the SpOC—a fight over nothing, really—made a lot more sense. Nunzio remembered how the Three Rs had seemed oddly happy that people were resorting to violence, and angry when Kol’daar calmed things down. No wonder; he’d interrupted their own personal round of pre-cake snacks.

“At any rate, I think you’ve only forced them to separate from their Merged form,” Heaven Siren finished. “Perhaps you even managed to destroy the homunculi bodies they’re possessing, but I can’t confirm that while they remain silent to my Hearing.”

“So they could still be here in the lab?” Lolanna drew her swords, scanning the chaotically lit lab warily.

“We have to get out of here quickly. Seraphina!”

“Mmmrr mmmng mmm mmrr,” came Seraphina’s muffled voice from above them.

They craned their necks upward once more. The dove was not alone. Zinhalte was with her. It seemed the Twink’s method of breaking his fall proved to be none of his doing. Seraphina had the back of his linen shirt clamped in her beak, her wings fluttering so quickly she appeared to be a very large hummingbird.

Zin hung from his shirt, looking supremely miffed at being hauled around like an overgrown kitten. The hand-tailored seams held up admirably even as they had to be cutting into his armpits something fierce. The little bird set him down. Zin straightened his shirt and tried to rub his pits as covertly as possible.

With that, the whole group was present and accounted for. Though everyone appeared a bit worse for wear, with blood trailing from ears and various scrapes, it kind of beggared belief that none of them had died. It was even harder to believe he was glad to see *Zinhalte*, of all people. Still, Nunzio took a moment to breathe a sigh of relief.

Seraphina didn’t so much land on Zin’s shoulder as collapse there. The black patches had almost completely overwhelmed her white feathers. What remained were only thin slices, like cracks in a shattered window. As she lay panting with her beak open, Heaven Siren collected her gently.

“What did you say, Seraphina?” the angelic girl asked, stroking the bird’s feathers tenderly. Where her fingers touched, the feathers glowed white again. As soon as she moved on, the inky darkness swirled to fill in the pure spots.

Seraphina took a moment to gather herself before she gasped out, “They’re coming this way. Heaven Siren! What the Sin Trinity said—The Scourged Saints—I figured it out!”

Lolanna interrupted before she could get any farther. “Explain as we go. If the Sin Trinity are headed our way, we must not delay our escape any longer. Lead the way, Ryouta.”

Sakano joined her at the front of the group. Kwiif followed with a long-suffering slump to her massive trunk. Nunzio and Kol’ daar brought up the rear, keeping Zinhalte in front of them. Heaven Siren soared slowly several feet

over their heads. They followed the lab's curving wall because it was where the least damage had occurred, and then one side was not vulnerable to attack.

Kwiif had at least made it to the armory. She handed Nunzio his nerve disruptor as they went. Zin held out his hand for a weapon, but Kwiif ignored him.

"You're still kind of our prisoner, after all," Nunzio said in an undertone to his disgruntled ex. He wiped slime off his gun with his shirt tails. It was already ruined by similar stains from the kidnapping at the bar.

"I think I should get a weapon for good behavior," Zin hissed back.

"What part of your behavior has been 'good,' exactly? You're only here out of your own self-interest to begin with," Kol'daar pointed out tiredly, scratching at the drying blood beneath his ears.

Soaring slowly above them all, Heaven Siren coaxed Seraphina to a calmer state. "There, now. What do you mean, you figured it out?"

Seraphina took a huge breath and blurted, "They're going to use the corrupted Hymnal to build a Hell."

Heaven Siren gasped, eyes wide and staring off into the middle distance. Everyone else looked at each other, baffled.

"*Build* a Hell?" Nunzio repeated. "What, like it comes from IKEA?"

"What's Eye-key-uh?" Kwiif asked.

"Why do *demons* want to build a Hell?" Kol'daar's brow furrowed. "I thought the goal of most demons was to get *out* of Hell, to wreak havoc among mortals."

"That may be true in most universes," Seraphina wheezed, "but ours doesn't have a Hell at all. Only the Heavens. The demons and monsters exist on Earth with the rest of us, which is why we need the Heaven Siren and the Hymnal. To protect Humanity, *little though they deserve it.*"

"The Scourged Saints are behind this, all right," Heaven Siren muttered enigmatically. "But why the Sin Trinity or this Torth are cooperating is the real question."

"Weee will reign in Hell."

"Weee will feast on the souls of the damned."

"Weee will gain strength from their misery."

The voices, so eerily similar, slithered from the darkness. They were followed by shuffling footsteps. The Sin Trinity, separate now, emerged from behind mangled equipment and damaged scientific paraphernalia. Their bodies were just as mangled and damaged, hideous parodies of Human form. They didn't even look *real*—no blood or organs dripping from their torn flesh, as if they really *were* made of plastic. Homunculi bodies in action.

Surrounded, the motley bunch of would-be world saviors bunched together defensively. Kol'daar raised his harp, reaching for the strings with his bloodied arm. Heaven Siren spread her wings aggressively and drew a deep breath to sing. Nunzio had no idea if his nerve disruptor would have any effect on them, but he reached for it anyway.

Kwiif, however, was a quick draw.

With the sound of a whole battalion cocking their rifles, the Infinipod whipped out what must have been Sakano's whole arsenal from her voluminous body and opened fire. There was a long moment of simultaneous, deafening, and blinding ordnance discharge. When silence fell again, Nunzio picked himself up from his reflexive hit-the-dirt position and tried to see through the haze of gunpowder and ozone.

"Huh," said Heaven Siren. "Maybe it wasn't a vulnerability to harmonics after all."

Kwiif put up her guns, giving a satisfied grunt. Nunzio had a feeling that if she'd had lips, she'd be using them to clear the smoke out of the various gun barrels.

The smoke thinned, but the Sin Trinity was nowhere to be seen. Well, perhaps that wasn't quite right. Where they'd been standing, there was a pillar of jagged ice, a flat black tear in the space/time continuum floating several feet off the ground and shrinking, and an enormous pink amoeba that reeked of grapefruit.

"What just happened?" Zin asked blankly.

"The Sin Trinity has been defeated," Kol'daar said in tones of 'duh.' He grinned widely and gave the nearest part of Kwiif a hearty slap of congratulations. "Kwiif, you're amazing."

"Damn straight," Kwiif agreed. She reabsorbed the weapons with a squelching sound.

Zin shuddered, already too familiar with the noises of Kwiif's interior. "Yeah, I got that part. *How* did that defeat them?"

“Given... *that*,” Heaven Siren waved a hand at the amoeba, which was ignoring them in favor of engulfing a supercomputer, “and Mr. Arquette’s success with the grenades earlier, I’d say their silencing spell made them vulnerable to the weapons of mad science.”

Lolanna scowled, jerking one sword to point in the direction of the ruined mecha. “But the Gardenbot’s weapons had no effect.”

“The Gardenbot’s weapons were complete *shit*,” Kwiif sneered. “It spat *pips* at them. My freeze-ray, now *that’s* mad science.”

“It was a *prototype* system,” Sakano muttered, crossing his arms. “I can make modifications based on the data gleaned—”

“Enough of this,” Seraphina croaked over the bickering. “There is no time to waste. We still are no closer to finding this Torth, or his lair.”

Lolanna nodded soberly. “I think it wise to inform the Guildmasters of our progress.”

“You mean *lack* of progress,” Nunzio corrected sourly.

“I still don’t understand why the demons want a Hell to live in,” Kol’daar said.

Nunzio reasoned out loud, chasing explanations. “It *sounded* like they just wanted an all-you-can-eat smorgasbord of suffering with ice-cold souls on tap. So, they turn Maggie and Seraphina’s world into a hellscape, then use the Hymnal to hop from dimension to dimension to feed the souls of each one into it.”

Heaven Siren shook her head. “If Sera and I are right and the Scourged Saints are behind this, they won’t use the corrupted Hymnal to wreak havoc on my world. At least, not the kind we all assumed. They won’t turn *my* world into Hell. They will do it to Splinterpoint.”

As this news sank in, the only sound came from the soft squishing of the demonic, citrusy amoeba as it finally conquered its stationary prey.

“You know, I always figured the multiverse wanted to make my life Hell,” Nunzio observed offhandedly. “I just didn’t think that would ever be *literally* the case.”

Lolanna shot him a quelling look. “Who are these Scourged Saints? Are they demons?”

“Oh, no. They’re as Human as you and me,” Heaven Siren said with a sardonic smile. “With a Human hunger for power. They wanted the Hymnal’s knowledge for their own from the start. Claimed they were the Heavens’ true messengers. They were trying to expose the truth about demons and monsters to the rest of the world, to frighten people into turning to them for protection from evil. When my friends and I defeated them, we thought that was the end of them. They never resurfaced, anyway.”

Nunzio frowned. “But why do *they* want to make a Hell?”

“When it comes to matters of faith and moral living, the Scourged Saints always felt that the people needed... a stick, as well as a carrot,” Seraphina explained, ruffling herself in disapproval. “The Heavens themselves are merciful, but the Saints felt that such mercy was wasted on undeserving souls. Anyone they deemed to be guilty of not following their violent reinterpretation of the Heavenly Mandates would be tracked down and punished. Many died at their hands. But that was not the worst of it.”

Heaven Siren grimaced, eyes distant as she recalled the worst of it. “The Scourged Saints deliberately fed their victims’ souls to demons as the ultimate penalty. They claimed that was the *purpose* of demons. They believed that anyone whose supposed sins could not be ‘cleansed’ by suffering should die an immortal death.”

Nunzio pinched the bridge of his nose. He’d had it up to here with otherworldly theology lately. Between this mission and that radio-host reverend—

Who had extremely violent views on how to purge one’s sins. Who supported the use of soul-eating demons. Who’d shown up in Splinterpoint at the same time as the Sin Trinity. Who had *been* at the Mercurian Guild just hours before the Sin Trinity came to nosh on Blatt.

All Nunzio’s blood drained from his face and turned to ice in his veins.

“Nunzio? Are you all right?” Kol’daar asked.

He grimaced. “No. I’m a *massive* idiot. *Super* massive. We’re talking black hole levels of stupid, here.”

Kwiif spoke up, “If this is about the dart thing still, I don’t think anyone can blame you. You couldn’t have known it’d be a tracking device.”

“Even if you *really* should have considered something like that, given what you’ve been up to the last few days,” Zinchalte added loftily.

“*This* coming from the guy who stole the Hymnal in the first place,” Kol’daar muttered darkly. “And Nunzio was hardly in a state to notice at the time.”

Numbly, Nunzio shook his head. “No, this is worse than the dart thing. It’s been staring me in the face, but I just didn’t even *think*—Seraphina, Heaven Siren, have you heard of a man called Reverend Wadsworth?”

The shocked recognition in their eyes was proof enough. Nunzio made like an analog alarm clock and facepalmed with both hands.

“He was the mouthpiece of the Scourged Saints. His radio show was how they tried to recruit the public at large,” Heaven Siren informed them. “After we defeated the Saints, he vanished. I take it you’ve seen him here?”

“His broadcasts have been playing here in Splinterpoint,” Lolanna said, her own eye wide with the jolt of realization.

“More than that, he *lives* in our building,” Kol’daar added heavily. “Just like the Sin Trinity did. And he didn’t seem disturbed by them at the SpOC, not like everyone else.”

“Worse, I saw him while you guys were questioning Blatt. I even fucking said *hi* to the guy,” Nunzio admitted miserably. “I figured at the time that he was just scoping out guilds, or maybe trying to convert people. I forgot about it, later. There was so much else to worry about...” He shook his head. In hindsight, the encounter seemed less like meeting Pat Robertson at the grocery store than akin to running into Jim Jones in the Kool-Aid aisle and *not getting it*. “I just never made the connection.”

Heaven Siren touched down in front of him, dark eyes brimming with kindness. “We never *wanted* his ilk connected with our world, really. Don’t beat yourself up about it.”

Nunzio gave a humorless bark of laughter. “Hah, right. He didn’t manage to convert *me*. I’m not going to stick my head in an oven over it, but *jeez*.”

“But we now know who we’re fighting,” Lolanna concluded grimly.

He drew a deep breath and shoved the self-recriminations down to worry about later. If they failed, he’d have plenty of eternity to sit and stew over his complete lack of instincts over the course of this job.

“Okay,” he said, drawing himself up. “So what we know is that the demons want a free buffet, away from you meddling kids. The Scourged Saints, or at

least Reverend Wadsworth, want to set themselves as judge, jury, and executioner for your world, because fire and brimstone rhetoric counts for a whole lot more when the people threatening you can *actually* damn you. They'll have your whole world in their pocket."

"Yep, pretty much," Heaven Siren confirmed with a sharp nod.

"Why Splinterpoint, though?" Lolanna asked. "Couldn't they have found an unpopulated dimension to turn into Hell? That certainly would have been less risky for them."

Seraphina clacked her beak in thought. "Perhaps they *wanted* a populace, to appease the Sin Trinity until the Saints could start damning souls. And this Torth appears to have been living here for some time already. Perhaps he has a grudge against this city for reasons of his own."

Kol'daar shook his head. "Whatever his reason, without their pet demons, he and the Reverend will be weakened. If we're going to capitalize on that weakness, we need to move quickly."

Sakano pointed out the glowing, red 'EXIT' sign that was barely visible off ahead of them. As the subdued group resumed their trek, Nunzio stewed over the new revelations. At least he knew what was in store for Splinterpoint if they failed, but it seemed for every question they answered, five more popped up.

First off, *why* had the Reverend or any other Scourged Saints as yet undiscovered been tracking him? The obvious answer was so that they could find and destroy Heaven Siren and Seraphina, but that didn't fit. The Sin Trinity hadn't *planned* to attack Heaven Siren directly until their power was assured by the corrupted Hymnal. Why had they attacked anyway? Impatience? Were they under orders? From the conversation on the fire escape, they hadn't seemed to give Torth much authority. But the Reverend, armed with the twined holy and demonic magic of Maggie's world, had *he* been in charge of the Sin Trinity?

Even if that was the case, why force the confrontation? If sabotaging their group had been the goal, there had been plenty of other opportunities. Instead of awkwardly trying to pump Nunzio for information at the Mercurian HQ, Wadsworth could just have killed him then and there. Clearly *someone* had been at the bar, most likely tailing Zinchalte or perhaps keeping an eye on the Chateau. Whoever had darted Nunzio could just as easily have blown the three of them to smithereens while they were distracted and unsuspecting. That would have set Maggie and Seraphina back considerably.

Maybe this attack had been a delaying tactic. Though, it ought to be painfully obvious that this happy little team of world saviors was spinning their wheels and getting nowhere near uncovering the whereabouts of the Hymnal without outside setbacks.

Maybe Torth and Wadsworth were *trying* to get rid of their hateful, greedy, and traitorous demon-friends. But then who would rule the newly created Hell? This Torth character? Persons or demons unknown?

Speaking of greedy, traitorous friends, Zin planned aloud with a brisk clap of his hands. “So we get out of here and you all can... fix me up, and then we’ll go from there.”

That did seem to be the only option they had. Nunzio just hoped that Zin actually *knew* something. It was just as likely that Zin was merely using them to break his curse. As soon as he was enchantment-free, he’d whip out the diport and jump planes. Which made Nunzio think of *another* question.

He dragged himself out of his reverie to catch up to Kwiif. “That hole in space/time you shot at... whichever demon that was. Where did it go?”

He still didn’t care if the demon was alive or dead, but he hoped they hadn’t dropped one third of the Sin Trinity onto some unsuspecting world to decimate the populace.

Obviously following his train of thought, Kwiif paused in her slithering steps. “Um... I dunno, actually. Let me check the diport cannon.”

She hurriedly drew a long, fat, bazooka-like weapon with a slurping sound. She examined the settings and then wilted in obvious relief.

“Nowhere populated. It’s set for deep space in a minor iteration of Fifth Major Dimension. Are demons immune to hard vacuum, near-zero Kelvin, and astronomical radiation?”

“Yes.” Seraphina perched on top of Kwiif to conserve energy. Her shoulders hunched sinisterly as she went on. “But if it’s not populated, Avarice will become very weak indeed. Starving as she drifts for untold eons. Suffering. *Mwahaha.*”

“Are you feeling okay, Sera?” Kol’daar asked.

“Not at all.” The darkened dove slumped forlornly. “The sooner this is *all over* with, the *better*. *Mwahaha.*”

Chapter Twenty-One

At long last, they made it to the emergency exit. The door fell off when Sakano tried to open it. Beyond was the deep, dark bottom of a deep, dark hole in the ground. The narrow space was surrounded by vertical earthen walls, which held no signs of an exploded staircase, scaffolding, or even a fraying rope ladder.

“Where’s the exit in this exit?” Zin asked

Sakano cleared his throat awkwardly. “Ah, well, as I said, it *is* under repair—”

“You also said it wasn’t impassible,” Nunzio reminded him, exasperatedly. “How did you think we could get away from the Sin Trinity in this thing?”

“There wasn’t much time! And we *can* climb, I have tools—”

“And I’m no scientist, but I always thought that if you’re going to call something ‘structurally unsound,’ you need a *structure* first,” Heaven Siren added.

“All right! Fine! I *might* have overstated things! But it’s *this*, or we go back across the lab and try to climb up the elevator shaft.”

When he put it that way, everyone quieted their complaints. A quick search of the lab tables nearby revealed three mining helmets with lights on top and as many forearm-mounted cable-launchers.

“I’ll lead the expedition!” Sakano declared as he put one of the helmets on over his crazy-man hair. “I have spent the last few weeks determining stable handholds. I am eighty percent positive I can navigate safely to the surface.”

Considering the hole was a straight shot up to groundlevel, this was not a particularly strong endorsement of Sakano’s directional sense. What did the eminently capable Lolanna *see* in this guy, seriously?

“I think I’d just as soon fly up on my own.” Heaven Siren flapped her wings illustratively.

“All due respect, madam, but the passage isn’t wide enough to accommodate you,” Sakano said, oblivious to the unfortunate implications that made the girl bristle at him.

Seraphina perked up a bit. “Why don’t *I* fly up? I’m smaller than any of you *pitiful Humans*.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Sera,” Heaven Siren said worriedly. “You stay here with me.”

“Don’t look at me,” Kwiif said, though no one had until she said it. “I’m claustrophobic.”

“I could go,” Zin, an experienced scaler of walls, volunteered.

“No,” said everyone.

“I will go,” Kol’daar said, and no one argued. Kol’daar was the most physically fit out of any of them, and nimble besides, as Nunzio could attest. If anyone could make the climb, it would be the barbarian. He stowed his harp against his back and picked up a helmet.

One helmet left. It was nowhere near as cool as a fedora, but Nunzio put it on anyway. He was pretty wiped out from weathering the magical battle, but he wasn’t in danger of passing out from overuse just yet. He would rather be *doing* something than cooling his heels, anyway. He hadn’t managed much of anything useful on this mission yet. The least he could do, after leading the enemy right to them, would be to help get his team out of the lab and back on track.

Lolanna moved a little ways off to call HQ, via her implanted comm, and inform the Guildmasters of their plight, in the hopes of getting somebody to wait topside, or perhaps even assist in their extraction. Sakano tailed along behind to give the address and probably angle for a sappy good-bye, even though he was only going upstairs. He did like his big dramatic scenes.

Meanwhile, Heaven Siren, with Seraphina once again perched on her shoulder, sat gingerly on top of one of the overturned computers. She called Zin over to start once again trying to find the correct Keys to break his enchantment. Kwiif was already complaining to herself about lab cleanup and sifting through the debris to see what was and wasn’t salvageable.

Nunzio slipped on the silver, oblong cylinder of the cable-launcher. It was fairly lightweight despite its bulk, which took up most of his forearm. A quick tap to a recessed button on the interior lip by his elbow activated the self-adjusting fitting system. The thing gave a soft hiss as it molded to his forearm with its no-slip interior.

Kol’daar had come up to him to observe the process, which he then mimicked. He gave a pleased hum, clenching his hand around the control bar to test the fit.

“Nice and tight,” he murmured approvingly, for Nunzio’s ears only to avoid a scolding from Seraphina. “Just like I like it.”

Nunzio snorted, but he found himself too preoccupied with all the scattered pieces of the puzzle to come up with a witty retort. Instead, his eyes landed on the man’s wounded left arm, which looked a bit like raw hamburger and still bled sluggishly. Had to hurt like a sonuvabitch.

“You shouldn’t go climbing with *that*.” He dug around in his pockets for his regen-pills. When he found them, he handed them to Kol’daar and said gruffly, “One pill oughtta fix you up just fine.”

“Oh.” Kol’daar blinked then offered him a soft smile, something knowing in his eyes. Nunzio glared, but that just made Kol’daar’s smile widen as he said, “Thank you.”

He took the pill bottle with a rattle. Their fingers brushed. Between that and the smile, Nunzio fought the ridiculous urge to blush. He was *not* a teenaged girl, whatever Kwiif said. This was nothing by comparison to Zin’s groping.

Not to mention the Lap Incident or the Roof Incident. Hell, he probably had a bruise on his ass in the shape of the man’s hand already—never mind, he wasn’t going to think about any of that, either. While part of him might want to ask about the hair-petting, he wanted to let the whole matter drop more than he wanted to hear the answer.

“At least you got your hat and rappelling kit,” Kol’daar said as he popped one of the little white tablets.

He snorted again and knocked the hard yellow shell with his unencumbered hand. “Not exactly what I had in mind. But the cable-launcher looks like fun.”

“You have a weird idea of—*whoa*,” Kol’daar broke off with a grimace. He raised his left arm to stare at it, wide-eyed as the flesh knit itself together visibly. The wound closed over with pinkish scar tissue, which quickly smoothed beneath the layer of half-coagulated blood.

“That felt *weird*.” He flexed and examined his healed arm. “Really *itchy*. Not like magic healing at all.”

Nunzio half smiled. “Nope. These little babies just accelerate your body’s natural healing process. The wonders of modern medicine and all. You’ll probably get hungri—”

Right on cue, Kol’daar’s stomach growled. He looked mildly embarrassed. “I was pretty hungry to start with, actually.”

“You should have eaten some of the muffins when you had the chance. They weren’t half bad.”

“Uh, no thanks. They had *moving things* in them.”

So that *hadn’t* been his imagination. Kol’daar chuckled at his dismayed look and wiped the gore away to reveal that the new skin had grown in just a shade whiter than his already-pale complexion. Not a scar, but a patch that needed a bit of sun to blend back in.

“Huh, looks kinda like Delaware,” Nunzio said before he thought.

“What’s Delaware?”

“Oh, it’s the, um, land I come from.” He looked away from the weird healed patch. “Doesn’t matter. Never mind.”

“I think it matters.” Kol’daar leaned his hip against the lab table next to him, encroaching on Nunzio’s bubble. “What’s Delaware like?”

“Hah, boring compared to here.” His lips twitched into a wistful smile all on their own. “Boring compared to most anywhere, really. But it’s home, you know?”

“I do. My people are nomads, so I knew all of Hradica like the strings of my spiderharp. The Landsongs of the plains, the forests, the mountains, even the deserts and swamps... I miss them, even though it has not been long since I left them behind.”

“It doesn’t really matter how long you’re gone, if you think you might never see home again.” Nunzio carefully kept his eyes on the cable-launcher, familiarizing himself with the equipment. Or at least pretending to.

Kol’daar was quiet for a long moment and then said, “I’m sorry about your MOM exploding.”

How was *that* for a condolence greeting card slogan? He sighed and shook his head. “It probably was too good to be true, anyway. If the Sin Trinity hadn’t broken it, Sakano would have found a way. And if *he* hadn’t, there was no guarantee it would have *worked*. MOM’s always been a longshot.” He forced a smile. “Anyway, I’m used to disappointment at this point.”

For a beat, Kol’daar seemed as if he was about to say something deep and insightful, but then mischief sparked a smirk. “Of course you are; you used to date *Zinchalte*.”

The cheap shot startled him into laughing. Kol’daar joined in, too deep to be called a giggle. Something manlier; a chortle, maybe. Nunzio flicked a sidelong

glance at the guy, catching a glimpse of his grinning profile. He looked wild, with his short hair standing up at odd angles. His unshaven jaw and dirty, bruised, bare chest caught sharp, dangerous shadows in the intermittent flickering of the emergency lights.

Yeah, even beat up and exhausted, Kol'daar was still ridiculously hot.

Nunzio snorted and looked back down at his cable launcher and then thought how Kol'daar had had to watch him to figure out how to put it on. "So you haven't used a cable-launcher before?"

"No. How's it work?"

So Nunzio showed him. He pointed out the control bar that ran across the palm with its recessed buttons. The grapple consisted of three blunt, flexible fingers and three barbed spikes. Depending on which button was pressed to fire, these would respectively latch around or drive into whatever they struck.

"Once you've anchored the grapple, you just squeeze the control bar to reel yourself along. Pretty simple. This'll release the anchor and fully retract the cable so you can fire again."

"This, here?" Kol'daar tapped the wrong button.

"No, this here." Nunzio pointed it out on his own cable-launcher, but Kol'daar just found another wrong button. Losing patience, he unthinkingly yanked Kol'daar's fingers to the correct position and held them over the button. "*Here.*"

They were close enough that Nunzio heard the catch in the man's breath. He hastily let go, feeling his ears heat. All this *touching* just came as a bit of a shock; that was all. Since the Burrito Incident, he'd been avoiding physical contact with anyone. And it wasn't like he'd bothered making any real *friends* in Splinterpoint—what was the point, if he'd be leaving someday?—so he wasn't used to anyone getting close anymore. In more ways than one.

The way things were looking, he probably wouldn't get the opportunity again. If they couldn't find the Hymnal and stop Torth and the Reverend in the next few hours...

No, he wouldn't think about that. To date, he'd only ever failed one contract, and the reason was standing right here with him. They'd save the world. They *had* to.

Kol'daar cleared his throat and fiddled with the controls without depressing any of the buttons, just learning their layout. "Uh, thanks for the tips. But if I

have to release the anchor before I fire it again, doesn't that mean I'll be falling until it hits something?"

Nunzio rolled his eyes. "Oh, like *you* have a problem with some midair acrobatic bullshit, Mister X-d20."

"I just want to know in case I have to catch you again."

"Hey! I had to catch you, too, you know."

"You were already holding on to start with. Doesn't count."

Before Nunzio could offer the very mature rebuttal of *does so*, Sakano called to them from the emergency exit's door. "Gentlemen! Are you prepared to ascend?"

"Ready, Doctor!" Kol'daar replied for both of them.

They made their way over to the exit, switching their headlamps on as they went. Sakano waited for them, a somewhat dopey grin on his lips, which may or may not have been a bit swollen. Nunzio blinked at him and glanced over to where Lolanna stood impassively standing guard by Heaven Siren. She didn't look like someone who'd just been making out before the end of the world, but the color rose in her cheeks when she saw Nunzio's thumbs-up.

Kol'daar and Sakano disappeared into the hole. Before Nunzio could follow himself, he was waylaid by Zinchalte's hand on his shoulder. He stopped and half turned back, aiming his headlamp right at Zin's face. The thief grimaced and let go of him in favor of shading his eyes.

"You're a dick, Nunzio."

"Oh, I'm *sorry*, Lady Twinkerina. Can I help you?"

"Maybe," Zin replied, leaning against the warped doorframe and blocking the exit. He fluttered his eyelashes coyly. "But you won't even *try*."

Oh, Christ. "This *again*? Really, Zin? It won't work. How many times do we have to tell you? I can't break music-magic spells."

Zin flat out whined, "Seriously, c'moon. It won't *hurt*. It could save so much time! Hell, it doesn't even have to be a kiss." He ducked between Nunzio and the door and stuck out his tongue, pressing it flat against his lower lip to nudge the barbell higher. "Jutht touth iht."

"Come on, Nunzio! We're ready to go," Kol'daar's voice echoed off the hole's walls, and his beam shone right in Nunzio's eyes as he turned to look his way. Damn, those things really were pretty bright.

He none-too-gently shoved his way past Zin. “Quit wasting time, my lady. Get back to Heaven Siren; she’s the only one who can help you now.”

As soon as he stepped into the pit, Kol’daar’s light still half blinding him, an unfamiliar voice echoed distantly, “There he is! Get him!”

Blue-white light, unearthly and somehow *viscous*, poured down into the hole and scalded Nunzio’s retinas. It was accompanied by the sound of a hundred thousand vacuum cleaners revving their engines. Gravity changed directions. He found himself falling straight up. Kol’daar and Sakano cried out in bewildered alarm as they, too, were plucked forcibly off their feet and drawn inexorably upward toward the source of the light.

“Oh, what the *fuck?*” he shouted. He flipped upside down and fired his grapple blindly at the earthen floor.

He missed, of course. Instead of the solid *thunk* of the grapple striking earth, Nunzio dimly heard a high-pitched squeal. The grapple had struck *something*, at least.

He’d been squeezing the control bar as hard as he could to start with. As the cable reeled back into the launcher, Nunzio reclaimed enough of his vision from the spots dancing around his eyes to see Zinchalte’s alarmed visage careening toward him. The grapple had latched its gripping fingers around one of Zin’s arms, dragging him up and along for the ride. He supposed he should be glad he’d accidentally hit the wrong button on the controls, or Zin would have a shiny new wrist piercing to match the barbell through his tongue.

They collided with crushing force, reminding Nunzio of why he had never tried out for the football team. The impact drove them both farther up, above Kol’daar and Sakano, spinning them like a top, and then they plowed into the sheer wall. Nunzio took the brunt of it, wind rushing from his lungs and his head smacking hard against the packed earth at just the right angle to knock the helmet askew.

Pain rattled his brains. Dazed, he gasped for breath and tasted blood and dirt. He barely felt Zin steal the cable-launcher off his arm. Zin put it on with the admirable alacrity of long experience and fired. He kept hold of Nunzio with legs around his hips. The sharp jerk of the cable snapping taut against the pull of the light helped the mercenary get a better handle on the spinning in his head. He managed to orient himself just in time to see Kol’daar barreling up and smacking into the pair of them. As Kol’daar’s build was closer to that of a quarterback than Zin’s, this was even more reason to hate contact sports.

“Oww,” Nunzio groaned weakly.

Kol'daar fired his own cable-launcher, further anchoring them in place against the beam. The sound of Sakano doing likewise faintly reached them from farther up the shaft.

“The ground is unstable here!” the mad scientist warned. “We won't be able to hold out against the tractor beam for long!”

“Tell me something I don't know!” Zin shouted back, right in Nunzio's ear.

“If we alternate firing, we could try to work our way back down!” Kol'daar shouted into Nunzio's other ear.

“That won't work, you idiot! Our combined weight plus the pull from the beam is going to—”

The grapples blew out of the wall nearly simultaneously, and the three of them rocketed upward once again. They plowed into Sakano, who joined the airborne dogpile on Nunzio.

“There! That outcropping should be strong enough to hold us!” Sakano flailed at a large rock whose tip jutted out a foot or so from the wall, at what would be the twenty-yard line before they'd pass through the rapidly approaching opening at the top of the emergency escape.

The three cable-launchers fired, but the combined recoil sent them spinning again. Kol'daar's and Sakano's grapples missed the target by miles. Zin's struck home, though, and the Twink shouted with the force of all four of their bodies anchored by his slender shoulder joint. Nunzio's former cable-launcher started to emit a distressing high-pitched noise, oily-smelling smoke streaming out of either end.

“Let go!” Zin cried. “You're going to blow out the motor!”

Nunzio scowled at him. He rallied to snap with the querulous irascibility of a mild concussion, “*You're* the one holding on, you moron!”

Zin blinked at him and looked down to where his legs still had Nunzio's waist in a viselike grip. Everyone else was holding on to Nunzio directly, who hadn't had the presence of mind to latch on to anyone. The Twink looked back at his face, then up at the source of the blinding light, and then back to him. Zin gave a single nod, coming to some internal decision. Then he lunged forward, his blue tongue flicking out.

Nunzio turned his head by reflex, trying to jerk away, but only managed to knock helmets with Kol'daar and Sakano. Still, his quick action kept his mouth away from Zin's. It did not keep Zin's tongue from swiping messily up his stubbled cheek.

"Ugh, yuck," Nunzio groaned, but then sharp snap of shattered magic hit him like a suckerpunch. He gasped and tried to recoil farther—and succeeded this time, because Zin finally released his hold.

Zin caroled, "Thaaank yooooo! I owe you one, Nunzio!"

As the three-man knot went flying up once again, Nunzio shouted the only thing of which he was certain. "IIII haaate yoooouu!"

Kol'daar and Sakano both desperately fired their grapples. Kol'daar's shot only skimmed unstable earth to no avail, but Sakano's struck something solid. He jerked to a halt, but couldn't keep a grip on Kol'daar. The mad scientist cried out, straining to catch them even as the two of them soared out of reach.

The next thing Nunzio knew, they shot out the mouth of the exit and into the open air. There was a gap between tall, unlit structures, which blurred murkily as they were drawn into the night and toward a petite, sporty metallic flying saucer hovering near to the ground.

The tractor beam's loud sucking sound reached a peak as they reached a small, circular aperture in the bottom of the saucer. It wasn't built for two grown men to pass through at once; they jammed in it, with a sound like a golf ball clogging the hose of a Shop-Vac. They came to an abrupt halt, squeezed tight against each other and the thick edges of the saucer's hull.

Unabated, the intense pull of the tractor beam threatened to rip the fillings out of Nunzio's molars. And then suddenly the light dimmed; the sound fell from deafening to faint white noise. Without the light blinding him, Nunzio peered around the circular cargo hold, but the spots dancing in his eyes, from either concussion or the retinal burns, kept him from making out much.

"We got him, Hell-Sire," someone said. "No sign of the demons, though."

"Excellent," said a throaty, growling voice. "Subjugate these damned souls."

Zzzot. Behind him, Kol'daar went limp. Boots came into Nunzio's field of vision. He had just enough time to look up past the barrel of a stun-ray to see a large, round, green being staring dispassionately down at him.

“Look, Torth. Two hats with asses attached,” Gsk sneered.

“Hey!” Nunzio said, blinking stupidly through the slick of blood that was dripping down from his hairline. Things were taking shape in his muddled head—far too slowly, because before he could grasp the significant thing there came a loud—

Zzzot.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Far away, someone was playing their stereo way too loud. The screaming of a guitar—or maybe a pipe organ?—hummed down to his bones, and the rough, guttural roar of death-metal vocals punctuated the awful song with unintelligible, inarticulate rage.

Nunzio could relate. His head fucking *hurt*, and the concert wasn't helping. On top of that, someone was shaking his shoulders. This merely served to wedge the ice picks behind his eyes deeper, needling his frontal lobe like the tools of an inept and deranged tattoo artist. He groaned and swatted at the offending hands.

“Stoppit, 'M try'na sleep,” he said, winching his eyelids tight as if that would help. He definitely didn't plan on opening them. He could sleep for *eons*; he was so tired. Kinda sick, too, and he had the spins something awful.

The hands let go, but before Nunzio could sigh in relief fingers seized his chin, ruthlessly smooching his lips open. Another hand pressed little, dry, bitter things into his mouth. He sputtered, but the hand clapped over his lips before he could spit them out.

“Swallow,” a familiar baritone voice commanded as he squirmed. “For Ancestors' sake, just take your medicine.”

Left with little choice, Nunzio swallowed the pills. The hands let go again, then one of them threaded fingers in his hair. It didn't pet so much as find the swollen contusion on the side of his head. The prodding sent more sharp, shooting pains through his skull, but after a few moments the familiar itching, burning sensation of regeneration replaced the feeling of knives driving through his skull.

“*Christ*,” he said, raising his own hands to scrub his face. It was crusty with dirt, dried blood, and scratchy with a day's worth of beard.

“Someday, you will have to tell me what that word you keep saying means.” The fingers prodded the shrinking lump on his noggin and tangled in blood-matted hair. “Are you feeling better yet?”

“Yes,” he admitted with ill grace. The distant death-metal music stopped, which helped ease the lingering headache. He chanced opening his eyes.

The first thing he saw was Kol'daar's face, bent over him and lined with grim concern. Nunzio blinked blearily as he registered the familiar feel of the

man's leather-clad thigh beneath his head. Well, there were worse ways to wake up, but that didn't mean he wanted to get used to this.

"I think you're developing some bad habits, Kol'daar," he said without heat.

This drew a wan smile to the man's lips. "I'm not the one who insists on falling all over the place and passing out."

Nunzio rolled his eyes. "Nuh-uh. I was going the wrong direction for *falling*. Doesn't count. And I ain't the only one who's got knocked out a few times. You okay?"

"I'm fine." The grim look returned to Kol'daar's face. "I don't know where we are, or what they want from us. But they haven't killed us yet, so there's that."

Grimacing, Nunzio looked around. The two of them were stuck in a small square room maybe three meters across, clearly a cell of some kind. Kol'daar sat in the middle of the red, oddly warm, strangely giving floor with Nunzio sprawled crookedly next to him. The cell's walls were the cloudy color of pus and glistened in the red-tinged light that slipped through the translucent substance from whatever lay beyond.

On top of that, the walls were breathing.

"Am I hallucinating again?"

"Is this about the walls breathing?"

"Okay, so that's a no. Great, that's just *peachy*." He looked back to Kol'daar and asked aloud before he thought to rein in his sarcasm, "More Hradical comradely cuddles?"

"Uh." Kol'daar withdrew his hand from Nunzio's hair, his face pink—which clearly was an effect of the bizarre lighting. He cleared his throat. "Well. See, uh. There's no room. And, um, you were wounded."

"Right," Nunzio agreed hurriedly.

He wasn't wounded anymore, either, so he sat up fast enough to make his head swim. He took stock of himself and his companion; they'd been stripped of weapons, from the cable-launchers to Kol'daar's harp. They'd taken Nunzio's coat, too, the bastards. He frowned. Wait.

"How'd you get my regen-pills?"

"You gave them to me and forgot to take them back. I put them in my belt pouch before we left."

“Right. Uh. Good thinking.” He coughed and rubbed at the crust of blood on his face, grimacing at the memory of their capture. The concussion couldn’t have been that bad, because he didn’t feel like he was forgetting anything. He ought to be grateful for that, but he could only feel a depressing kind of resigned confusion. “It was a trap, wasn’t it?”

Kol’daar nodded. “I don’t know how they found the lab’s emergency exit, but if they’d been tracking us since the bar, there would have been time for them to scout the area above ground. The Sin Trinity flushed us out like hunting dogs scaring up game.”

“Not *us*.” Nunzio shook his head slowly as a few more puzzle pieces slipped into place. “They didn’t spring the trap until *I* got into the emergency exit. The guy who stunned us in the saucer was the dude that darted *me* at the bar. I bet they either planted Zin there or followed him, because they were after *me*.”

“Why?” Kol’daar asked, his brow furrowing.

A very good question. Come to think of it, Reverend Wadsworth *had* seemed a bit eager to know more about him. About his *thing* with magic. If Zin had been informing them—willingly or not didn’t matter at this point—it was quite probable they knew everything there was to know about Nunzio and his destructive ability. Did they think they could recruit him to help demolish the world? Even then, it seemed like they had the situation too well in hand to need his kind of expertise.

“Don’t know. Don’t care, either,” he lied, standing with a grunt. It was a moot point, because he didn’t plan on sticking around long enough to find out. “Best not waste time speculating. They did us a favor by bringing us to their base, though. All we need to do is break out of here and find the Hymnal. And it just so happens that breaking things is my specialty.”

He turned to face the breathing wall. The material of the wall reminded him uncomfortably of the surgical videos they’d made him sit through in health class, some kind of spongy, soft-tissue shot through with fine pink and red veins beneath a viscous layer of clear goop. Gross. Apparently the new Hell was going to be done in shades of 80s-horror-flick practical special effects.

He cracked his knuckles and reached out, already concentrating on his hands, letting his power seep to the surface. Just before he could make contact with the wall, Kol’daar intercepted his fingers, saying, “Wait!”

In the same instant, they both let out shocked gasps, and immediately he slammed his control back in place. He jerked away, already shouting, “Fuck! You *idiot!* Are you all right?”

The man’s hands showed the pink-red of freshly grown scars where callouses had capped his fingers—and if Kol’daar hadn’t still had the regen-pill from earlier in his system, there might not have *been* fingers.

Nunzio’s stomach dropped into his boots. The breath in his lungs lodged there, stuck by the presence of his heart in his throat.

Kol’daar looked from Nunzio to his hands and back and then said unevenly, “Y-yes, I’m fine—”

The liar. “You’re *not!* I was about to—I could’ve—”

He’d been so *careful*, so damn careful not to let his disability get out of control, to *never* touch anyone when he let loose the disintegrate-on-contact aspect of it. He’d never even seen its effects on a living body before; he’d never wanted to see it. Even when fighting for his own life, he hadn’t wanted to know what it would look like, *feel* like to obliterate someone with his bare hands. Besides that, he couldn’t be sure that blowing somebody’s limbs off wouldn’t kill them from shock or blood loss or, hell, if maybe some of his targets belonged to weirdo species that kept vital organs in extremities.

Of fucking *course* it would happen to Kol’daar, the first guy in ages he had started—however unwillingly, however goddamn *pointlessly*—to actually *like*. The Roof Incident had been tempting fate. This was merely Murphy’s Law underscoring itself as the only multiversal constant that mattered in Nunzio’s life.

He didn’t notice how badly he was shaking until Kol’daar caught his hands in both of his larger ones. Nunzio flinched badly and tried to pull away again, snarling, “Let go!”

But Kol’daar held on. He stepped into Nunzio’s space to catch his eyes with a resolutely calm gaze. “Nunzio, listen to me. I am fine. On my honor as a Songweaver, I swear it. You d—”

“Dammit, let *go!*” He ripped his hands free at last. The force of the gesture sent him staggering back a step, arms going out to catch his balance. In the process, his elbow grazed the wall of the cell. “Ow!”

When he moved to clap his hand over the harsh, searing pain, Kol’daar once again seized it midreach. “Don’t! It’s some kind of acid. You don’t want to spread it around.”

Nunzio wanted to punch something. Acid *really* hurt. He settled for grinding his teeth and hissing, “Fffffuck!”

“I *did* try to warn you.” Kol’daar grimaced, at once reproachful and sympathetic. “I didn’t want you finding out the hard way.”

“Shut up.”

“Do you need another regen-pill?”

“*Seriously*, shut up.”

Wisely, Kol’daar obeyed. After a few moments, the acid spun itself out. The regen-pills in his system fought it every step of the way, and finally they won the battle. The patch on the back of his elbow sealed itself. He resisted the urge to twist around to try to see the scar; at this point it hardly mattered how many scars he had, or how bad they looked. If he turned into Freddy Krueger, maybe it would help him keep sexy, friendly, and dumber-than-a-box-of-rocks barbarian princes from getting carelessly close.

Nunzio heaved a fraught sigh, pain-tense muscles relaxing. He jammed his unwieldy turmoil to the back of his mind. Kol’daar had been right about one thing; this was no time to freak out. They had to get out of here, find the Hymnal, and stop the world from ending. He withdrew his hand from Kol’daar’s grip more smoothly this time, though there was still a hint of resistance.

“Okay. So.” He wiped the sweat from his face wearily, turning back to the breathing wall without meeting Kol’daar’s eyes. “Breaking the wall isn’t going to work. The floor, though... Hmm.”

He pressed his hands to the floor. It felt a bit like raw meat that had been left out long enough to take the first step on its path to jerky-hood, but it twitched lightly under his palms. *Gross*.

He shot Kol’daar a warning glare over his shoulder. “Don’t touch me this time.”

Kol’daar gave a frustrated huff but held up his barely healed hands in surrender. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Nunzio pressed his lips flat and looked away. He took a steadying breath and slowly let the power filter through his control.

Nothing happened. The floor-jerky didn’t peel away or turn to dust. In fact, it was an awful lot like the nonreaction he’d gotten when he’d tried to break

Blatt's spell. He scowled. If this living cell was music-magic... Well, that would only make sense, he supposed, but he didn't have to like it.

But there was the matter of him breaking Zin's curse. He wasn't *sure* he had, he supposed. He'd been out of it, and everything had happened pretty fast. It had certainly *felt* like a broken spell. Zin had seemed to think it was broken; he'd even put himself in Nunzio's debt in front of witnesses. Perhaps it had been normal magic that had somehow fooled both Maggie and Kol'daar's Hearing? That sense did seem to get a bit muddled here in Splinterpoint.

Nunzio didn't know what to think at this point. Christ, he was tired of all this magic he didn't understand. One thing he did know was that, unlike with Blatt or Zinchalte, he could go all out this time. So he did, channeling the full strength of his disability down his arms and into his palms.

The rolled-up sleeves of his shirt turned to powder. He wrinkled his nose against a sneeze.

The floor remained unscathed. He punched it with both fists. "*Goddammit!*"

He sat back on the floor, which twitched again beneath him. Ugh. He was even more exhausted now than before; he'd forgotten how using the disintegration touch wore him out. He pinched the bridge of his nose. Kol'daar sat next to him, but he didn't say anything.

Grudgingly, Nunzio asked after a moment, "Kol'daar, does this cell have a music-magic spell on it?"

"I don't know." The uncertain response made Nunzio turn to spear the man with another glare. Kol'daar, having received the brunt of Nunzio's glares all day, was even more immune now than he had been to start with, which was saying something. The man just seemed tired and oddly thoughtful as he went on, "There's a lot of... *really* awful Dissonance in the Orphic Noise here. It's hard to pick anything out above it."

"So you can't Hear anything but... magical feedback?"

"Well, I Heard one thing," Kol'daar said hesitantly, his expression oddly cagey. His eyes flickered over Nunzio's face and then away again. "I Heard it today once already, and I've been Listening for it ever since."

"Huh. Do you think it's some kind of clue to what's going on here?"

"In a way, perhaps." A wistful smile curved the edges of his lips.

"What did it sound like?"

“It was a bit offbeat, a little broken, but also, somehow, brave. And unexpectedly sweet. And beautiful, really, but so very... *lonely*.”

“That’s some weird music,” Nunzio said dubiously. “Where’d you Hear it?”

Kol’daar watched Nunzio closely, his gaze gentle. “First, today on the roof, when I, ah, had you pinned. And then again, when I stopped you from trying to break the wall down.”

Nunzio’s eyes widened, his insides flipping like the floor had dropped away. He swallowed hard and said, “You—What do you mean?”

“I think it was you, Nunzio. I think it was your Heartsong. All this time, it’s bothered me that you didn’t have one—”

“Well, *excuse* me for not—”

“No, I didn’t mean—It’s just, you’re not undead. You *should* have one; everyone does, even the demons. Theirs is made of Dissonance rather than Orphic Noise, but still they have one. Skroinx had one. *Zinhalte* has one, if you can believe it. But it seemed so... unfair that someone like you didn’t.”

“Someone like me,” Nunzio repeated uncertainly.

Kol’daar’s smile broadened as he gave a single nod. “Yes. Someone a little offbeat, a little broken, but also very brave.” As Nunzio scoffed and tried to look away, the man reached out and stalled him with a hand on his shoulder. “And the way you look out for people without even thinking twice. Maggie’s pure heart, my shoulder, the orientation class. You warned me about making rash promises, even when you would have benefited from taking advantage. Considering you didn’t even like me at the time, I’d say that’s unexpectedly sweet.”

Nunzio’s jaw worked for a second before he found something to say. “Who says I like you now?”

Kol’daar snorted with the disbelief that question deserved and raised a brow at him. “You might want everyone to think you’re some sarcastic loner, but you’ve got a soft heart.”

In the small confines of the cell, Kol’daar took up too much space. As much as Nunzio wanted to shake off the hand on his shoulder, to turn his back and pretend to be thinking of escape plans, he found himself returning Kol’daar’s contemplative regard as if hypnotized. The barbarian was just too good at doing that, drawing his attention and refusing to let it—him—go. Like he didn’t *want*

to let Nunzio go. And maybe, if close-talking was all he could get from Kol'daar, he'd take it.

"I'm also petty and vengeful, remember?" Nunzio strove for levity, but his voice had gone a bit odd, deeper and rougher around the edges. He swallowed. "Don't try to make me sound like I'm some kind of saint just because I have some basic Human decency."

"No, you're not a saint," Kol'daar agreed good-humoredly. The smile furled into something else, a look more knowing, but no less warm. "But you are beautiful, anyway."

The hand on Nunzio's shoulder skimmed up his neck, drawing a line of heat behind it before it cupped his stubbly cheek. His breath caught in his throat, all too aware of Kol'daar's gaze dropping to Nunzio's mouth and the rapidly increasing proximity as the man moved in for the kill.

Well, no, Kol'daar moved in for a kiss, but with Nunzio it was tantamount to the same thing, anyway.

Nunzio wrenched away with a gasp, pushing Kol'daar back with a hand against his chest—Christ, the feel of those solid pecs and the hard heartbeat beneath them really didn't help with his willpower in the slightest. He snatched his hand back as soon as the other man stilled.

"Kol'daar, I..." He swallowed, took a shaky breath, and tried again. "I can't. Do you have a death wish? Haven't you been paying attention all day? Hell, *five minutes* ago? You should know by now that I—That if I... get... *distracted* and lose control—"

The last word cracked, and he looked away, humiliated and miserable. Now he understood the reason he had worked so hard to keep his flimsy shield of denial about how attracted he really was to the man, and how obviously mutual the attraction was. It hadn't been because he'd wanted to hold on to his stupid grudge. No, he'd kept his head in the sand because it was just so much easier to believe that he hadn't *wanted* a chance, that there hadn't *been* a chance in the first place, than to have that chance taken away by his disability.

He had to hand it to Torth and Reverend Wadsworth, though. If Hell wasn't being stuck with a hot, willing dude in a tiny, private cell with no means of escape, while at the same time you *knew* if you ever gave in to the obvious basic urges, you'd murder the object of your affection, Nunzio didn't know what was.

“Wanting to be with you is not the same thing as a death wish,” Kol’daar told him quietly.

Nunzio choked on a half-hysterical laugh; how was *that* for sweet talk? “Maybe not, but it’d have the same end result.”

The barbarian sighed and leaned back. In a different tone, he declared, “This is that faithless bastard Zinchalte’s fault.”

Nunzio blinked then frowned. “Zin had nothing to do with the burrito that cursed me, so I don’t see how—”

“No, not your curse,” Kol’daar interrupted. “I mean your fear of it. Whatever he was to you, you... *cared* for him. Then you were cursed, and he became scared of you. When he rejected you because of that fear, he more than hurt you; he made you scared of yourself.”

Oh, awesome. Hell was rehashing your last breakup and getting an amateur psychological profile from the willing, untouchable hot guy. The end of the world was sounding better and better, if only to end this particular kind of torment.

“You told me that when this thing manifested, you wiped out all the magic and tech in a whole section of the city,” Kol’daar went on. “If it’s that powerful, don’t you think that if there was a chance you could kill someone with your ability, it would have happened then?”

“No one was in physical contact with me at the time, so that doesn’t count,” Nunzio snapped. He ran his hands through his hair. “Look, trust me on this. I didn’t need *Zin* freaking out to get scared of this curse. I literally spent a week afterward destroying anything I touched. I couldn’t even eat *food*. I couldn’t wear clothes. I had to keep moving or the ground I was standing on would turn into a fucking *crater*. If I don’t have a little corner of my mind concentrating on controlling it, the same damn thing happens *now*—in case you didn’t realize that when you almost lost your damn *hands*.”

“See, that’s what I mean. I *didn’t* almost lose my hands when I stopped you from touching the wall.”

Nunzio finally looked at him, incredulous and bewildered. “What are you *talking* about? I saw the scars, all right? You oughtta be counting your lucky stars that you still had enough of the regen-pill’s effects in you that you healed up before—”

“I got these burns when *I* tried to break through the wall, before you woke up.” Kol’daar spoke loudly over him and held up his hands to show the whitish,

smooth skin of his healing hands. “The only thing that happened when I touched you was that I Heard your Heartsong. Your power had no effect. You didn’t hurt me.”

This revelation bounced around Nunzio’s brain, refusing to absorb any deeper. It didn’t make any sense in his established paradigm.

“*Wha-a-at?*” he managed after a long moment of gaping.

“You didn’t hurt me,” Kol’daar repeated firmly. When he lowered his hands, he reached out to cover Nunzio’s where they were fisted against his jean-clad thighs and squeezed reassuringly. “I tried to tell you, but you were too upset to let me say anything.”

“*What?*”

Kol’daar’s gave him a somewhat self-conscious look as he explained, “I’ve been thinking about this. What if we were wrong about your power? We thought it was the music-magic, when you couldn’t take the spell off of Blatt. But now you can’t break this cell, this *living* prison. You were really trying, too, but nothing happened to it. And when *I* interrupted you, nothing happened to me.”

Nunzio’s brain finally kicked back in, kicked into *overdrive*, really. “So you’re saying... my curse, my power doesn’t work on—”

“Living things,” Kol’daar finished with a single nod.

The theory did explain a whole lot more than the idea that music-magic was as immune to him as he was to it; he’d never quite wrapped his brain around that particular double standard. It would also explain how he could break Zin’s curse, since the locus for the spell wasn’t Zin himself but the tongue piercing. And in hindsight, he probably should have at least *tried* to break it a little earlier, and then maybe he and Kol’daar wouldn’t be in this mess.

It also made him realize, to his endless chagrin, that his long, self-inflicted dry spell had been *completely unnecessary*.

“Haven’t you ever tried to use your power on anyone directly before?” Nunzio dumbly shook his head, which drew a disbelieving huff from the man. “Anyone else in your position, with your job, facing the dangers you face, they’d probably have tested that out pretty quickly. But you did just the opposite. You really are—”

“A total idiot!” Nunzio burst out.

“Well, I was going to say softhearted, but that too.” When Nunzio glared, Kol’daar just grinned and squeezed Nunzio’s hands again to soften the blow. “I think the way you control your power makes your Heartsong almost silent. When you’re not using it, I can’t Hear anything, and even when you *were* using it just now, I had to touch you before I could.”

“Can you hear me now?” he asked, then winced internally at the way he made himself sound like a cell phone with crappy coverage.

“No, I can’t. You’re controlling it, right?” Nunzio nodded, and then Kol’daar suddenly smirked slyly, watching Nunzio with half-lidded eyes. “Does that mean that, back on the roof, I made you... lose control?”

Direct hit. Nunzio’s face heated immediately. He pulled his hands out of Kol’daar’s in order to cross his arms. “You’re asking the wrong questions, man. I’m more interested in this goddamn cell.”

The barbarian’s brow furrowed. “The cell?”

“Dude, we *just* figured out that I can’t destroy living things. *I* didn’t know. Zinhalte, if he was their source of information about me, didn’t know. So how did Torth and the Reverend know to put me in a cell made of living tissue, the one thing I can’t break? How did *they* know more about my curse than I did?”

Chapter Twenty-Three

With that unsettling question still hanging in the air, the far wall of the cell parted with a wet sound, like a mouth opening. Gross.

Both mercenaries leapt to their feet as a being stood in the narrow opening. A handful of eyestalks sprouted up from the top of its bulbous, hairy body, which was clad in a black leather and silver-studded ensemble that wouldn't have looked out of place on an extra in *The Road Warrior*. Five spiderlike arms surrounded it in radial symmetry, and it walked on five more similar limbs. Each of the upper set aimed a gun at them. Laser blasters, to be specific; apparently their captors had foregone stunners in favor of direct threat.

Nunzio cocked his head, mentally overlaying a white cloak over the figure. "Sibling Verity. Fancy meeting you here. Does your guild know you've converted? Or would that make you an oathbreaker?"

Sibling Verity didn't speak, merely took a step back and gestured with the weapons, indicating that they were to leave the cell. The no-funny-business was assumed, of course. Kol'daar and Nunzio exchanged glances and shuffled out into a dimly lit hall.

Well, not a hall, but a *hall*, vast, windowless, with a vaulted ceiling, crumbling Gothic arches, and bloodstains of various colors spattering the walls. This was all badly illuminated by smoking torches in sconces made from the leering skulls of different species on spikes. Batlike things with red glowing eyes ominously rustled their leathery wings in the rafters.

Intimidating at first glance, but also kind of chintzy what with the glow-in-the-dark green cobwebs coating everything, and the smell of fresh paint and plaster instead of blood and death. Squinting, he made out lines on the skull-torches from where the decorators forgot to file down the seams from whatever mold had cast the replica bones. Even the bat-things were fake, he realized as he saw the strings that bobbed them up and down.

Apparently, Hell was being unwillingly cast in a Rob Zombie music video.

Another being waited beyond the door. It was Gsk, equipped with his own pair of blasters and similarly wearing black leather, though his had small iron spikes instead of studs. He grinned unpleasantly when they filed out, Sibling Verity at their backs. Nunzio didn't know if his species was supposed to be a heavy-set bunch, but the way the grin gave him a baker's dozen of rolls on his

neck was definitely unappealing from a Human perspective. He looked like a fat, hairless Grinch Who Stole Ozzfest.

“Hold still now, boys,” Gsk said. “Verity there has itchy trigger-digits. You don’t want to startle her. Hands behind your backs.”

They obeyed, as there wasn’t much choice in the matter. Gsk put away his weapons and drew a pair of shackles from his leather jacket’s interior pocket, then circled around to put them on Kol’daar. The barbarian held his head high and proud, not flinching when the asshat tightened the shackles with a gleefully malicious jerk.

Nunzio half hoped for shackles, but of course their guards were prepared. He couldn’t see what exactly it was that Gsk used to bind his arms from elbow to wrist, but it was furry, warm, and pulsed softly as it tightened around his limbs. When he tested the living rope, it purred and tightened further with surprising strength.

“Ugh, *gross*.” Fuzzy handcuffs were forever ruined for him.

“Silence! Now, march to your perdition! The Hell-Sire commands your presence!”

“This Hell-Sire is Torth?” Kol’daar asked as Verity none-too-gently prodded their backs with her blasters to get them moving.

“Silence! You are unworthy of even speaking his wicked name!”

Their escorts shoved them through the imitation den of iniquity, which stretched out for quite a ways. Several times they passed branching halls, which weren’t finished yet. Workers labored in these offshoots, balanced on scaffolding and wearing painting overalls on top of their black leather outfits as they splashed buckets of bloodlike colors over the walls. They had radios, all of which blared Reverend Wadsworth’s sermons.

—And so you see how flippancy is an affront to Heaven. There is redemption from the crime of blasphemous mockery, but those who don’t staple their sinful lips shut, those who don’t chew glass shards to cut the sin from their tongues, those who don’t pull their sinful teeth with the pliers of righteousness, their souls will be the food of demons in the lowest pits of Hell!”

More of the same dreck from the Reverend. Nunzio had heard it before, so some of the shock value had worn off. Kol’daar, however, had a pretty priceless look of what-the-fuck on his face. Understandable, as the rhetoric *was* pretty excessive, even for Splinterpoint. Typically, the violent religions reserved that

kind of torment for people who *refused* to repent and then sent them to whatever hell anyway.

“How did this Reverend come from the same world as *Maggie*?” Kol’ daar whispered to him.

“Worlds are big places, and they’re full of crazy asshats,” Nunzio replied, shrugging as best he could. He eyed Gsk and asked loudly, “If you guys are supposed to be, like, hellspawn or something, why are you listening to this crap? Irony’s sake?”

“The Hell-Sire commands it, for it is *Metaaaalllll!*” Gsk roared the last word gutturally from the back of his throat, and then threw one hand up in the air. His seven fingers contorted to extend index and pinky fingers, curling the rest against his palm.

“*Soooo Metaaaalllll!*” echoed the workers in kind. Some of them dropped their buckets of paint to return the gesture as best they could, depending on their available digits.

Kol’ daar looked completely mystified by this declaration. “But it’s not metal, it’s a sermon.”

“It’s slang,” Nunzio tried to explain. “It’s kind of a mentality, I guess, and a kind of music. Both of which are kind of lame when taken to extremes.”

“Blasphemer! We will eat your soul first!” Gsk cried. Verity flailed a couple arms at him, and he scowled at her. “Well, the Hell-Sire will, anyway.”

“But you aren’t even *demons*,” Kol’ daar said, looking and sounding more confused than ever. “I can Hear you, you know, and your Heartsongs aren’t Dissonant enou—”

“Silence!” Gsk fired a warning shot with one blaster. The beam of light fried part of the ceiling. A mechanical bat-thing fell in a shower of ashen debris. The workers started yelling and making obscene gestures at the guard for damaging their hard work. “That goes for you, too! Get back to work; the End is Nigh!”

Grumbling, the workers turned up their horrible radio show; the Reverend’s vitriolic rants and imaginative punishments for sinners echoing followed the mercenaries and their guards for quite a long time. The more Nunzio listened, the more he could understand why a metalhead cult would support Wadsworth. These guys seemed to be the just about the same demographic that bands like Cannibal Corpse played to back home, only limited to the nutcases who

actually *wanted* a dead Human collection—a goal they shared with the good Reverend, apparently.

Back on Earth, the religious zealots and metal fanatics were nearly completely separate factions, almost natural enemies. If this was what happened when the two joined forces, it was better that way. If he ever got back home, the chance of which was looking slimmer and slimmer every minute, he'd start his own crusade against Christian Rock in all its forms.

At last, they reached an enormous set of doors, badly inlaid with a bas-relief depiction of a gruesome orgy of violence and depravity—or maybe a Gwar concert, Nunzio wasn't sure. Gsk pressed his hand to the controls beside the doors, and they swung open with an ominous creak. Verity shoved the two Humans into the gaping maw of darkness beyond.

“On your knees, maggots!” Gsk commanded, but he didn't join Verity in kicking their legs out from under them as the doors closed.

All was darkness and silence for long moments. Then, with the loud clank of a thrown switch, bloodred spotlights on the ceiling flared alight, circling the floor around them dramatically.

“Tremble, ye damnéd worms!” Gsk's voice announced through a loudspeaker. “Grovel, ye unworthy wretches before your Sovereign Sinner in all his terrible glory! Here he is, the Eternal Enemy, the Scourge of Souls, the Tortured Prince of Darkness himself!”

“Ozzy?” Nunzio asked sarcastically, even though no one present would get the joke. Verity responded by prodding his back meaningfully with a few blasters.

The lights fixed upon a tall dais at the end of the large room. It held a throne made of faux-bones surrounded by enormous amp speakers. The throne's occupant was the orange dude from the bar. He still looked like a rejected version of a *Cats* character, though his face had a more half-transformed werewolf look to it in this lighting. His black leather trench coat was adorned with a handful of huge, curved spikes on either shoulder.

These gleamed sinisterly as he sprawled across the throne with his legs kicked up over one femur-shaped armrest. In his lap, he cradled an instrument of some kind. It resembled nothing so much as an unreasonably embellished, purple, double-necked keytar. At the foot of the throne rested Nunzio's and Kol'daar's equipment all in a pile, apparently offered up as spoils of war.

“Hail Torth, Hell-Sire!”

Torth leapt to his feet and struck several of the keys with his black-clawed fingertips, the amps released a raucous chord that sounded like a cross between a pipe organ and a screaming Stratocaster. Fireworks exploded a shower of purple and red sparks at the base of the dais.

Which promptly caught fire.

“Shit!” Gsk said, followed by earsplitting feedback as the unseen mic bounced noisily to the ground.

A moment later, the house lights went up, bathing the dilapidated, barren concert hall in stark white light. Gsk appeared from a side door with a fire extinguisher and began spraying white foam onto the rapidly spreading flames while Torth glared.

“Dude, seriously, what the fuck?” he growled hoarsely, setting the butt of his keytar down on the dais with unimpressed authority. From a pocket in his coat, he pulled out a piece of hard candy and began sucking on it. “You totally ruined my entrance. You said this shit was flame-retardant.”

“It was! The paint can *said* inflammable!” Gsk said and started coughing on the harsh smoke.

Nunzio and Kol’daar exchanged incredulous looks. It did not do Nunzio’s already-suffering pride any favors to know that these chuckleheads had actually outsmarted them.

Torth’s face twisted into a pained grimace. “*How* did *you* make Lackey First Class? Should I call the Henchmen’s Guild and check your references?”

“Sorry, Hell-Sire, sir.”

“Silence!” Torth snarled ferociously, his eyes shining red in a way that even the harsh lights could not justify. Gsk shut up. “You’re demoted from Devil’s Advocate to Personal Assistant. Just get the fuck upstairs and make sure the fanatics have enough whips and chains.”

Gsk bowed and groveled his way out by a side door. Torth glared after him for a moment and then called over his shoulder, “Reverend, you missed your cue!”

“I did no such thing,” drawled the familiar, sanctimonious tones of Reverend Wadsworth as he stepped out from behind the throne. He adjusted his broad-brimmed hat with one white-gloved hand. “I never agreed to your grandiose theatrics in the first place. I was merely waiting for you to get to the point.”

“So are we,” Kol’daar spoke up, his head held high, back unbowed, and his eyes glinting like blades.

Torth whirled back to face his captives, lifting his keytar once more to descend the stairs. Wadsworth matched step with Torth. The pair of them approached the wide, empty concert hall at the steady pace preferred by the serial killer in a slasher flick, while Torth sneered, “So eager to begin your eternal torment. Stupid mortal, know that I hold your very soul in my hands.”

“No, you don’t,” Kol’daar insisted, tilting his head. “You’re not a demon either.”

“Not yet,” Wadsworth allowed. “But once we extract your soul, and he consumes it, he will be.”

“Sounds like a neat trick,” Nunzio spoke up, refusing to let the threat get to him. “Is that something you got from the Heavenly Hymnal?”

“You mean the *Hymnal of the Damned*.” Torth said the words in an impressively phlegmy death-metal roar. “I completed its corruption while you fools languished in my dungeon.”

Nunzio’s guts knotted with dread. He sought Kol’daar’s eyes and saw the same utter dismay reflected there. They were too late, then. But Hell didn’t seem to have descended just yet; so what were they waiting for?

He looked to Wadsworth, who had a pained set to his beady eyes. “You want *this* guy in charge of Hell? *Seriously*? You brought your own demons with you just to sell them out in favor of heavy-metal Macavity, here?”

“They weren’t fuckin’ Metal at all,” Torth muttered as he and the preacher halted a few yards in front of the kneeling captives. “What kind of demons eat *cake*? Unless it was made of raw flesh and the sorrow of raped virgins, what would be the point?”

“I did not sell them out,” Wadsworth said haughtily. “Torth warned them of the dangers posed by the spell to make them undetectable to Heaven Siren. I can only assume from their notable lateness in returning here that your heretical witch defeated them—no doubt a result of their own single-mindedness regarding the girl. I *did* tell them to do no more than drive you out of your cozy little hiding place.”

Nunzio pretended to cough and then said clearly, “Bullshit.”

“You didn’t trust actual demons at your back,” Kol’daar surmised. “No doubt you assumed they would have murdered you and eaten your soul as soon as the Hymnal was corrupted.”

“What makes you think your furry friend is going to be any different, once he gets a taste of soul food?”

“Since the first time I heard his sermons leaking through the multiverse and into my radio, I have known that this Human has the most *brutal*, most *Metal* soul,” Torth snarled and popped another hard candy down the hatch. “I had to spread the word, so I got my friends in the Communications Guild to get his show in syndication.”

“And so you started a literal cult following for this guy,” Nunzio said. He eyed the hairy dude’s unscarred body. “Doesn’t look like you’re a very true believer yourself. When was the last time you took the branding iron of atonement to your face?”

“You misunderstand, filth. There is no atonement for me and my kind. I am the *Other* to his *Might*. There cannot be *Night* without *Day*. *I will be the Scourge, and he will be the Saint!*”

“Rather more than a saint,” Reverend Wadsworth said coldly.

“Yeah, but I was kinda on a roll, man, like, I was doin’ a thing—”

“What do you mean, more than a saint?” Nunzio interrupted.

“I don’t suppose that heathen Heaven Siren has tried to tell you anything about Heaven at all,” the preacher said, clucking his tongue in condescending disapproval. “Our Heaven has no protector, you see. No gatekeeper. No god to keep the souls of the blessed safe from interlopers or undeserving filth that would seek to contaminate that holy place. But with the Hymnal’s power, I will be fully prepared to take up the mantle of godhood, for the good of my world and my people.”

Nunzio heard Kol’daar’s sharp intake of breath, but to be honest, he himself wasn’t that surprised. It made sense that a man this blatantly insane would have a god complex.

He sucked his teeth noisily and shook his head. “There’s a song-spell in the Hymnal for that? That’s all it takes? Sing a little song, do a little twirly dance, and you get supreme omnipotence over a whole dimension?”

“The Hymnal contains many useful song-spells,” Wadsworth said, giving his hollow, humorless smile. “There isn’t one for you, specifically, Nunzio, but we’ll make do.”

The gleam in the man’s eyes was one Nunzio recognized. It wasn’t a holy look at all, but one of madness and desperate greed. Nunzio had learned to fear

that look, as it lurked in the eyes of frenzied Black Friday shoppers just before the latest hyped-up gizmo sold out, when the mall where he'd worked was about to become a free-for-all war zone. Now he had even more reason to fear that look, because *he* was said hyped-up gizmo.

"I don't know what you think I have to offer," he said as he felt beads of sweat forming on his brow. "I won't convert."

"You don't need to," Wadsworth reassured him, the effect of which was the exact opposite. "Your soul won't survive, anyway."

"What are you going to do to him?" Kol'daar demanded harshly, making to rise to his feet.

Verity, still lurking behind them, clipped his head with the butt of one of her blasters. The blow didn't seem to deter him in and of itself—another facet of his d20 awesomeness, perhaps—but it served to remind him that they were still outnumbered and outgunned. He sank back down, his face a stoically furious mask.

"I found out many interesting things about you from your talkative little thief friend," the Reverend said, ignoring Kol'daar in order to circle around Nunzio with slow, intimidating steps. Nunzio kept his face forward and his back straight, refusing to let the tactic unnerve him. "And on top of that, I had already had... difficulty placing your abilities. So I sent Torth and his minion to find out more... about you. There is nothing about your soul that my Damnation Dart and its scourge particles couldn't find out, after all."

That part didn't jive with what he knew about the nano-compound Kwiif had found in his blood. Then he remembered that Maggie had been in the middle of her explanation when they'd been sidetracked by the fact that the dart functioned as a tracking device. She had said "*and also,*" hadn't she? Before Zin interrupted, before the attack derailed that train of thought entirely.

Scowling, he said, "So your nanotech—"

"My Damnation Dart's scourge particles are not *nanotech*. Their secret lies in the vibrations of the *soul*. They're perfectly neutral magically, the better to absorb the psychic record of a sinner's Song of Life. This they transmit to me, turning that sinner's darkest corners into a beacon," Wadsworth said smugly as he completed his pointless little circuit. He drew out his gold pocket watch, snapping it open and smiling tightly. "I understand more about your ability than you do, I'm sure. And I know how to take it from you, and make it mine."

Nunzio's mind raced with this declaration. He'd known they had the dirt on his curse, somehow, but the idea that they'd want to take it from him entirely hadn't occurred. He'd almost jump at the chance, except for the whole soul-destroying technique the Reverend seemed to favor for that purpose. But why would he want—

"Immunity to magic," he gasped, realization dawning in a flash. "That's why you paid Blatt with the invincibility spell, you were testing it out. That's why you were so interested in following up on him after the Mercurians got him. You wanted to see if the spell was really unbreakable, if Blatt really was invincible. When he wasn't, and you happened to find me instead—"

"Yes, that was a bit of a godsend," Wadsworth said, snorting at his own pun. "Heaven works in mysterious ways. Not even the song-spell to ascend to godhood is without drawbacks. But if magic ceases to work on me, I will truly be immortal and invincible. And though your ability is fully integrated into your soul, there is one way to extract it."

"You can't... eat my soul," Nunzio hazarded, because he really had no idea if that was the case. "You'd... become a demon, or something."

"Yes, there is that. But haven't you noticed how exhausting it is to use your power to its fullest? Haven't you ever wondered why that is?"

Nunzio *had* wondered, but like many parts of his curse, he had not explored the question. He was starting to get why that had been a mistake on his part.

But the preacher was making one as well, literally as they spoke.

It seemed certain now that he had in fact broken Zin's curse. He had to hope that Zin hadn't run home, packed his bags, and diported himself to an out-of-the-way dimension. He had to hope that the self-serving bastard had gone back down to tell Maggie, Lolanna, and the others exactly what was going on—if he even *knew* and hadn't just been stringing them along in order to get them to break his curse.

He had no idea how long he and Kol'daar had been unconscious, or how long it would take Zin to spill the beans, or how long it would take for help to arrive. But if he could keep this whack job talking about his grandiose plans, there'd be more time for the cavalry to come rushing in. Or at least, more time to delay the inevitable.

He enacted his stalling plan with the brilliant question, "Why don't you tell me?"

Wadsworth waved one gloved hand dismissively but snapped up the bait. “The ability feeds off your life energy, to put it simply. The Song of Life that sustains you also grants power to the spell. Ideally, it works symbiotically; your energies recuperate with time and conservation. But if used too much, too quickly, with no time to recover, the Song fades out. But your spell will linger, bolstered by your death. We simply need to wear you down. Any music-magic spell in your vicinity ought to do the trick nicely.”

“Huh,” Nunzio managed weakly. He thought about all the magic he’d already weathered today, and all the energy he must have expended trying fruitlessly to escape from the living prison. He’d unwittingly made Wadsworth’s plan that much more attainable. Shit. “The more you know.”

“Once I have ascended to the throne of Heaven, Torth will do likewise to truly become the Hell-Sire. At that point, if you haven’t died, you will have a front-row seat to watch your friend’s soul ripped apart.” The preacher grinned at the thought. “A fitting end for a pair of irredeemable homosexuals such as yourselves. You’ll serve as the first example of what becomes of those who defy the Holy Edicts.”

“As you watch each other suffer, you will become ripe with mortal pain,” Torth added with relish. He eyed Kol’ daar and licked his chops. “Sweet agony will season your very soul.”

Wadsworth clicked his watch shut and nodded at Torth. “I’d say it’s about time we got started, don’t you?”

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Wait!” Nunzio cried. He couldn’t believe that this windbag was finished already. Weren’t supervillains supposed to talk your ear off with the monologues and the crazy laughter? Maybe he was getting them confused with mad scientists. “Why do you need to take *my* curse, if you know so much about it? Why don’t you just do the spell on yourself?”

“This is faster,” was the succinct reply.

“I bet you can’t,” Nunzio taunted, a shot in the dark. When Wadsworth’s smug look faltered, he felt a sudden glee at hitting his mark. “You *can’t*, can you? You can’t do magic at all. *That’s* why you disappeared after Heaven Siren took out your first cult. You were just the mouthpiece all along. That trinket you have there is the only thing magic about you, and that’s only to keep track of your scourge particles.”

“Silence, you disgusting degenerate,” the preacher hissed, his pudgy face going taut with anger.

Nunzio went on, because he was worse than damned, anyway. “Shit, I bet you wouldn’t even *be* here in Splinterpoint if it wasn’t for your furry fanboy over there. Lucky the Communications Guild loves syndication, or he wouldn’t even know you exist. *He* brought you here. *He’s* the one who corrupted the Hymnal for you. *He’s* the one who’ll make you a god. Hey, Torth, don’t you think the division of labor around here is unfair versus the rewards? You give him a whole world and a seat in Heaven, and what do you get out of it, huh?”

“I get to *raise Hell*,” Torth replied with a satisfied look. “As soon as we’re through with you two, I will reign supreme over my own army of demons.”

Okay, maybe Nunzio should have guessed that one. Time to start pleading then. “If you need me for my ability, that’s one thing. You don’t need Kol’daar. You have that cult full of henchmen out there. I bet they’d line up for the chance to be on the menu, I mean, how metal would that be? Let him go.”

“Fuck no,” Torth said. “The sacrificial soul must be unwilling in order for me to descend into darkness.”

“You realize that once you do that, you won’t be able to use your music-magic,” Kol’daar pointed out impassively. “You’ll be a demon, unable to influence the Orphic Noise.”

“But I will have Dissonance,” Torth said, grinning as his eyes flared red. “Which is *sooo Metaaalllllll*.”

“Enough!” Reverend Wadsworth roared, eyes blazing madly, every inch the furious zealot. “Ready the Hymnal, Torth, and we will each ascend our thrones before the sun sets this day.”

“Verity, take this filth to the stage,” the self-proclaimed Hell-Sire commanded. He spun on his heel and followed the preacher back across the concert hall.

Ever obedient and mute, their spidery guard hustled them to their feet and up to the low steps of the dais. The pile of Nunzio’s coat and weapons and Kol’daar’s harp lay tantalizingly nearby, but Verity halted them at the base of the steps with a few meaningful jabs from her weapons. Torth took the steps two at a time, seizing a remote he had apparently left on the seat of the throne of fake bones. He fiddled with the buttons, and two tall, narrow objects rose from trapdoors in the floor. One was an iron pillar with a chain dangling at about waist height. The other was a full-grown tree, dripping with some kind of parasitic vine, in an enormous pot.

“What, did you run out of special effects? No more giant, hideous flesh-walls left at the corner store?” Nunzio griped as Verity chained Kol’daar’s shackles to the post with two arms, holding three guns on him.

“Do you *ever* stop blathering pointlessly?” Reverend Wadsworth asked irritably.

“Nope. Certainly not when surrounded by asshats who want to kill me. You wouldn’t begrudge a man his last words, would you, Preach?”

“You have far too many of them.”

As Verity turned back to Nunzio and began to bind him with the vines, Torth hit another button on the remote. Another, larger trapdoor opened on the stage itself in front of the throne. From it rose a steel platform. In the center, a fire of green and black flames blazed beneath an altar that looked like it really *was* made of things that used to be parts of living beings, and not just bones. Parts of it pulsed, others breathed, and on one of the legs, an eye the size of a dinner plate opened up and blinked at him.

“*Gross*,” he said with feeling.

Upon this Franken-table rested an enormous leather-bound book with aged, yellowed pages.

“Behold the Hymnal of the Damned!” Torth growled throatily.

It looked more like a decrepit unabridged dictionary Nunzio’s high school library had chained to the reference desk than a Heavenly Hymnal, much less one that was completely corrupted by now. He didn’t expect it to look so... mundane. Shouldn’t it have, like, a face, or teeth sprouting along the edges of the cover, or even black miasma surrounding it by now? Though, upon seeing it, he could understand why Maggie had opted not to lug it around in her backpack in the first place. The thing had to be forty pounds or more.

It was undeniably magic, though, and powerful enough that Nunzio could feel the pressure of it on his skin, even at this distance. Uneasily, he wondered if merely standing in its presence would drain his soul-energy, or whatever. He’d been hired to destroy it; but if his talent *did* have limits, then would he even be able to?

Well, he’d never know unless he tried. Hell, it was possible that even if he *did* try, he might not live to see the end result, either way. If he could get free somehow and rush the stage...

Torth chucked the remote over his shoulder and readied his keytar. He growled something that might pass for singing in a world populated solely by sentient, bronchitis-infested lungs. Apparently, that still counted as music-magic, because Nunzio felt the quick brush of power that accompanied the sound. The Hymnal opened without being touched, pages arcing by flip-book quick, until Torth gave another unmusical grunt, and they stopped, opened to the necessary page.

Reverend Wadsworth strode briskly to stand between the steps and the altar, directly in front of the Hymnal. He straightened his long black coat and grumbled to Torth, “Get rid of your minion. None are worthy to witness my transformation.”

“Verity, my Sister in Suffering, you have done well. You are hereby promoted to Devil’s Advocate. Go make sure that moron Gsk hasn’t set fire to the upstairs.” Torth raised his hand with a rock-fist salute.

Verity curled three arms close and raised the other two on opposite sides, bowing low before she shuffled out the same side exit Gsk had also used.

“And turn off the house lights!” Torth shouted as an afterthought.

The overhead lights went out, and suddenly they were back in the metal business. The red spotlights and eerie flickers of green and shadow from the

fire cast the entire scene in a sinister mood befitting the end of the world. Torth struck the opening chords on his keytar. The amps, easily as tall as the tree, surged to deafening life.

Nunzio's whole skeleton rattled, but worse was the magic that accompanied the raucous wall of sound. This power wasn't gentle and uplifting like Heaven Siren's, though it was every bit as powerful. It slammed into him on all sides, stinging worse than the Sin Trinity's Dissonance attack. He shuddered against the hateful, oily feel of it against his... everything, really.

Reverend Wadsworth, with his fingers stuck firmly in his ears beneath the brim of his hat, levitated up off the stage, hovering in the air above the Hymnal as the soon-to-be-Hell-Sire began to bellow and roar his phlegmy death-metal vocals. The words were completely unintelligible, but it hardly mattered. From the white blaze that started up in the preacher's eyes, it was working. There was no Wadsworth, only Zuul.

At this point, it occurred to him that the world was really, really going to end. He'd failed. He was going to die, his friends were going to die, the whole dimension was going to be a Hellscape ruled by an idiot metalhead-cum-demon, and Wadsworth would damn countless innocents to eternal torture if they refused to close their hands in a waffle iron for taking his name in vain.

Nunzio should have let Kol'daar kiss him. He should have done a lot, really, but he'd had his other regrets for long enough that this one stood out, fresh and sad in the front of his mind.

He turned his head toward Kol'daar and then wished he hadn't. The poor guy drooped from his chain, his legs having collapsed under him, and his mouth opened in a scream Nunzio couldn't hear over the cacophony.

Except, then he *could*. And it wasn't a scream. The Hradical warrior... No, the *Songweaver* was singing—or maybe that was Singing.

Kol'daar opened his pain-tight eyes, focusing his dagger gaze on Torth and the Hymnal, his baritone voice rising to unnatural volume and hitting a note that clashed a bright counterpoint against Torth's deep, dark growl. The inharmonious sounds thickened the air, eldritch lightning crawling up the steps of the dais. Torth's red-gleaming eyes widened in shock, and he rounded on Kol'daar with fury etched on his face.

Even if it meant that it drained Nunzio further, he found the familiar humming of Kol'daar's magic soothing. He didn't know why Kol'daar had waited till literally the *last fucking minute* to do it, but he supposed that was the

whole point of a secret weapon. His Singing seemed to be interfering with Torth's song-spell. Wadsworth lost some altitude, the blaze of light in his eyes dimmed.

Torth bellowed louder, his fingers furiously working both sets of keys. Wadsworth shot back aloft, higher than before. The magic closed like a grasping fist around Nunzio, and for a minute, he couldn't even breathe from the force of it.

Kol'daar slammed backward, his head knocking into the iron pillar, and his voice cut off. Nunzio's heart lurched painfully in his chest. He screamed Kol'daar's name but couldn't hear himself, only knew it happened by the rawness in his throat. Torth celebrated the victory with a hip-swivel and an extra-phlegmy vocal flourish—

Which ended prematurely in an abrupt, hissing croak.

Nunzio tore his eyes from Kol'daar's limp body to stare as Torth began to hack and cough. His Playing faltered. The magical pressure began to evaporate, and Wadsworth dipped again, his sensible black loafers skimming the pages of the Hymnal—which snapped shut on them.

The crunch of pulverized bones resounded over the dying chords of the song-spell. Wadsworth screamed, an animal sound devoid of godliness. A bloody stain spread through the clenched pages of the book with horrific speed, seeping out through the leather of the cover in tendrils, which thickened into veins and buried themselves into the altar.

The whole thing bucked and twitched, shaking itself like a wet dog. The book opened again. Wadsworth dropped straight down, disappearing into the pages as if they were the open gullet of a slaving beast. His scream cut off abruptly when the cover closed once more.

Its pages ruffled as if in a quick breeze, the stationery equivalent of a burp.

Torth's shocked eyes lost their red shine as he gaped at the monstrosity. He spoke, but his voice had given out, the toll taken by thirty-six death-metal solo concerts in six days, plus however many other song-spells he'd worked in between corruption rituals. The throaty rumble had turned into a barely audible raspy squeak.

“Oh, fuck—”

The Hymnal-beast rushed him, its misbegotten legs thundering across the stage. The Hymnal stretched out from the table, the connective veins thickening

into the bare muscular tissue of a long, sinuous neck. Torth Played a couple chords, but whatever song-spell he'd been trying to craft dissolved into earsplitting feedback when the maw of the book bit through both the keytar and his arms.

Nunzio turned away from the gruesome feast that followed, though he knew that the sickening wet slap of the Hymnal-beast's savage pages and Torth's last dying gasp of, "So... *Metaaallll*," would haunt him to his grave.

Instead he looked to Kol'daar, who was groggily coming around. In a voice a couple octaves higher than his usual range, Nunzio said, "Jesusfuckingchristwakeup! Kol'daar, *wake up!*"

Kol'daar slumped forward, neck bowed low over his chest. Then he raised bleary eyes that blinked at Nunzio, one lid slower than the other.

"What. Did you. *Do?*" Nunzio demanded.

"Uhn?" Kol'daar blinked again, his eyes slowly focusing on point to the left of Nunzio's face, and then blowing wide open. "Nn!"

Nunzio didn't look. He belatedly noticed the oppressive feel of the Hymnal's magic against his skin. The hairs rose on the back of his neck and dread coiled with horrible certainty in his guts, because he knew, *knew* with the conviction of a true believer what he would see if he turned his head.

A papery rustle gusted a puff of air against his cheek, smelling of blood and a library's basement. The creature that bound his arms quivered in terror, then suddenly went limp and fell away, either dead, unconscious, or fleeing from the atrocity breathing down Nunzio's neck.

He closed his eyes, grimacing. Well, he'd pretty much resigned himself to dying already. At least this way, there wouldn't be an apocalypse. Probably. Maybe. He didn't even know anymore. And since the Hymnal had somehow come to heinous life, he doubted his curse would have any effect on it, either.

Then the roof caved in.

Thankfully, it didn't cave in over the stage area, but farther back behind them. Nunzio recognized the sound; he'd been the cause of quite a few demolished buildings since becoming a bounty hunter, much to his Guild's chagrin. The Hymnal-beast stopped sniffing him or whatever it was doing to make a sudden mad dash toward the disturbance. By the time he opened his eyes, all he could see was a cloud of dust.

“Torth of the Mages’ Guild and Reverend Wadsworth, defend yourselves!” echoed a very by-the-book declaration of challenge in a very familiar, incredibly welcome voice of Lolanna Solang.

“Nuuuunziiioooo!” singsonged Zinchalte. “You better not be dead already, ’cause I brought the cavalry! This makes us even!”

“Holy shit, what the *fuck* is that?” Kwiifelchilingush shouted even as she opened fire.

Nunzio unlocked his fear-frozen muscles. With his arms free from the fuzzy constrictor, he had a surprising amount of wiggle room in the vines. He squirmed frantically, managing to get an arm free. He gritted his teeth against the stiffness of his shoulders from the prolonged position and began peeling away at the sturdy, woody vines.

“It’s the Hymnal Animato! *Mwahaha!*” crowed Seraphina gleefully. “*You’re too late!*”

“*Heavens, help us!*” sang a perfectly harmonized female quartet.

Oh, no. Not this again. And somehow, Heaven Siren had gotten *backup singers*.

The Heavenly chorus kicked in. Time stopped. If he’d thought that Torth’s concert or Heaven Siren’s solo Miracle Modulation came with a breathtaking amount of magic, this was something else entirely. Even though he wasn’t literally frozen like everything else, he felt like he was moving through molasses from the sheer force of the humming across his entire being. It wasn’t just physical anymore; the vibrations of the music-magic shook him down to... well, his very soul.

He’d been a bit drained before, and certainly he’d have felt the exhaustion kick in after Torth’s and Kol’daar’s impromptu duet, if absolute terror hadn’t distracted him. Now, with the piercingly sweet feeling of pure divine magic coursing around him, through him, he felt light-headed and kind of sick.

The familiar hangover that came with overextending his ability settled in his bones like leaden grafts. Now that he knew the cause and repercussions thereof, it took on a new level of inconvenience. If slowly siphoning his life force could be considered merely inconvenient.

But the Hymnal-beast, the Hymnal Animato... It was still running around out there, or would be when time kicked back in for everyone else. Who the fuck knew what it wanted, or was supposed to do, or how any of them were supposed to defeat it. Maggie’s warning of how easy it was to get unintended

consequences from a botched Hymnal spell couldn't be more appropriate. He doubted anyone would have intended *that* thing to happen.

And Kol'daar was still chained up and wounded, a sitting duck if the monstrous mobile book decided the newcomers were too much of a hassle and turned around to seek easier prey.

He forced his fatigued limbs back into motion, dragging himself out of his vine cocoon. His legs wobbled beneath him, but he staggered up the low steps to the stage. The green and black flames of the unmoving fire cast enough light that he could just make out the pile of their confiscated items through the cloud of immobile dust.

He could also make out a huge bloody mess between him and it. Shades of the Tomb Raid flashed behind his eyes.

No. No, Torth wasn't some unsuspecting schmuck. This mess couldn't have happened to a more deserving asshole.

Nunzio wouldn't let his team end up the same way. Not this time. He wouldn't let Kol'daar end up a chunky stain on the ground. He swallowed bile and didn't look down at the slippery lumps he had to walk over to get to the throne. Numb fingers closed around the hoop of the spiderharp. He'd have to bend over to grab his coat, and he wasn't that certain of his balance at this point. Fuck it; it was probably covered in bits of Torth anyway. He'd worry about it later.

The soundtrack for the twirly dance faded out, and time rushed back to normal. Nunzio sighed in relief and tipped his body back around unsteadily. The room took a while to catch up.

He caught his first glimpse of the battleground. About a third of the roof had collapsed at the far end of the concert hall, letting natural light spill down in shafts through the settling dust. Lolanna had her swords drawn, finishing her paused leap from the hole in the ceiling to land on top of the pile of rubble. Kwiif dangled from bared support beams, her many limbs bristling and blazing with Sakano's arsenal. Zin was nowhere to be seen—not surprising in the least; Zin was a thief, not a mercenary. He'd probably taken one look at the Hymnal Animato and headed for the nearest exit.

Heaven Siren soared above the destruction, wings spread wide. Three more teen angels soared behind her in a lopsided V formation. It was hard to tell for sure through the dust, but they appeared color-coded. Beneath them, the magic-birthed miscreation that used to be Maggie's extracurricular homework reared

up on two legs to snap its furious folios at them, impervious to Kwiif's steady barrage.

"Bellicoso Blessing!"

"Almighty Aria!"

"Celestial Crescendo!"

"Sacred Sortita!"

The pitched battle didn't seem to have any more effect on the Hymnal than Kwiif's attacks, but the music-magic wore on Nunzio like a cheese grater. Suddenly, everything seemed to have a red wash to it, and his eyes stung. He ended up tripping on his way down the steps, face-planting at Kol'daar's feet.

"Owww," he groaned.

"Shh," said Kol'daar. "M' hed hurz."

"Me too." Nunzio dragged himself to his knees. He scrubbed at his eyes with the back of his arm, but that didn't help, just got red on his arm.

He'd landed on top of the spiderharp, but after squinting through the red, it didn't appear to have been damaged. He set it aside before he could break it and then crawled up to Kol'daar's side. After a long, clumsy moment of awkward fumbling, he found the regen-pills in the man's belt pouch. After more fumbling, he shook a few out into his palm. He dropped the bottle in order to pry Kol'daar's mouth open, and he practically stuffed the pills down the guy's throat.

He felt like he should make some kind of comment about how the tables had turned, but the words wouldn't line up right on his tongue, so he didn't say anything.

Behind them, the fight raged on. The womenfolk held their own against the beast, but they didn't seem to be making any headway in actually harming it. Maggie's Angels kept up their magical attacks, the song-spells flowing into each other and making Nunzio's eyelids droop more and more, even as Kol'daar's eyes slowly regained lucidity.

"Nunzio? What—What's going on? What happened to the Reverend? Torth?"

"Dunno wha's goin' on anymore, man," Nunzio said with a shrug. He felt kind of weird. Hollow, like his voice was echoing up from somewhere foreign to his body. Or maybe like his body was foreign to himself. He struggled to

recall the question, struggled harder to recall the answer. “You Sang at ’em, ’n’ the Hymnal ate ’em. Now it’s alive, ’n’ we’re fucked.”

Kol’daar peered at him, deep lines of worry forming on his forehead and around his mouth. “What happened to *you*?”

Nunzio blinked at him muzzily. His face felt wet. Wet from far away, if that was a thing. “I broughtcha yer harp. See?”

When he turned to point at it, he ended up overbalancing. His face crashed into Kol’daar’s shoulder, which twitched with an aborted motion. Oh, right. Kol’daar was still tied up. He couldn’t play his harp with both hands tied behind his back. Oh, wait, he could *so*.

Nunzio sniggered. “Hendrix-style.”

But no, that wouldn’t work. He reached for Kol’daar’s bound hands, but the man kept trying to shake him off and he couldn’t find the shackles.

“Don’t! Your Heartsong is so faint, you can’t—”

“*Immaculate Omaggio!*”

“*Divine Dolcissimo!*”

Black surged in his vision, overwhelming the red for a long, still moment.

“—zio! *Nunzio!*”

Breath flowed into Nunzio’s lungs, and he coughed raggedly and sat up. He didn’t remember lying down. Stupid thing to do; there was a fight on.

“Yep,” he said, turning to sound of his name. “Here.”

Kol’daar looked positively distraught. “Nunzio, take a regen-pill. They’re right beside you. I don’t know if they’ll do any good, but... For Ancestors’ sake, take one. Please.”

Nunzio rolled his stinging eyes. “Fine, *Mom*. Jeez. Freak out, why don’tcha.”

It took some doing to find the pills and get one from the bottle to his mouth, but Kol’daar coached him through it, the giant, bossy, sexy jerk. He swallowed the pill and tried to remember what he’d been doing.

Oh, yeah, he’d been leaning on Kol’daar’s arm. Good idea. His head *thunked* against the reassuringly solid shoulder, and he sighed. That was better. There was something else though. Something important.

“Hey, Kol’daar. Izzit still th’ end of th’ world?”

“Yes,” someone else said before Kol’daar could answer.

Nunzio blinked his eyes open, squinting to see through the thickening red darkness. Kol’daar had drawn his knees up, half-curved toward Nunzio, and perched on one leather-clad joint was a solid-black bird with a bloodred tail shaped like a heart.

“They can’t destroy the Hymnal Animato,” Seraphina croaked. “It will consume the world.”

“Huh. Shit sucks,” Nunzio slurred.

“So there’s nothing we can do?” Kol’daar asked, not sounding much better off than Seraphina. Nunzio lolled his head to look up at his face, not surprised to see tears cutting murky tracks on his dirty cheeks.

“Nothing *we* can do,” Seraphina said, but she cocked her head at Nunzio. Her large, red eye gleamed at him challengingly. “*You* can do something about it, though.”

Kol’daar went rigid. Nunzio wished he wouldn’t; he wasn’t nearly as comfy that way.

“Whaddaya wan’ me t’ do?” His tongue moved thickly in his mouth. He didn’t think the regen-pill was doing any good, to be honest, but he didn’t say anything. Kol’daar was already pretty upset. No need to make him freak out more.

“Hold out your hand,” she commanded quietly.

Dimly, he was aware of magic flying thickly around him, but all he could see was Seraphina and her big, sad eye. He held out his hand, braced against Kol’daar’s chest. Kol’daar let out a choked sound, his shoulders and chest shaking. And he called *Nunzio* softhearted.

“Hey, don’t cry, Kol’daar,” Nunzio reassured him earnestly. “S all right. I’m gonna save th’ world.”

The dove fluttered up from Kol’daar’s knee to land in Nunzio’s open palm. It was the first time she’d landed on him, he realized dimly. She’d even perched on *Kwiif*, but not him. She felt kind of heavy. Maybe about forty pounds or so.

“Thank you,” she cooed, a relieved, aching sound. “I’m sorry.”

Then she dissolved with an agonizing snap, and she took the whole world with her.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Things were weird here. Splinterpoint.

There was magic and horror and science and wonder and monsters that gave you muffins. There were girls with voices like an angelic choir and women with swords like lightning. There was a guttural roar in a blood-soaked tomb and a buzzing voice on the radio. There were mad scientists with crazy hair and thieves with slinky walks and alligators who fixed the plumbing. There were cults and guilds and labs and castles made of candy that was filled with razor blades and the good drugs.

There was a man with a slow, sly smirk and laugh-lined eyes. And there was a lot of falling, falling and *falling*, but the man kept catching him. Hands in his hair. On his shoulder. Plucking the strands of a spider's web.

There was an ancient book that spread its pages and soared on white, gleaming wings into an endless sky that kept changing colors.

There was someone talking to him, sometimes, a baritone voice, and he could almost hear the words.

Nunzio blinked lazily at the ceiling and then realized he was awake. Then realized he was not dead. Then realized it wasn't his ceiling.

His head felt like it weighed a million pounds as he turned it against an unfamiliar pillow.

The unfamiliar room was a hospital room. He could tell by the smell, not the décor, which was far friendlier than the hospital he'd stayed in back home when he'd had to get his appendix out. The bedspread was a forest green and made of a flimsy fabric that held heat like a down quilt, beneath which he found he wore a plain white hospital gown. The walls were taupe and terracotta colored, embedded with viewscreens showing panoramas of mountains. A table sat next to the door, with a pitcher of water and a stack of glasses. Two chairs that might be as comfy as they looked sat on either side of the bed he lay in, but only one was occupied.

Maggie dozed, chin propped on her fist on the armrest. She appeared unharmed and wore a dun-colored shift that had Lolanna's utilitarian taste written all over it, but she retained her many bracelets and necklaces. From the

shadows under her eyes, it seemed like she needed the rest, so Nunzio kept quiet and watched the fake windows.

He remembered... pretty much everything, he thought.

Some of it made more sense now that he wasn't dying by inches every time someone opened their mouths to sing. He remembered bleeding from his *eyes*, which was just messed up. No wonder Kol'daar had been so freaked out. He also remembered that he'd failed to bust Kol'daar out of his chains, too, and then cuddled up to the guy instead. *That* probably freaked him out even more, what with the hungry, hungry Hymnal on a rampage behind them, and Nunzio acting like they were on their first date.

He remembered Seraphina. The weight of her in his hand, the dry, scaly bird feet, the willing, almost joyful way she destroyed herself simply by touching him.

Someone should have *told* him that 'Guardian of the Heavenly Hymnal' meant that she was some kind of sentient magical construct. It was pretty obvious the whole time that she'd been affected by the Hymnal's corruption, but Nunzio wasn't a magic-user. He'd figured she was just some kind of magic bird in some kind of psychic sympathy with the book. He hadn't thought that she was a bird *made* of magic.

If the Hymnal Animato meant what he thought it did, what it had *looked* like it meant, that the Hymnal had become a living thing in and of itself, then Seraphina had been its only weak point. He'd done exactly what she and Maggie had hired him to do. He'd used his ability to destroy the Hymnal, when nothing else would.

She *had* been alive, though. Not biologically, not in a way that would have protected her from his curse. But alive, just the same. She'd been a person, a living, sentient being, and now...

She hadn't even *liked* him. Barely had spoken to him, and usually when she did, it was to explain something as if he were eight, not twenty-eight. He couldn't blame her; if *he'd* had to hire somebody to kill him, just in case, he probably wouldn't have gotten too friendly with the guy, either.

He really should have asked more questions about the magic. Not just in Seraphina's case, but his own as well. If he had, maybe he could have figured out his power before people had gotten too interested in him. He could have been prepared, instead of just rolling with the punches and seeing where he landed afterward.

Funny how he'd saved the world, just like he'd set out to do, but he felt even less like a hero than ever. He didn't feel like Batman. Not even GI Joe. He felt like Nunzio Arquette, lost little Earthling, and now a killer to boot.

Movement in the doorway made him turn his head. It wasn't so difficult this time, his body waking up slower than his mind.

"Well, look who's back from the dead," Zinhalte said, leaning against the doorframe. He looked much better than the last time Nunzio had seen him. He was clean, for one, dressed in a shiny pair of tight white leggings, knee-high black boots, and an iridescent silver jacket. His silvery-pink hair had been combed neatly and styled back from his face. He actually looked happy to see Nunzio, which was as much of a surprise as his very presence.

"What are you doing here?" Nunzio croaked, only then realizing how choked his throat was, and that tears streamed down his cheeks.

Zin sighed and entered, as if that had been an invitation. "Calm down, you big crybaby. I'm here to collect my goddaughter."

"Don't call me that," Maggie grumbled, waking up to blink sleepily at him. Then she noticed Nunzio and a smile broke over her face, relieved and happy, and so very young. "You're awake!"

"So are you," Nunzio said, looking away and flushing. He hastily scrubbed his face, feeling quite a few days' worth of beard in the process.

"Zin, get Nunzio some water." She tactfully didn't mention his discomposure. A real class act, this kid.

"Oh, no more 'Mr. Arquette'?" Zin raised a finely groomed eyebrow at her, but poured a cup of water from the pitcher and brought it over to the bed.

She rolled her eyes at him. "What can I say? Keeping vigil over someone for a week kinda puts you on a first-name basis, in my opinion."

Nunzio accepted the glass and sipped it as Zin plunked himself into the empty chair. He sniffed and cleared his throat. "So, I've been out for a whole week?" Maggie nodded. "What did I miss? What happened, exactly?"

"Well, you and Kol'daar got kidnapped," Maggie said. She waved a hand at Zin. "You managed to break his curses, though, so he could finally tell us what was going on. Torth's cult, Wadsworth's plan, the works. The other mercenaries showed up, so Lolanna, Kwiif, and Sakano went with them to rally all the guilds. Zin took me back to my world so I could recruit my friends—you didn't get to meet them, but they were there at the final battle."

“I know,” Nunzio said, but didn’t elaborate about how their combined powers had nearly vaporized his soul. There was petty, and then there was *petty*. Instead, he looked at Zin and raised a brow. “Curses, plural?”

“One was the silencing spell, obviously,” Zin explained, examining his nails as if he really didn’t care one way or the other about this conversation. “They didn’t want me tattling on them. But the other was a truth spell, from when they questioned me about you.” At Nunzio’s surprised sound, the Twink met his eyes evenly. “For the record, I hadn’t *planned* on selling you out. I don’t like to shoot myself in the foot like that if I can help it.”

“The two spells kept pulling him in opposite directions. He was supposed to tell the truth, but he couldn’t talk about the spell, the Reverend, or Torth. That was why he kept making that face, like.” Maggie demonstrated a fairly close replica of the jaw-straining twitch.

“And while we’re clearing up misunderstandings, I didn’t accept the job to steal the Hymnal because I *wanted* to. I wasn’t doing it for money.” Zin crossed his arms and shook his head. “I *owed* Torth from a long time ago, before he got all crazy. He just finally called in the debt. Nothing I could do, unless I wanted to skip town permanently. I didn’t know I was getting mixed up in all this *philosophy* and *morality play* bullshit.”

Maggie shot Zin a look that clearly said that his reasoning wasn’t good enough for her. It probably wasn’t good enough for anyone who hadn’t spent a long time in Splinterpoint, but it made sense to Nunzio. No one liked oathbreakers, even if keeping your word and honoring your debts meant you got roped into some pretty vile circumstances. Zinchalte *had* tried to fix his blunder when he could have just cut and run, so they ought to give the selfish bastard a *little* credit.

“Anyway, so we picked up Heaven Sword, Heaven Shield, and Heaven Bolt, and headed back here for the big showdown. The guilds were already taking care of those weirdos in the punk-rock outfits—”

Nunzio grinned wanly at that. So much for *Metal*. Clearly their genre was just misunderstood.

“—so we took Lolanna and Kwiif to look for you. Zin told us what they were planning for you, so we just followed the sound of that really terrible music-magic. We couldn’t find the entrance, though, so Kwiif just blew up the floor.”

“And then you found the Hymnal,” Nunzio said. He fiddled with his water cup. “What was the deal with that, anyway? I thought it was because Kol’ daar

messed with Torth during Wadsworth's ritual, but Seraphina... had a name for it. She recognized it."

"That was the Hymnal Animato. It's the worst-case scenario that we'd feared." Maggie hunched over her knees, lowering her head so her cloud of hair hid her eyes. "Kol'daar said he was trying to purify the Hymnal, but it was too late for that. The Hymnal... Well, it's kind of weird. The corruption process works like..." She huffed in frustration, blowing her bangs away from her brow as she sat up. Her eyes were bright, but the tears didn't fall. "Seraphina was always better at explaining these kinds of things, you know."

"She *was* pretty good at it," he murmured quietly, looking away from the naked grief on the girl's face. A far cry from how collected and confident she was as Heaven Siren, but he knew she had it in her. "But you're not bad, either. Take your time."

Maggie sniffled and then began to explain a bit haltingly, choosing her words carefully. "The Hymnal and Seraphina were two halves. The Hymnal was the knowledge, and she was the wisdom to use it. The Heavens gave them both to Humanity to help us keep the demons and monsters in check and as... a test. To see if we could overcome our hunger for power, or if we'd give in to the temptation to use the Hymnal for our own ends, instead of the Will of the Heavens."

That sounded a bit familiar, actually. Sort of like the serpent, the apple, and original sin, only through a mirror *brightly*. Instead of forbidding knowledge, the Heavens dished it out. Instead of a serpent tempting Humanity to ruin, there was a dove guiding them to peace and love, or whatever. The Heavens seemed to want to encourage them to do better, *be* better, without stacking the deck against them, first.

Christ, *how* had Reverend Wadsworth gone so far in the other direction? The guy must have been the bastard child of L. Ron Hubbard and Fred Phelps, just completely off the map.

As he assimilated this, he said, "So you think the Heavens wanted to see if people would use the Hymnal for good or evil? And there was a built-in punishment for doing evil?"

She nodded. "If we failed, and it was corrupted, the Hymnal would... become *aware* of itself. But it would need a mortal sacrifice to gain true life. The Hymnal Animato, the knowledge given life, given awareness, given... *hunger*."

She shivered visibly, and Nunzio wondered just how horrible the fight with that thing had been. And what would have happened if it hadn't been stopped. Seraphina had said it would consume the world, but what about when it had finished with this one? Nunzio felt a chill go down his own spine at the thought.

"When the Hymnal became corrupted, there was no going back. So Kol'daar *couldn't* purify it; he couldn't do anything to it, really. The damage was already done. What he *did* manage to do was break Torth's concentration long enough for the Hymnal to slip free of his control, and that was that."

"You told Kol'daar, right? I think I maybe, uh, might've blamed him a bit, at the time," Nunzio admitted guiltily, remembering the tears on the man's face. "I think he might've taken it pretty hard."

"Oh, he knows. We had to tell him about ninety times before he stopped moping," Zin said, rolling his eyes. "Guy has a total responsibility complex."

"Better than feeling no guilt whatsoever, like one guy I know," Nunzio said, glaring. Zinchalte had the grace to look disconcerted, his pupils narrowing before he looked away. Nunzio shook his head and drew a deep breath to steady himself. To Maggie, he asked, "But why did Seraphina... do that? Why did you need *me* to..."

The girl sat up in her chair and put her hand on Nunzio's arm. "Because that was Seraphina's *job*. She was the Hymnal's mortality, whether it was pure or corrupt. You can't be wise in the ways of the world without knowing about the inevitability of death. And the Heavens are merciful. They *want* us to learn from our mistakes. The Heavens don't want us all destroyed, so they made her the Hymnal's weak point, to give us a chance, however slim, to survive our stupidity. But even then she was pretty hard to... get rid of. You were the only one who could. And you saved us all. You really did."

"I'm... I'm sorry about Seraphina," he managed to choke out. "She was your friend, and I—"

"She sacrificed *herself*, Nunzio," Maggie told him with absolute conviction, even if her voice wobbled when she said it. "And you sacrificed something, too, when you let her do it. That was the only thing that saved you from your own power eating your soul, you know."

"Actually, I don't know. Not at all." Nunzio hung his head and stared at his shaking hand around the cup of water. "I had no idea how my ability worked until Reverend Wadsworth told me about it. And I thought... Well, I knew I

was going to die, but I'd forgotten about it by the time Seraphina came to me. Things got kinda messed up in my head by then."

Maggie squeezed his arm gently. "You knew what would happen, even if you didn't think of it right then. You still gave willingly of yourself for the greater good. Sacrifice is holy power. Soul power. That gave your Song of Life, like, a boost. Enough so you could destroy the Hymnal, and just enough that you didn't die from it. Though you did scare the hell out of everyone. Kol'daar especially."

Nunzio gave a watery huff at that. "Yeah, I know. I'd owe the guy a new shirt, if he ever wore one." He looked at the girl, tried to summon a smile, but gave up.

Maggie went on with justifiable anger, "These weirdos who wanted to corrupt the Hymnal never really understood that sacrifice is, like, this huge chunk of what holy power *is*. Even my own isn't completely free. That's the trap of the corrupted Hymnal, promising all this power with supposedly no strings attached, and then bam! Lunchtime, followed by the End Times."

Nunzio cocked his head at her, frowning his surprise. "What did you have to sacrifice to use it in the first place?"

She flushed faintly but answered, "Um. I can't... I have to remain... *pure*. For life. Or I'll lose my ability to use music-magic."

"And what a sacrifice that is," Zin said without a trace of irony. For once, Nunzio agreed with him. "You poor, brave girl. Better you than me."

"Wait, so you still have your powers even *without* the Hymnal?" Nunzio asked.

"Well, *yeah*. The Hymnal wasn't the *source* of my power; that comes directly from the Heavens. The Hymnal was, like, the user's manual. Once my friends and I learned our invocations and performed the Miracle Modulation, we became part of the Heavenly Host. Only breaking our vows will strip us of power."

This is why he didn't go in for all this religious stuff. So many hoops to jump through. He thought a bit about everything, and then had one more question for the girl.

"Not that I'm not grateful you stayed to explain all this to me, but why'd you bother? Don't you have... demons to slay and monsters to remonstrate back home, kid?"

“I’m not a *kid*,” she said, the ingrained reflex response of every kid ever, but her eyes were older than her years. She dredged up a pensive smile for him. “The other girls can handle it, as long as the Sin Trinity is still out of commission. And I suppose I just had to know you’d be okay. Kol’daar, Lolanna, and Zin all told me about how you’ve never... I guess I just wanted you to know that... Well, you did the right thing. Sera and I both knew what could happen as soon as the Hymnal vanished. We came here asking a lot of you, and you came through for us. For my whole world, and this one, and... you know. Thank you. And I’m sorry.”

That just wasn’t fair. He’d almost made it through the whole thing without embarrassing himself, but at her words, Nunzio felt the tears spilling over. Maggie looked alarmed at this reaction and began to stammer out something, but he cut her off with a wave of his hand.

“No, it’s... It’s fine. But you were her friend, so you should know, that’s the last thing *she* said, too.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, his voice cracking as he continued, “Who *does* that? Who *thanks* the guy who k-kills—”

And that was how Nunzio ended up smothered in a hug and crying on Maggie’s shoulder. It was some consolation that she was crying, too. God, Kwiif was right; Nunzio really *was* a teenage girl. But he figured he’d proved his badass masculinity by saving the world, so he could cry about killing a holy dove all he wanted.

Zinhalte remained surprisingly quiet while the two of them grieved. Eventually, as they wound down and separated, he tossed a box of tissues onto Nunzio’s lap. He said to Maggie, “I think it’s time to leave the bawl for *that* princess, honey. I don’t want your friends back home to start wondering if I turned you into a pumpkin.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m coming. Keep your shirt on, Lady Twinkerina,” Maggie said. She blew her nose and collected herself, taking another tissue to dab at her runny mascara. She offered Nunzio another smile, this one at least a bit more serene than sad. Surprisingly, he found himself able to return it.

“Take care of yourself, Nunzio. Good-bye.”

“You too, kid. Bye. Um. Good luck with finals.” The phrase seemed so weird in its normality after all this otherworldly mythology that for a second Nunzio couldn’t really relate to it at all, so he added, “And, you know, the whole Heaven Siren thing.”

Zin hustled the girl out, but he hung back in the doorway to say, very nonchalantly, “I’d get a hold of Kol’ daar soon, if I were you. He visited a lot, according to Maggie. Lolanna pried him out yesterday for a raid, but I’m sure he’ll want to know you’re feeling better. Make him feel like a hero, or whatever his kink is.”

“Gimme a comm and I just might,” Nunzio said, then added, “Ow!” as Zin actually chucked a wrist-comm at his head.

“Don’t blow this one up when there are *better things* to be blowing.”

“I *totally* don’t owe you for this!” he called at the Twink’s back.

“No, this one’s on the house. Don’t be a stranger, Nunzio,” Zin caroled over his shoulder.

Nunzio blinked after him for a long moment and then picked up the wrist-comm. It was the same model as his last one, and it had five contacts saved in it already. Kol’ daar’s name was at the top of the list. He stared at it for a long time before slipping it on his wrist.

Then he reached for the hospital bed’s call button to summon a nurse or whoever. He wanted to go home, and for the first time in nearly two years, he didn’t think longingly of Delaware.

Chapter Twenty-Six

It wasn't that simple, of course. First, his belongings had all been abandoned at the scene of the Hymnal's rampage, and the clothes he had been wearing at the time were burned for sanitary reasons. He managed to bamboozle a pair of purple scrubs and slippers from a sympathetic nurse. It wasn't his color, but they were better than the hospital gown.

He'd lost his tie, his last physical reminder of Earth, which made him ache a bit—as much from the apropos pun as what it represented. However, the nerve disruptor, his coat, and all its contents were losses that hit harder. He didn't miss the machete at all, though, which went to show that he'd worn it more for decoration than practicality. It was probably a multiversal truth that if you're in the middle of an apocalypse, and you don't use your machete, you don't *need* a machete.

The Mercenaries' Guild was listed as his emergency contact, so when he checked himself out of the Medical Guild Hospital's magic-free isolation room—magic-free for *his* safety, this time, as well as to preserve the spells of other patients—they knew right away and escorted him to HQ posthaste. There were about a thousand different forms of paperwork waiting for him in a room that was thankfully not the Lollipop Lounge. His license had been reinstated while he was sleeping off his postapocalyptic hangover, which helped immensely, but since it had been an interguild incident in the end, *and* had invoked the Extraordinary Circumstance Amendment, there was a lengthy gamut of statements and official records to file.

On top of that, there were inquiries from the anonymous Guildmasters about his curse, demanding new information about capacities, liabilities, and limitations. It was a step that had been so much easier when he hadn't known much about his power, but now that he had a far better idea of how he functioned, the Mercenaries' Guild wanted to know, too.

It was a red-tape nightmare, but the upshot of it was that he had a new d-rating. Member 769, Hunter Nunzio Arquette of the Splinterpoint Mercenaries' Guild was now an X-d8 and had a shiny new badge to show for it. He honestly didn't really know what that meant, but larger numbers on his side were generally a good thing.

While he was unconscious, the Guild had deposited the promised million credits to his account, minus the membership tithe he hadn't had to pay after

he'd failed his evaluation. He called Sakano to inform him that he could start up his Multiversal Origins Machine project again—even if Sakano was a bit of an idiot, he was still Nunzio's best shot at finding Earth—but the call went directly to message. He couldn't figure out why, because Sakano usually pounced on a call from his number one investor—until he tried to contact Lolanna, just to see if she knew what was going on with the guy, and the same thing happened.

Given that Lolanna could answer her comm in any situation, it being fused into her neural network, this could only mean she was busy doing something private. Or, Nunzio surmised, doing something to Sakano's privates, and the less he thought about that the better.

At least *someone* was getting some well-earned, postapocalyptic, life-affirming sex.

He wondered what would become of Kwiif, if her supposed boss was calibrating the horizontal hickimadoo with Lolanna. It turned out he needn't have worried that she was being overworked, because as he *stick-stucked* his way down the gumdrop lane outside gingerbread castle, he spotted her out on the grounds, completely owning at laser-tag. He grinned and waved at her, receiving an Infinipod flail of tentacles in return. The change of guilds ought to suit her well, he thought. She'd seemed more at home with an arsenal of weapons than taking orders from Sakano, anyway.

As his credit card had been in his poor, lost coat, he still couldn't get a cab home. With nothing for it, he'd have to walk. Not a prospect he looked forward to. He didn't know if he was still recovering his lost soul energy, or if the week asleep had made him start to atrophy, but he was already wiped out just from the paperwork.

Just as he was rounding the corner of the gingerbread curtain wall, another figure rounded it from the opposite direction. Neither reacted quickly enough to avoid a collision. Nunzio bounced off that solid torso like he was the proverbial quarter launched to test the tautness of the guy's perfect abs. He nearly hit the ground, but a hand snagged his wrist at the last second and reversed his momentum.

“Sorry about th—” Kol'daar was saying as he drew him back upright and suddenly stopped when he got a good look at him. “Nunzio!”

Kol'daar wore a different set of loincloth and leggings than Nunzio remembered, and he looked a bit scuffed up in a way that was actually quite

fetching. His harp occupied its accustomed position on his back, and beneath it, he carried his leathern pack, which bulged at the seams with loot that rattled a bit as he shifted. Kol'daar, fresh from a raid, unharmed and every bit as gorgeous as the first time Nunzio had laid eyes on him.

“Are you—You’re... better?” Kol'daar scanned Nunzio up and down in an incredulous but brief once-over.

“Yeah,” he replied, sounding a bit dazed even to his own ears. He was suddenly very aware of his scruffy beard, unkempt hair, and ridiculously purple clothing. He cleared his throat and strove for a more normal tone. “The medics gave me a clean bill of health.”

“Good,” Kol'daar sighed. That heart-stoppingly gorgeous, wide-open smile broke over his lips, the corners of his eyes creasing. Between that and the warm, strong fingers that still held on to Nunzio’s wrist, it came as no surprise when Nunzio’s midsection acquired a swarm in internal butterflies. “Good. What are you doing here?”

“Just tying up some loose ends. There was a lot of paperwork.”

Kol'daar groaned sympathetically. “I know; I had to fill it out, too. Were you headed back to the Chateau, then?” At Nunzio’s nod, he said, “Mind if I tag along? I just need to go in and report to the raid officer real quick.”

“Um, sure, but—”

“Great! I’ll be right back. Wait here.”

Kol'daar gave his wrist a gentle squeeze and departed at a determined, ground-chewing pace. Nunzio stared after him, blinking. He shuffled out to the curb and sat down to wait.

The Splinterpoignant sky was cerulean today, the sun was white, and the city swelled around him in a riot of multiplicity. Aliens of every stripe, scale, and limb went about their daily business as he watched the crowded street. He wondered how many of these beings had been involved in the rout of Torth’s cult of metalheads, and how many of them knew just how narrowly they’d escaped certain doom at the hands of an overgrown stack of sheet music.

The apocalypse averted, life went on.

As he took it all in, he realized that for the first time, he felt a strange kind of belonging amidst the masses—though it probably said something that he felt that way while wandering around looking like a shaggy escaped mental patient.

Kol'daar came back to find him staring around himself with an unconscious smile, which he shook off as soon as he realized he was doing it. The other man just looked at him a little too knowingly, though, so Nunzio probably wasn't fooling him. He didn't say anything else, though, just hailed a hovercar and piled in next to Nunzio. The pack of loot he chucked over onto the bench seat opposite them.

"So, how do you split the fare on these card-readers, anyway?" Kol'daar asked as they took off.

Nunzio opened his mouth to answer and then flushed. "Uh, actually. I don't have a card. It was in my coat, so, um—"

Kol'daar snorted and waved off his stammered apology. Then he threw Nunzio a puzzled frown. "Wait. If you don't have your credit card, how did you plan on getting home?"

"I was going to walk there." Kol'daar looked at him blankly, so he added, "With my legs. Because that's what they do."

"You would have *walked*?" Kol'daar furrowed his brow in incredulous consternation. "You've been at death's door for a week, and you were almost falling asleep on the curb just now. But you were going to *walk* home. Across half the sector. Without weapons."

Well, when he put it *that* way, it did sound pretty stupid. Nunzio cleared his throat and shrugged. "Yeah, well, what else was I supposed to do?"

Kol'daar gave him a reproachful look, reaching across the seat to pointedly tap the wrist-comm. "You could have commed me, for one. Or any of your other friends. We didn't get you a get-well present just for you to make yourself collapse the same day you get out of the hospital."

This made his brows rise, and he looked back down at his new comm. Friends. Well, he supposed it would be stupid to insist that he wasn't Kol'daar's friend, but that the *others* considered him a friend—not a coworker or a teammate or mere acquaintance—was kind of touching.

Dammit, they were totally going to ruin his jaded loner mystique.

He covered the sudden surge of emotion with a wry huff. "This is from *all* of you? Zin implied it was from *him*."

"*That* figures. No, it was from all of us. It was Lolanna's idea, actually, but Kwiif kept Sakano from modifying anything. It shouldn't explode or do anything weird," Kol'daar reassured him.

He'd left his hand next to Nunzio's on the seat, not quite touching. Nunzio fingers began tapping softly on the upholstery.

"Well, thanks. It was... thoughtful of everyone. Even *if* half of them aren't bothering to answer their calls." At Kol'daar's raised eyebrow, Nunzio grimaced. "Sakano and Lolanna are in their honeymoon phase, I think."

"You don't know the half of it." Kol'daar managed to look both amused and pained at the same time. "He calls her 'my sweet.' In front of other people."

Nunzio boggled at him. "And he lives to tell the tale?"

Kol'daar leaned in conspiratorially. "Her eye twitches, but she hasn't stabbed him yet. I think she secretly likes it."

They chuckled at each other, eyes meeting and darting away. Companionable silence fell for a few moments afterward, and then Kol'daar put his hand over Nunzio's drumming fingers to still them. Nunzio twitched with surprise, but when Kol'daar didn't let go, he looked at the man properly. Kol'daar's gaze was steady and warm, trapping Nunzio's own as surely as he'd trapped his fingers.

Quietly, Kol'daar asked, "The medics may have said you are recovered, but... How are you holding up, really?"

Of course, the apocalypse made for one massive elephant in the room. Nunzio was just glad that Kol'daar had brought it up. He wasn't sure how to broach the topic himself, unless he was going to say, '*Sorry I blamed you for the apocalypse, cuddled with you when I should have been trying to save you, and then literally almost died on you. Do you still want to kiss me?*' He wasn't quite that straightforward, though, and the whole thing exhausted him. But if nothing else, he owed Kol'daar some answers.

"Maggie was waiting for me to wake up, so we could talk. And we did. About everything. The Hymnal and... Seraphina." He was proud of the fact that his voice didn't wobble very much on the name. "It was a lot to take in, you know?"

Kol'daar nodded somberly, squeezing Nunzio's fingers. "If it helps, you did a very brave thing. The right thing."

"It doesn't, but thanks for trying."

They sat in silence for a while, and Nunzio looked unseeingly out the window to hide the stinging of his eyes. Crying in front of Maggie and Zin was

one thing—the former he wasn't going to see ever again, and the latter had seen him at his worst already—but he did have some pride to uphold here.

He hadn't known Seraphina well enough to miss her as a person, really, but he'd carry that little forty-pound bird in his heart the rest of his damn life. He didn't know what to do about it, otherwise, or where to put this guilty grief. Life went on, and so would Nunzio.

He eventually sighed and said, "She... didn't deserve it. Just because she was tied to that monster..."

"It wasn't fair to either of you," Kol'daar said. He shook his head, sighing heavily. "If I could have purified the Hymnal..."

Nunzio turned back, taking in the drooping of the proud barbarian prince's shoulders. And that mopey, brooding look didn't suit Kol'daar at all. Not that it made him look *bad*; Nunzio doubted that was even possible. It just... shouldn't be there, not when Kol'daar was such a generally cheerful guy.

Zin and Maggie were right; Kol'daar was still pretty upset about that. Well, that *was* the reason he'd been hired. Having had his own brush with failure lately, Nunzio could relate a bit.

With a sigh of his own, he threaded his fingers cautiously between Kol'daar's, which were warm and starting to regain the calluses on their tips, and squeezed. "We were just... too late. There was no purifying that thing, as I'm sure Maggie already told you. I'm sorry I jumped to conclusions and gave you that idea in the first place, but in my defense, I know nothing about magic. What happened wasn't your fault."

Kol'daar brooded for a moment longer, but at last he sighed. "But if that's true, then what happened afterward wasn't *your* fault. The whole situation was beyond our control, perhaps from the start."

Story of his life. Nunzio muttered, "Yeah, well, then the Heavens work in some pretty fucking *mysterious* ways. Can't say I'm too impressed."

"I... can't complain," Kol'daar said with a philosophical shrug. "For the end of the world, there was an incredible survival rate. The men responsible won't trouble anyone ever again. You saved the world."

"Yeah, well, I didn't do it by myself." Nunzio tugged on the man's hand illustratively. "Enough glory to go around."

A miniature version of Kol'daar's smirk curled the corners of his lips. "Even so, I think that makes you some 'legendary hero dude,' now."

Nunzio welcomed the levity with a smirk of his own. “Just a warning, if you’re going to go around singing my praises; I don’t think anything rhymes with ‘Nunzio.’ Hell, I didn’t even know you *could* sing.”

Kol’daar’s tentative smile faded, and he shook his head. Nunzio didn’t know what he’d said wrong until the man explained, “I would not have Sung had there not been dire need, and I hadn’t thought we would both be dead or worse anyway.”

He hadn’t meant to bring the mood down again, just when things were starting to feel a bit more normal. Well, except for the hand-holding thing, not that he was complaining. He tried again. “Why not? You weren’t *that* bad at it.”

That succeeded in drawing out a snort of laughter. “Songweavers must be careful about Singing. To Play an instrument gives us a channel, a proxy that helps us focus and control the Orphic Noise. When we Sing, we’re opening our Heartsongs to the Orphic Noise directly. It can be dangerous for us, because it leaves us vulnerable to Dissonance taking hold inside us. If that happens, madness and death follow.”

Nunzio’s eyebrows climbed. “Wow, harsh.”

Kol’daar shrugged again, like *whatchagonnado?* but went on to say, “I believe that’s what happened to Torth to make him... the way he was.” He shook his head in incomprehension. “His music-magic was so subtle, and he gave it up for empty noise.”

“You call *that* subtle?” Nunzio boggled at him again. “The dude had amps the size of our apartments *and* cranked them up to eleven, for fuck’s sake.”

Kol’daar rolled his eyes. “I meant the Orphic Noise of his music. Take my word for it, he was quite talented. He wouldn’t have been so dangerous, otherwise.”

In his mind, he could see Torth’s snaggletoothed snarl as Kol’daar’s head crashed into the iron pillar, and he repressed a shudder. Then a fresh wave of unease swept through him as he recalled something else. “You said there was Dissonance all over the place in Torth’s lair. You didn’t, uh, pick anything up, did you?”

“No.” Kol’daar rubbed his thumb reassuringly over the back of Nunzio’s hand. “I had Maggie check, to make sure.”

“Good,” Nunzio said, relieved. He mused aloud, “Maggie sings around Dissonance all the time. How come it doesn’t grab hold of her?”

“Maggie is not a Songweaver. Her power comes to her directly from her Heavens, which *cannot* be corrupted. Dissonance can’t get a hold on her, as long as she stays pure.”

Nunzio squinted at him dubiously. “You sure know a lot about her purity. Were you flirting with her again?”

“There wasn’t much else to do at the hospital,” Kol’daar said lightly. He cast a sidelong glance at him, dragging his thumb slowly, deliberately over Nunzio’s knuckles. “But she wasn’t the one I wanted to be flirting with. I prefer soft hearts to pure ones.”

Nunzio felt his face heat. “Takes one to know—”

Kol’daar cut him off with a kiss, soft lips pressing firmly, irresistibly against his. His eyes flew wide and then closed, and he kissed back eagerly with all the skill he could muster. The hammering of his heart couldn’t drown out the deep, satisfied hum that rumbled up from Kol’daar’s bare chest. He brought his free hand up to grip the man’s shoulder, and Kol’daar’s tangled in his hair. The kiss got deeper, hotter, tongues and breath and the thrill of discovery, and Nunzio’s power started to test his control—

The hovercar lost altitude sharply. Nunzio pulled back, panic flooding him, because he’d *broken the cab* and they were going to drop out of the sky to their deaths—

But they’d only arrived at the Chateau. Kol’daar laughed, not unkindly, at his overreaction. Nunzio tried to glower at him, but was interrupted by another thorough kiss that did wonders to assuage both his nerves and embarrassed pique.

With one more quick peck, Kol’daar released his hand in order to gather his things and pay. Still tingling, reeling from the kisses, Nunzio got out, grinning like a man who knew he’d be getting some yay-we-saved-the-world sex in the near future. Kol’daar had a similar expression, and the feeling of giddy closeness stayed even as they lingered on the sidewalk. Kol’daar shifted his pack on his shoulder while Nunzio tried to figure out something to say before things got awkward.

“Um, thanks for the ride,” was the best he could come up with. Trading witty barbs with Zin was one thing, but Nunzio hadn’t been a gay Don Juan even *before* he’d taken himself off the market and gotten all rusty.

“Any time. But... I have to go hawk this loot down at the pawnshop,” Kol’daar said a bit ruefully. His gray eyes flicked an assessing glance up and down Nunzio. “You should maybe go rest some more. You look tired.”

Nunzio snorted and rolled his eyes. “I look like crap and I know it. You don’t have to spare my feelings.”

Kol’daar’s beaming grin faded into a private, tender kind of smile. “Oh, I think I do.”

“Oh yeah?” Nunzio didn’t know who closed in, or if they both did, but they were suddenly sharing space again. Kol’daar leaned in and brushed some of Nunzio’s epic-bedhead hair away from his face.

“Yes.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because... you’re used to disappointment.” Kol’daar held his gaze. “I decided while you were healing, you see. You might be used to it from the rest of this whole world, but *I* won’t disappoint you.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to snap at Kol’daar not to *make* promises like that, but... Maybe Nunzio wanted to believe him. He cleared his throat and said, “Well... if you insist. Um. Start by telling me if you see any good guns while you’re at the pawnshop. I lost mine.”

“Sure.” Kol’daar’s sly smirk spread out as he added, “I’ll keep my eyes peeled for any magnums.”

Nunzio’s jaw dropped, which just earned him a cheeky wink before Kol’daar turned around to start walking. He watched the man and his spiderharp disappear into the crowd and then looked up at Le Chateau Florida’s dilapidated sign. As he watched, the neon ‘F’ flickered and went out, two residents in neighboring windows started hollering obscenities at each other, and on the roof’s ledge there appeared to be no less than three brooding silhouettes backlit by the sun.

Ah, Chateau, sweet Chateau.

Now that Kol’daar wasn’t here to distract him, a sudden wave of misgiving filtered through the cloud of elation. There was still the matter of the broken fire escape and Vorkra’s wrath. He might be hunting for a new apartment before the day was out. Sighing, he straightened his ridiculously purple scrubs, squared his shoulders, and went inside.

Vorkra sat at the front desk in the dingy lobby, watching *Praetor Judy* on the small scry-cube she kept on the counter. All four of her hands were knitting a new housecoat out of puce mohair yarn. She waved over at him and bared her

many teeth. He still couldn't tell if she was trying to smile or simply preparing to bite his head off.

"Nunzio!" She set her knitting down as he approached cautiously. "I got something to ask you about."

He winced. "If it's about the fire escape—"

She shook her head, waving him off. "Don't worry about it. I was pretty pissed, but Kol'daar said it was in the line of duty. Since your guild paid for the repairs under whatever sucker clause they put in their charter, I don't mind so much. Just don't break it again. And stop going up to the roof, it's bad for the tar paper."

"Ah, uh-huh, okay," Nunzio agreed, but they both knew he was lying. He cleared his throat. "What did you need, then?"

"I just wanted to tell ya that you did a good job with the orientation class. Been getting compliments from folks who were there, said you were really helpful. Most of 'em already found guilds, except for that Wadsworth and those girls. *They* all skipped out on their leases. I heard they were demons, though, and what else can you expect from *those* people?" She curled her lips again, this time definitely a snarl.

Nunzio didn't generally approve of casual racism, but he made an exception in this case. "Yeah, evil incarnate makes for bad tenants. Who'd have thought?"

She snorted and leaned back in her chair. "Anyway, your class made the best acclimation ratio for the Chateau since the Hospitality Guild made it mandatory."

Nunzio's eyebrows climbed to his hairline. "What, really?"

"Yeah, really. I was wonderin' if you'd like to make it a more permanent thing. Once a month, for the new residents. We could come to some kind of agreement, not indenture, so your guild shouldn't have a problem with it. Whaddaya say?"

Honestly, he had a feeling the success of his SpOC adventure had less to do with his actual skill at disseminating information than Vorkra's completely terrifying personality and short temper. As he wasn't suicidal, he didn't tell her that.

"I, uh. I dunno. This is kind of... sudden. And I'm kinda... busy... now."

"Well, think about it. You got until next month's moving day." She picked up her knitting again in a clear dismissal. "Good ta have ya back."

“Good to be home,” he agreed, smiling when he realized how true it was.

Splinterpoint was *weird*. But this was the city he’d almost died for. The city he’d killed for. The city where he’d managed to carve out his own niche despite everything the multiverse had thrown at him thus far.

It wasn’t Earth, but it was, grudgingly, home.

There weren’t any rules to say he couldn’t have more than one.

Epilogue

The first day after Nunzio got back to the Chateau, he woke up with Kol'daar serenading him from the fire escape with simple, non-magical melodies. Kol'daar looked amazing in the midmorning light, but that wasn't anything to write home about. Nunzio was almost surprised when there weren't any woodland creatures frolicking about the fire escape with him.

"I knew I should have closed my window last night," he grumbled as he got up, scratching his whiskery chin and leaning on the windowsill.

"You have no romance in your soul," Kol'daar replied without pausing in his rendition of that timeless classic, 'Wake the Hell Up, Nunzio, I'm Playing a Harp.' "This is a time-honored courtship ritual among my people."

"Dude, I haven't even had coffee yet."

"What's coffee?" Kol'daar asked.

"Huh." Nunzio eyed him with all the annoyance of a man who'd been robbed of a good old-fashioned lie-in. "Well, as long as we're doing courtship rituals, why don't you come in and try a cup?"

If he neglected to mention that his terrible coffee probably was closer to hazing than seduction, well, that's just what Kol'daar got for waking him up. When he handed Kol'daar a mug, the man sniffed dubiously, took a sip, and made a face so priceless that Nunzio laughed his own swig of the terrible sludge up his nose.

Not the most romantic moment of his life. But then, he really did have a low threshold for anything sappy. He preferred the solid five minutes of giggling on Nunzio's part and chortling on Kol'daar's.

"Awful. Truly bad. I'm never drinking this again, you realize," Kol'daar told him eventually, still laughing. "You did that on purpose, you petty bastard."

"You just have *no* romance in your soul," Nunzio accused when he could breathe.

When it was time for Kol'daar to leave for the Guild raiding party he'd signed up for, Nunzio kissed him, heart fluttering high in his throat. Kol'daar didn't complain about secondhand coffee taste, just pulled him in closer.

The next day, Kol'daar walked in on him in the Human communal bathroom after his shower. Luckily Nunzio had dressed, but Kol'daar was clad only in a fluffy white towel. They stared at each other in surprise. Nunzio watched him blush. The downside of being that pale was that it didn't take much.

"Um," Kol'daar said. "Sorry! The door wasn't locked."

"Damn thing must be broken again," Nunzio griped, feeling the heat in his own cheeks, which were luckily covered in shaving foam. "I'll be done in a few minutes; then the shower'll be all yours."

"Right." Kol'daar cocked his head curiously. "What's that on your face?"

"Shaving cream. I'm finally getting rid of this beard." He held up his hover-razor, a snazzy little high-tech gizmo he'd bought yesterday when he finally had gotten his long-anticipated shopping spree. The new sunglasses, new trench coat, and brand-spanking-new fedora all were back in his room, but he'd already put on the new black necktie in a spate of... Not homesickness, exactly. More like Earthling pride.

Kol'daar blinked at it uncomprehendingly. "That's what you shave with?"

"Uh, yeah. Why, what do *you* shave with?"

Kol'daar raised one hand, in which he held some kind of stone blade—or more accurately, a blade-stone, because it looked less like a knife and more like a round rock with a sharp edge chipped into it.

It was Nunzio's turn to blink. He blurted out, "You shave with a *rock*?"

Kol'daar shot him a puzzled glance. "Problem with that?"

"It's a *rock*. I mean, not even a knife or a straight razor."

"It's what Hradical men have always used. It's *traditional*," Kol'daar explained, a little defensively. "Besides, it's what I had with me when I arrived."

"It's... *barber-ism*. *Shear barber-ism*."

Kol'daar snorted and shook his head. "So you don't only save the puns for dangerous situations. I had wondered."

That depended entirely on what one considered a dangerous situation, but Nunzio wasn't going to point out that the tiny bathroom filled with Kol'daar, whose chronically bare skin once again smelled vaguely of barbeque, was

feeling pretty risky to *him*. Even so, a sudden idea materialized, and on impulse, he decided that it was a good idea. Possibly a *great* idea.

“You know, we Earthlings have our own technique,” he said as nonchalantly as possible. “I could show you. If you’re interested.”

Kol’daar eyed him and smirked slowly. He crowded into Nunzio’s space to set his sharp rock down on the rim of the sink next to the faucet. He leaned even nearer, like the close-talker he would ever be, to steal the air between them and rumble, “All right. Show me, then.”

And so Nunzio did, explaining shaving foam on autopilot as he spread the lightly scented cream over Kol’daar’s skin, even as the man leaned into his fingers. He barely felt the hover-razor as it busily shaved his face, while he drew a regular disposable blade across the planes of Kol’daar’s cheeks. Kol’daar watched him, both directly and in the mirror, pale eyes intent and gradually growing darker. He held perfectly still when Nunzio tipped his head back to get the stubble like coal dust beneath his chin and trailing down his neck.

Nunzio saved the delicate skin of Kol’daar’s upper lip for last. The feel of shallow, quick breaths against his fingers and the weight of Kol’daar’s gaze combined to leave Nunzio just as breathless.

When he finished the last little patch, he found that his voice had dropped an octave when he said, “There, all d—”

Kol’daar kissed him, his freshly shaved, smooth skin against Nunzio’s, lips tasting only faintly of shaving foam, and backed him against the porcelain of the sink. The razor’s handle dissolved in his fingers, his control slipping as precariously as the towel on Kol’daar’s hips.

Just then, someone pounded on the bathroom door.

“Anybody in there?” a female voice hollered from the other side.

Nunzio growled, tearing his mouth away from Kol’daar’s to snap, “Occupied!”

“Hurry up, would ya?”

Kol’daar sighed, bumping his forehead against Nunzio’s, eyes closed as he murmured, “Come back to my room.”

Nunzio groaned. “I can’t. I promised I’d stop by Sakano’s new lab today. He says he’s got MOM version Infinity-point-oh ready for a test run.”

That response got another sigh from Kol'daar, this one quieter, with a distinct resigned quality to it. He pulled back enough to look Nunzio in the eye. "Tonight, then? When you come back."

Something about the uncertain note in his voice and the searching quality of his gaze made the teasing reply die unsaid on Nunzio's tongue. Instead, he found himself bringing his hand up to wipe a stray blot of foam from Kol'daar's cheek.

"Yeah," he said as casually as he could manage. "I'll be there."

Sakano's new lab was smaller than the last one by far. Instead of nuclear-missile-silo proportions, it was more the prototypical Frankensteinian dungeon, complete with granite flagstones and shackles on chains dangling from the walls.

"Is this place even wired for electricity?" Nunzio asked skeptically, eyeing a particularly impressive slime mold that spread most of the way down one wall from the cavernous ceiling.

"I've rigged something better than electricity," Sakano declared, grinning broadly as he used an enormous monkey wrench to tighten a large bolt on the steel casing of the Multiversal Origins Machine. "Isn't that right, my sweet?"

Nunzio fought not to snicker at the endearment while Lolanna, leaning against a nearby mecha's ankle with her arms crossed, narrowed her eye at her boyfriend. Sakano, oblivious, explained, "I have found a way to tap into the oscillation of the multiverse itself, which is essentially a limitless power source!"

"And, incidentally, free of charge," Lolanna added dryly.

Nunzio snorted. "Of course it is."

"A much more efficient allocation of resources," Sakano proclaimed. He gave the bolt one last tightening turn and then, with a deliberating look, loosened it a half turn. "There. Finished."

He stepped back from the squarish, blocky supercomputer that towered a full six feet over even his girlfriend's mighty frame. That made it just over twelve feet, built on a scale of Kwiif's Infinipod body, which Nunzio found a bit reassuring. If this was the version of MOM she'd helped modify, there was even a chance this wouldn't explode this time. Nunzio might actually be able to

find his home dimension again. See his family, meet his sister's kid, and deal with real life again. Leave Splinterpoint and its violent nonsense behind.

"Now, Nunzio," Sakano said as he tossed the monkey wrench carelessly down on a worktable in order to snatch up a vicious-looking medical contraption with a long, pointy bit. "I just need a blood sample from you, and we can make scientific history! Mwhahahaha!"

"Is *that* thing really necessary?" Nunzio asked, eying the new gadget unenthusiastically.

"Do not behave like poultry," Lolanna admonished. "You will only feel a little prick."

Sakano closed in, his goggles gleaming maniacally. "Lola's right. I'll be done before you know it."

Nunzio raised his eyebrows. "Wow, overshare. I'll thank both of you to leave your bedroom exploits out of this."

"Hold out your hand," Sakano said, brandishing the collection device. "For science."

Nunzio grimaced, but held out his hand. Sakano pulled the trigger. The oversized needle moved fractionally to neatly jab the tip of his middle finger. Blood welled up, and the needle thirstily drew it into the collection vial. The whole process only took a handful of seconds.

Then Lolanna was handing Nunzio a gauze pad, and Sakano was plugging the vial into a port in MOM's colorful control panel, and MOM was whirring to life.

Sakano struck a pose, arms flung wide above his head. "Behold! The secrets of the multiverse will open to me, Sakano Ryouta, alone! I have unraveled that which has baffled sentient beings since the dawn of time! With this knowledge, all of Splinterpoint will advance into a newer, brighter future, to the profit of all! But mostly me! MWAHAHAHA!"

MOM whirred, the rows and columns of flashing lights on the surface flickering, electronic *beep-boops* sounding from inside the massive casing. The culmination of the last two years of Nunzio's life finally set in motion.

Funny how now it was here, Nunzio felt kind of... underwhelmed. And even as he thought about his family and his student loans, guiltily he realized he was also thinking about eyes as gray as a knife's blade and the uneasiness he'd last seen in them.

Sakano ranted, likely the speech he'd mentioned that fateful night in his lab. Eventually he ran out of grandiose assertions and settled for kneading his hands together. Lolanna very subtly hid a yawn behind her hand. Nunzio shifted from foot to foot.

After about ten minutes more, MOM still hadn't started smoking, sparking, or otherwise demonstrating any kind of activity that might herald an explosion. It merely continued to whir, flicker, and beep.

Nunzio cleared his throat. "So, how long do you think this will take?"

"Hm?" Sakano glanced over at him as if he'd forgotten Nunzio was there. "Oh. Well, MOM has to filter through all the possibilities and narrow them down. Don't worry. I've already programmed her to ignore the several trillion trillion trillion known dimensions, so that will speed up the process by several decades."

"Decades," Nunzio repeated.

Sakano pushed up his goggles to squint at him. "Oh, yes. I'm afraid the nature of the multiverse makes this something of a time investment. It may not take that long, but the odds are that this will be an extended wait—Where are you going?"

"Decades," Kol'daar repeated.

"Oh, yes. So you'll just have to get used to me as a neighbor," Nunzio said and watched as Kol'daar's eyes did his smiling for him. "Now, what's for dinner?"

Their first attempt at life-affirming, yay-we-saved-the-world sex ended rather quickly for him and Kol'daar. In their defense, the intent *had* been to pound one of them through the mattress in the first place. But it was supposed to be *metaphorical*.

One moment, they'd been busily making out on Kol'daar's bed, the larger man a heavy, heady weight pushing Nunzio against the lumpy, squeaky springs as Kol'daar's lips explored his chest on their way south to where strong, calloused hands were pushing his black jeans down his hips. The intent was clear enough, sending hot chills of sheer want through Nunzio's whole being.

But the imminent reality of a blow job proved too much for him. His control vanished, and with it, so did his jeans and the mattress beneath him.

Nothing killed the mood faster than a sudden surplus of elemental dust in your asscrack as you plummeted out of your nascent lover's arms and through the floor.

It was a testament to Hradical reflexes that as soon as Nunzio suddenly slipped through the aged bed, Kol'daar was already moving to save the day. By the time Nunzio hit the floor, Kol'daar was on his feet and chucking the whole cheap bed across the room with a wordless barbaric war cry. He dove for Nunzio as he fell, latching on to a wrist in the nick of time.

Very impressive show of prowess or whatever, but on the whole, Nunzio would rather still be getting his dick sucked.

As if this wasn't bad enough, Nunzio wasn't alone. The apartment he'd fallen into was occupied by a hideous crab-man, sitting in an easy chair reading a newspaper and blinking long eyestalks in stunned shock at the naked Human dangling from the ceiling. At least this mortification helped him quickly reclaim the control Kol'daar had so willingly shattered moments before.

"The *fuck* did you do to my ceiling?" the crab-man shouted while the dust settled.

"Just dropping in," Nunzio said stupidly, mouth running on autopilot as the angry Crustaceanoid got up from his chair and advanced, pincers snapping in ways that no naked Human male would be comfortable with in his vicinity.

He looked up through the him-shaped hole he'd created to Kol'daar's dust-covered, equally alarmed visage. "Youcanpullmeupnowplease."

Kol'daar hauled away just in time. Though there was some awkwardness getting back through the narrow breach in the floor, the crab-man didn't manage to lop off any important bits of anatomy before Nunzio was back upstairs. Kol'daar dragged him away from the hole, and then they both collapsed on the linoleum.

"Are you all right?" Kol'daar panted as Nunzio slumped forward.

He was humiliated, naked, filthy with dust, and dealing with the onset of blue balls. "Oh, just *peachy*."

Downstairs, the Crustaceanoid was still shouting up at them. Kol'daar sighed and got up, crossing the room to retrieve his spiderharp from its hooks by the door. His loincloth and portions of his leather leggings had dissolved as well.

Nunzio couldn't help but guiltily stare at the revealed skin. He'd been *this close* to getting Kol'daar naked anyway, but somehow this felt like an invasion. Looking away, he took the opportunity to cover his lap with a sheet that had fallen in the kerfuffle and cast around for the bed itself. He winced as he saw the ruined mattress and bedframe flung up against the kitchen counter, the toppled table and chairs littering the floor around it.

The familiar feel of Kol'daar's magic hit him at the same time as the chords of the harp, and Nunzio looked up from his miserable brooding in time to duck as the bed flung itself back across the room. The hole in it was already patching itself. The enraged shouts of the crab-man faded as the floor likewise was magically repaired. The chairs and table righted themselves.

Well, at least Vorkra wouldn't be able to evict either of them for damage to the property. He supposed that was a relief.

When the music-magic ceased, Nunzio wrapped the sheet around his waist and stood up to look around for his shirt, the only piece of his clothing he hadn't been wearing at the time of the Mattress Incident.

"So..." Kol'daar began slowly, unselfconsciously peeling the remnants of his leggings off as he clearly fought back laughter. "That's what happens when you lose control?"

Nunzio groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose with the hand not busy holding the sheet. "Sorry."

"Oh, no, I take it as a compliment." There came the sound of the closet opening followed by the swish of cloth as Kol'daar put on a spare loincloth.

"Christ. I should have *known* my fucking curse would—" Kol'daar started snickering. Nunzio spun to glare at him. "It's not funny!"

Kol'daar's mirth died, but more from confusion it seemed. "But you just... That was a pun, wasn't it? *Fucking* curse. Because we were—"

"I don't think this is going to work."

That shut Kol'daar up, his pale eyes going wide and hurt. As soon as the words were out of Nunzio's mouth, he regretted them, but he couldn't take them back. And he was right, after all. Kol'daar had said that crap about not disappointing Nunzio, but really *Nunzio* was the disappointment.

He dropped his gaze. Screw the shirt. He headed toward the door, but didn't make it three steps before Kol'daar intercepted him.

“Don’t be like that.” He slid an arm around Nunzio’s shoulders and pulled him close. “You’re upset now, but it’s not as bad as you think.”

“Leggo,” Nunzio grumbled and didn’t relax against the warm, solid planes of the man’s chest. Not because he didn’t want to. The problem was that he really *did* want to, but *if* he did... “Unless you want to surprise the crabby downstairs neighbor with another visit.”

Kol’daar just snorted and steered them both back to the bed. When he sat down on the edge, Nunzio allowed himself to be pulled down beside him. He tangled their fingers and sighed. “We both just got carried away and forgot to take everything into consideration. But we can work around this. Don’t give up, and I won’t either.”

Hell. Big tenacious dope, always knowing what to say. Nunzio sighed, too, and leaned fractionally against him. A deep, contented rumble was his reward.

“I don’t see how *we* can,” Nunzio muttered. “It’s *my* problem. But I just... I can’t concentrate on controlling the power, when sex is involved.”

“To be honest, I don’t really *want* you to control it,” Kol’daar said. When Nunzio pulled away to give him an incredulous glare, he held his free hand up defensively. “Look, the falling through the floor thing I could do without, but if I couldn’t Hear your Heartsong, it’d be... *weird*. I mean, before coming here, the only things I couldn’t Hear were the undead. It’d be like trying to have sex with a zombie.”

Okay, maybe not *always* knowing what to say. “*Gross*. And thanks a *lot*.”

“No, I don’t mean *you’re* like a zombie,” Kol’daar hastened to assure him and then smirked as he brushed his hand against the fresh, red hickey Nunzio had left on his neck. “Maybe a vampire.”

“Shut up.” Nunzio flushed and crossed his arms to avoid the urge to reach over and give him another one. That smirk *did* things to him, dammit. “I’m not undead. You *know* I’m not undead. *I* can’t Hear Heartsongs, and *I* never had a problem wi—”

Kol’daar shut him up with a kiss, which had quickly become his favored tactic when he was losing an argument. Eventually the novelty would wear off, Nunzio was sure, but for now, it was more than successful. It didn’t seem to matter to Kol’daar that Nunzio’s mouth was gritty from the elemental dusts of mattress and apartment building, either. Lips, tongues, and breaths tangled in a warm slide of affection and playful desire, until Nunzio was breathless and his power was fighting his control once more.

When Kol'daar pulled away, his hands lingered on Nunzio's cheek and hip. His eyes were dark and soft as he captured Nunzio's gaze. Quietly, he admitted, "I *like* Hearing your Heartsong."

Nunzio blinked at him, feeling more laid bare by the look in Kol'daar's eyes than the fact that he was still naked under the sheet. He meant to say something snarky, something to break the too-intimate mood, but all he managed was, "Why?"

A wistful smile curled the corners Kol'daar's lips, and the butterfly swarm in Nunzio's stomach awoke. "Have you ever heard music that makes you just... *ache*? Like it's echoing something in your heart that you never knew was there, but had been all along?"

Nunzio found himself nodding along. "Something that... strikes a chord."

"Yes, exactly." Kol'daar stroked his thumb gently across Nunzio's cheek, his smile fading, replaced by something tender and honest. "That's what it's like when I Hear *you*, Nunzio. Your Heartsong strikes a chord in mine."

The butterflies surged, migrated to his chest, where his heart fluttered and his ribs felt too tight. In self-defense against the sappiness, he lunged forward and planted a kiss of his own on those full lips, swallowing Kol'daar's startled laugh.

His mirth was quickly put aside, however, in favor of pulling Nunzio close against him once more. For a moment, Nunzio let himself get lost in the sensation of Kol'daar's body, firm muscles and hot skin. His receptive mouth welcomed Nunzio's tongue and sucked lightly, rhythmically, a blatant tease that shot a bolt of lust straight to Nunzio's poor, neglected cock. Kol'daar hummed his pleasure, rocking his hips into Nunzio's, the thin layers of sheet and loincloth doing nothing to disguise Kol'daar's hard-on.

Christ. He knew now for sure that the banana-hammock hadn't done the man justice. He really *must* have been cold that day.

But Nunzio could also feel his ability starting to buck his control again, the sheet around his hips fraying. *Dammit*. A bit more roughly than he intended, he pushed Kol'daar away and hissed a breath through his teeth as he fought to keep from dissolving the bed again. Kol'daar made a disappointed sound, but allowed Nunzio to maintain a safe distance.

After a moment, Nunzio drew a deep breath and said, "If controlling my power is the only way we can be together, I don't think we'll ever be able to—"

“No, we just have to get creative,” Kol’daar insisted right over the top of him. “We know that it won’t work on living things. In a city like this, I bet there’s *somewhere* that sells living furniture.”

“Ugh.” Nunzio’s first image was the blinking eye on the Hymnal’s altar. “*No. No way.*”

Kol’daar seemed to catch on to his train of thought, and he hurriedly said, “Oh, it won’t be like... *that*. Nothing with limbs or eyes, nothing that moves around on its own. Just, you know, alive *enough*. A moss-bed or something.”

While it made sense that Kol’daar, a nomadic barbarian, would have no problem sleeping on a bed of moss, Nunzio just thought it sounded like an allergy attack waiting to happen. However, he’d take a lot of antihistamines if it meant he could take a lot of Kol’daar, too.

“Fine. No flowers, though.” He ignored the disappointed look on Kol’daar’s face at the addendum, because that was... Well, actually, not that big of surprise. The man’s weapons of choice were a harp and *friendliness*; he probably believed in flower power or whatever, too.

“What else do you think we could do?” Kol’daar asked, obviously in a brainstorming mood. Because if necessity was the mother of invention, then desperation was the baby daddy. “Is there anything else your power doesn’t work on?”

Nunzio racked his brain. “Um... water? I couldn’t eat until I got control over myself, because I kept destroying the food, but I could drink water. Wouldn’t have lasted that first week, otherwise.”

“That’s great!” Kol’daar crowed, a brilliant smile on his face. “We’ll just go to a lake.”

“Not a lot of *lakes* in this town. There are probably pools, somewhere, but I, uh. I can’t swim.”

“I’ll teach you.” Kol’daar grinned, hopeful and pleased with himself. He stroked his five o’clock shadow and snapped his fingers. “The roof!”

Nunzio blinked at the non sequitur. “The roof is not a pool.”

“No, I mean. You lost control up on the roof, remember? But nothing got broken but my comm. Why do you think that is?”

Nunzio remembered with dawning hope of his own. When he did think of the events of the Roof Incident, the comm hadn’t been the focus of the memory,

not when he could still practically hear Kol'daar's rough *'Do you yield?'* in his ear.

He cleared his throat and said, "Well... I don't know. Do you know what a lightning rod is?"

"No," Kol'daar said and added dubiously, "but it sounds... uncomfortable."

"What? No! No, it's not anything, y'know, kinky. It's science. Back on the roof, I thought that maybe, possibly, the comm kind of... attracted my curse's power, diverted it before the other affects could happen. I don't know for sure if that's how it works. Or if it is, I don't know what we'd get to divert the curse for the, uh, whole time."

Which, given his level of pent-up sexual frustration, probably wouldn't be that long. He'd deal with that particular pending embarrassing situation when it came.

"I wonder if magic would work just as well, or if it has to be technology," Kol'daar mused. "Speaking of technology, what about those condoms? I mean, they won't do much for you."

That was something Nunzio hadn't considered. And now that he *did*, he had another thought to avoid, because if the idea of fucking Kol'daar wasn't hot enough, now he had to deal with the realization that they'd do it bareback as a matter of course. His brain fried temporarily, but he cudged it back into action to answer.

"True. But I'm clean." After being with Zin, he'd had himself screened thoroughly; safe sex or not, Zin's enthusiastic promiscuity was enough to instill paranoia in anyone. And paranoia it was, because, as he explained to Kol'daar, "The Medical Guild's nanotech keeps, uh, any kind of interdimensional VD from spreading."

Kol'daar absorbed that with a bemused look. "Then why did you need condoms at all? The pamphlet said they're for disease prevention."

"Well, yeah, anywhere without the nanotech that's what they're for. But there's the other thing, too."

"Other thing?"

Nunzio shifted uncomfortably and cleared his throat. "Well, uh. To prevent pregnancy."

Kol'daar's eyebrows rose. "You like women as well?"

“No, but—” Nunzio grimaced and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Look, Twinks aren’t like Human males. I mean, they’re male, but they can, uh, you know. Get knocked up. If they’re not careful.”

The expression on Kol’daar’s face was somewhere between horrified disbelief and morbid curiosity. “You mean *Zinhalte* could be someone’s *mother* someday?”

They boggled at each other, the idea of a maternal *Zinhalte* more alien than the idea of male pregnancy in general.

“Christ, I hope not.” Nunzio shuddered and shook his head. “Anyway, condoms probably aren’t necessary with us, unless you’re not telling me something.”

“No, that’s definitely not something we have to worry about,” Kol’daar hastened to assure him, flushing a bit. “Um. But on that note, what about, er, body oil? Would you destroy that, too?”

“You mean lube?” Well, there was another detail that was too important to overlook. There wasn’t any reason to think that lube would be immune to his power, and if it degraded back to plain water or whatever, it wasn’t going to do the trick. Reluctantly, he admitted, “Probably.”

Nunzio wasn’t the kind of guy who enjoyed chafing and friction burn, either, so there went the butt sex. The silence that fell was disappointed on both sides, and he couldn’t help the defeatist sigh. Maybe he’d subconsciously been putting off this discussion for this very reason; even without being an active danger to Kol’daar, his ability still made sex so complicated it had to be more trouble than it was worth.

He caught Kol’daar’s eyes and asked a bit bleakly, “You really like my Heartsong enough to put up with... all this?”

“Oh, Nunzio.” Kol’daar reached for him again, linking their fingers gently and squeezing. “I like *more* than your Heartsong. I’ve liked you since I saw you chasing Skroinx around Lady Gronl’s shop, to be honest. You looked... I think the term people use here is *badass*. And then I got to know you, and I found out that you’re kind, funny, and honorable as well.”

Nunzio blinked. *Kol’daar* thought *he* was badass? High praise, indeed.

Then Kol’daar smirked and added, “Even if you are short.”

“I’m not *short*,” Nunzio objected, shoving him one-handed. He just laughed, rolling with the shove and then manhandling him closer, until Nunzio

found himself on Kol'daar's lap, back to his chest. Kol'daar rested his chin on top of Nunzio's head, still chuckling. It would have been sweet, and even comfortable, except Nunzio knew exactly what Kol'daar was doing: proving Nunzio's alleged shortness. He squirmed against the arms that had wrapped around his waist. "Stop that! Leggo."

"No." Kol'daar shook his head, arms tightening as if Nunzio was a novelty-sized teddy bear. He sighed contentedly, rumbling on the exhale, "I like you right here; so I'm keeping you."

The simple honesty in his voice, rumbling through Nunzio's back, made his breath catch, arrested by the sudden surge of his heart in his chest—and other places farther south. He gritted his teeth and tried to resist the urge to relax into the shivery heat of Kol'daar's body and the persistent, hopeful hardness that Kol'daar wasn't bothering to hide, and goddamn, Nunzio wanted him. The tingling of his ability rose sharply to press against the inside of his skin, only just barely held in check by his tattered, weary control.

Still, Nunzio had to ask, "Even if you couldn't Hear me?"

Kol'daar held him tighter, pressing a stubby kiss to his temple. "Yes. And if completely controlling your power is the only way we can be together, I'll... be fine. Though, I'll miss our Harmony."

He craned his neck to peer curiously back at Kol'daar. "Harmony?"

Kol'daar seemed to hesitate, a pensiveness flitting over his features, but the look smoothed after a beat. "That 'striking a chord' feeling. When it's found in the Orphic Noise, Songweavers call it Harmony. Our Heartsongs complement each other." He offered a smile that managed to somehow, despite the circumstances and everything they'd discussed up till now, be shy, almost fragile. Nunzio's heart stuttered again. "It's... not something that happens every day, and when it does, it's something to be cherished."

Nunzio shook his head, baffled how Kol'daar the mighty barbarian could be this much of a sappy bastard. Did he *listen* to himself? Who'd be dumb enough to fall for this kind of romantic tripe?

He belatedly noted that his own arms had covered Kol'daar's around his waist, and his hand had twined itself with Kol'daar's.

Dammit. Well, in for a penny, in for a pound. He admitted quietly, "Wish I *could* Hear it, the way you talk about it."

Kol'daar was silent, so silent Nunzio could almost hear the gears turning in the man's head. And then, he hummed.

Or rather, he Hummed.

And holy Jesus God. Nunzio gasped and arched helplessly back against him.

The sound itself was soft, a warm baritone note that Nunzio felt as much as heard. But it was so much more than just a physical vibration against Nunzio's back. The reverberation pierced straight to his core, beautiful and aching, plucking heartstrings he didn't even know he had. And something in Nunzio reacted like a struck tuning fork, his blood singing in his veins with every beat of his heart, and Kol'daar's magic was all around him, pressing on his skin, gentle but inescapable and, oh, *so hot*—

Kol'daar fell silent, and Nunzio could breathe again.

In fact, his chest heaved as if he'd just run a marathon. His erection had gone from a manageable half-mast to near-painful proportions. If he hadn't been sitting in Kol'daar's lap, he'd probably have plummeted all seven stories down. As it was, he felt his sheet and Kol'daar's loincloth disintegrate so thoroughly that there wasn't even any dust left over to feel gritty. Without the thin barriers between them, Kol'daar's own substantial arousal slipped along the crease of his ass and the seam of his thighs.

Where his legs touched the bed, it began to dissolve again, and Nunzio flinched and molded his limbs flush against Kol'daar's, calf to shin, heel to ankle. As he did, his pelvis shifted of its own accord. Kol'daar's cock jumped against him.

"Nngf," Nunzio said, already repeating the motion.

Kol'daar hissed a breath through his teeth. His amazing hands gripped Nunzio's hips to still him. At this point, Nunzio could tell that Kol'daar was in a similarly desperate condition; he could feel the man's heartbeat thundering against his shoulder blade, rapid breaths gusting hot and humid against his neck.

Nunzio swallowed hard and attempted speech again. "Wow."

"Uh-huh," Kol'daar panted.

"So that's... Harmony?"

"Uh-huh."

"Is it... always like that?" If so, not only did that make Nunzio the biggest prick-tease in the multiverse, but someone ought to give Kol'daar a gold medal for self-restraint.

“No, that, nfnf,” Kol’daar paused, his body under and behind Nunzio’s taut as the strings of his spiderharp. “That was, ah, the first time that happened.”

“Oh, good, I didn’t miss anything,” Nunzio said dazedly. He’d hate to be the only one this surprised. “But. But, uh, isn’t Singing dangerous for you?”

“In the presence of *Dissonance*,” Kol’daar clarified, nuzzling into Nunzio’s neck. “But Harmony is what Singing is *for*.”

Nunzio’s self-restraint had shattered under the sonic onslaught like the proverbial crystal wine glass, but if it hadn’t, that purring declaration, followed by a tongue against his pulse point, would have done the trick.

His position was a bit awkward, but if the goal was to get his wayward curse back on the leash, awkwardness was the only thing that would help. Certainly Kol’daar’s hard muscles and smooth skin against him weren’t going to. Catch-22 of Nunzio’s life: being too turned on *by* Kol’daar to control himself enough to touch anything *but* Kol’daar, which did not help him regain control.

He swallowed again. “I don’t think I should move. I think I’d break everything but you.”

“I think—you’re breaking *me*, too,” Kol’daar gasped, his hips giving an abortive little twitch. He inhaled shakily. “I—I can Hear you—with my whole body.”

Nunzio thought he might just know what he meant. He leaned against Kol’daar’s shoulder, tipping his head up to see Kol’daar’s flushed face. The barbarian’s pale irises were thin as silver linings around huge, black-hole pupils, scanning from Nunzio’s eyes, lips, and chest to lower where Nunzio’s cock strained toward the ceiling. He could feel that gaze like a caress, his own power surging along his skin.

“Nunzio.” Kol’daar’s voice was as rough, hot, and intoxicating as a fifth of whisky.

“Aw, hell,” Nunzio said, and reached a hand back to slide behind Kol’daar’s head and drag him down to crash their lips together.

Kol’daar kissed him like he meant to devour him and began to Hum. Nunzio drank the sound in, even as his breathing shuddered and his whole body jerked with the force of the feeling. It wasn’t as completely overwhelming now that he knew what to expect, but the sensation couldn’t compare with anything he’d ever experienced.

Now he knew what an amp must feel like. Kol'daar's music-magic pulsed through him, electrifying him from the inside out, each separate nerve blaring pleasure.

The sounds themselves didn't seem to make sense, like no song Nunzio had ever heard. There wasn't a melody exactly, but it wasn't tuneless, either. The notes were warm, gregarious, and sincere, but layered in something fierce and righteous, and a poignant thread of longing setting an undertone throughout it all.

It was Kol'daar's Heartsong.

The realization, intimate in a way Nunzio had never anticipated, stole what little breath he had to spare. He was unprepared for the flash flood of both raw desire and shocked tenderness that drowned him on the heels of this revelation. And every tone penetrated deeply, resonating a kind of bliss that Nunzio couldn't describe, even to himself, other than it felt utterly *right*.

The upshot of this was that he found himself writhing on Kol'daar's lap like a model on the hood of a muscle car. Kol'daar's hips bucked against him, cock a rigid brand that slipped unobtrusively between Nunzio's inner thighs, nudging behind and then underneath his balls to poke its red tip up from Nunzio's lap. Nunzio moaned and squeezed his thighs together to provide a tighter channel, to *feel* him more. His free hand dropped down to cup his sac and at the same time run a circle with his thumb over that silky, slick head.

Kol'daar broke the kiss to gulp a deep, ragged breath, his muscles under Nunzio's tense and straining. The intense sensation of their Harmony ceased, and Nunzio realized his calf had slid off Kol'daar's at some point, because it started to slip through the hanging edge of the covers again.

Wait. Only *started* to slip?

As he pulled back, his lust-drunk mind slowly connected the dots. He was only breaking things when Kol'daar wasn't Humming, or Harmonizing, or whatever the hell they'd call it later.

He was about to point that out, but then Kol'daar nipped and sucked on the side of his neck, Humming again, and coherent thought departed itself offplane. One large, sure hand dragged itself up Nunzio's front, through his happy trail and then his moderately thicker chest hair, curiously tracing scars and then circling his peaked nipples. The barbarian's other hand wrapped around Nunzio's cock at the same time.

Nunzio couldn't help the long moan that burst from his lips. Distantly, he recognized the fact that his voice was, quite unintentionally, pitched a perfect third above Kol'daar's.

Christ. They were *literally* making beautiful music together.

Kol'daar's fist worked Nunzio's length with ruthless skill. Nunzio could do nothing but rock feverishly up into Kol'daar's grip, and back down to meet Kol'daar's increasingly demanding thrusts. They found a primal rhythm and fell into it, bodies and hearts pounding together. Sweat and their own fluids slicked them both. The preternatural pleasure resounded between them, an echo that amplified itself like a feedback loop.

Beneath him, Kol'daar's Hum petered out, his breathing erratic with the edge of desperation. Nunzio had just enough coordination to clench his legs tight together, his hand curling around the head of Kol'daar's cock. Kol'daar's chin rasped against his shoulder as the man groaned in a way that was still musical—

—An undertone of longing burst to the forefront, and Nunzio knew that this wouldn't be enough, that Kol'daar wanted something else, something *more*, and Nunzio was only too happy to provide.

“Sing, Kol'daar,” he commanded breathlessly, even as he began to move.

The barbarian gulped a shaky breath, and then his voice spilled over them, waves of music-magic crashing around them, calling up a response from Nunzio's curse, which flared brightly beneath his skin. Nunzio pulled free of the man's grip to turn fully. His knees landed on either side of Kol'daar's thighs on the bed, and did not fall through. Kol'daar's eyes widened, brows rising incredulously, but he didn't stop Singing.

“Lightning rod,” Nunzio explained, grinning victoriously, and then he pounced.

He laid hands on Kol'daar's shoulders and pushed him down against the mattress. Kol'daar, a credit to his Songweaver training, kept the note going even as he jounced on the bed—the sound of which overall was, “aaaAAah”—before Nunzio covered the larger man's body with his own as best he could. Beneath him, Kol'daar shuddered and curved up to meet Nunzio as he sealed their lips together as they both moaned at the slide of their cocks against one another.

The notes of their Heartsongs twined together in complete accord.

Eventually, Kol'daar had to break for breath, but by then Nunzio had gotten himself prone on top of him, so the bed was spared a second disintegration. Meanwhile, Kol'daar's hands roved restlessly up Nunzio's back and then down to clutch the curves of his ass, pulling him in hard, shoving their hips together. Nunzio slid one hand down between them to encircle both their lengths, frissons of sheer need and blind lust radiating from his whole body to this one point. They kissed and rutted, and Nunzio held Kol'daar down, and Kol'daar hummed emphatic approval.

He swallowed Kol'daar's Heartsong, gave up his own through the singing of his nerves. Their Harmony swelled to a fever pitch, the crescendo of pleasure holding them suspended like a fermata before the grand finale.

Kol'daar arched so hard his back bowed up off the bed. "Nunzio!"

Nunzio, for his part, couldn't speak. He couldn't even breathe, senses in overload. He bit down on Kol'daar's collarbone to hear him cry out again, and then they were coming, both of them, slick and hot over Nunzio's hand, spattering their bellies and chests.

He'd heard about people blacking out during intense orgasms, but he'd never experienced it. Now, everything went dark. All he could do was feel the first massive burst of his release, the hammering of his heart against his ribcage, and all the same signs in Kol'daar, which only made everything that much more potent, stretching pleasure out past what Nunzio had even thought possible.

Eventually, they wound down. Around them, the room was silent except for the sound of them catching their breath. Nunzio reluctantly released their softening cocks and collapsed against Kol'daar's chest. Kol'daar didn't complain about being squashed, just wrapped his arms possessively around Nunzio once again.

"Nnnng," he said.

"Mmmhm," Nunzio replied.

It was so very tempting to pass out right about now, but as Nunzio blinked with sated lethargy, he realized something troublesome. Or it *would* be troublesome if Kol'daar hadn't just disintegrated his brain with his sexy magic. Still, shouldn't his vision have come back online by now? Maybe he'd gone blind. Well, whatever. Worth it. He'd worry about it in the morning.

Beneath him, Kol'daar shifted, looking around. "What happened to the lights?"

“Mff?” Nunizo raised his head off Kol’daar’s shoulder. Had Kol’daar gone blind, too? Should they be proud of themselves, or just alarmed at this point?

As he blinked into darkness, he turned his head in the direction of the window. The greenish light of triple moons filtered through the gap in the blackout curtains, along with the orangish light pollution endemic to Splinterpoint at night.

So he wasn’t blinded by passion. But then, what the hell had happened to the lights?

He rallied his two remaining brain cells to say, “Wha-huh?”

The sounds of confused, angry tenants drifted in from the hallway outside and the floors above and below them. The word ‘broken’ seemed to be getting repeated rather frequently.

A sinking unease managed to filter through Nunzio’s afterglow.

“But... your music-magic. The Harmony.” Nunzio struggled to string his thoughts together. “You were my lightning rod. I didn’t even wreck the *bed*.”

Kol’daar remained guiltily silent. Nunzio pushed himself up to squint at the murky outline of Kol’daar’s face.

“What?”

“Um, actually,” he said reluctantly, “if you recall, I sort of. Stopped Singing. Right before we—”

“Oh, no.”

That first pulse of orgasm *had* seemed a bit too intense, hadn’t it? Now that he’d regained a bit of objectivity, he could admit there’d been more to it than just a physical pulse. In fact, it kind of felt like the onset of his curse, but it *couldn’t* have been his curse. It hadn’t even hurt—

Just like the Roof Incident, when he hadn’t even noticed that he’d broken Kol’daar’s comm. Only on a much larger scale.

“*Fuck*.” Nunzio lurched to his feet, limbs rubbery with a confusing wash of postcoital endorphins and a fresh wave of adrenaline. “I gotta get out of here.”

“No one will know it was you,” Kol’daar said, but he sounded like he was trying to convince himself as much as anyone else.

Nunzio gave a hysterical laugh. “Have you ever heard of Murphy’s Law?”

“*Nunzio!*”

Right on cue, Vorkra's thunderous bellow rattled the glass pane of the window as Nunzio threw it open.

"You can't leave *naked*." Kol'daar hurried to Nunzio's side, stopping him with one leg slung over the windowsill. Nunzio turned, expecting a loincloth or even another sheet. Instead, he found a likely *formerly* enchanted sword shoved into his hand. "Take this."

Nunzio stared at him, awash in a ridiculous amount of helpless, if exasperated, affection. "Hradical warriors have the priorities straight, I see."

"I'll hold her off as long as I can." Kol'daar smirked in the moonlight, and for a split second, even though they were both bare-assed and covered in the traces of their shared passion, Nunzio felt fucking invincible with this man watching his back.

He stole one more quick, fierce kiss, and as he darted away across the fire escape, he could still feel Kol'daar laughing against his lips.

The End

Author Bio

Regina St. Claire is a queer freelance author, specializing in fantasy and science fiction. Originally from the wild west of North Dakota, she now resides in the significantly more civilized area of central Minnesota. Her hobbies include reading far too many books, tabletop gaming, nature walks, baking cookies, and waking up her two cats when they're sleeping, because vengeance is sweet.

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