

*"This changes everything. Lady Hawn is a paramount threat."*

*"What do we do with Kilhaven? He's definitely a psyker."*

*"The Inquisition has been hunting Lady Hawn for decades. Finding out how the Warp witch hides itself is priceless, so let's cut the young man some slack."*

*"Do we dare turn him loose? We don't even know how potent of a psyker he is."*

*"Confessor Lewin assures us that he's sane if not entirely stable. I'm not assuming he's harmless, nor did I say cut him loose. He'll have to be watched at all times, but keeping him occupied might do him some good. What's your opinion?"*

*"He's been in isolation for two months, meaning it's difficult to tell. He barely survived his encounter with Lady Hawn, and he's still recovering his senses. He wants to go home."*

*"That's a good sign. We were lucky that Xavier Lewin didn't inform Ordo Hereticus of this matter first. They would have torn the young man apart and left the Warp witch behind."*

*"So, how do we tackle the witch? With it being masked, we don't know how to find it."*

*"Lewin believes that Kilhaven can help in that regard, assuming the scion still has access to the underhive."*

*"Inquisitor, what do you think Lady Hawn is doing on Fulcrum IV?"*

*"Lady Hawn is only a seed. We must assume it's on its way to becoming a daemonhost and proceed with that in mind. Once we pinpoint the witch, the Shadow Legion can destroy it, but if the creature ascends further, and Hawn arrives fully incarnate, we're talking about a merciful exterminatus of Hydra II in order to preserve the planet."*

The two men took turns babysitting. When Interrogator Marsden returned, Confessor Lewin stepped out.

*"Paric, we need you with us on this."*

It wasn't a negotiation, but I had to ask, "When the operation is over, what happens to me?"

*"I can see you're an optimist." Marsden didn't say more.*

*OK, then. "What do you want me to do?"*

*"Pinpoint the Warp witch or its altar and, if possible, scout its defenses. Once we know the entity's exact location, we'll send in the Adeptus Astartes to finish it off."*

*"Do you know why it's here beneath Hydra Secundus?"*

*"Lady Hawn intends to give birth to a Warp daemon. The hive provides all of its nourishment, and once the daemon incarnates, its curse could spread across the entire planet."*

I knew Warp curses intimately. Death by firing squad was an easier way to go.

*"And what if the daemon arrives before we find it?"*

*"We'll know the second it arrives, and we have a backup plan. It entails the activation of a plasma bomb in the underhive."*

*"You speak like the bomb already exists."*

“It will be in place by this evening at the latest. When detonated, the hive’s lowest sectors will become a ball of plasma, and the rest of Hydra II will implode. We have more dire options, if necessary.” Marsden wasn’t joking.

“I want to see my family.”

“Do whatever you must.”

Confessor Lewin returned with Lord Rainer. “We’ve spoken with Governor Lachlan. He acknowledges the situation and is grateful to the Inquisition for its support.”

“What about me?” After another long stint in the Medicae, I could smell my coming release.

“Paric, the governor has been informed of your status and your assistance in the matter. You will be given a permanent escort and a chance to proceed as you see fit.”

“Does my father know?”

“No,” said Rainer. “Very few outside of this room have any idea of the threat, your status, or the presence of the Inquisition.”

“Lord Rainer, I don’t even know my status, not here or in the underhive.”

“Understood. Are you ready for this?” He’d ignored my concern, which I guess was an answer.

Physically, I’d been returned to serviceable shape through surgeries, stim fields, therapies, and enhanced nutrients. Mentally, I wasn’t nearly ready but knew the steps I would take to get there. Emotionally, well, I’d faced the firing squad and figured I’d go in with the heart of a ghost.

“Paric, your escort is here. Please cooperate as it is a condition of your release.”

Junior Arbiter Luna Rainer knocked and entered the office. She was loaded for bear and offered me a warm greeting, “Paric, let’s go.”

I’d missed her, too.

We caught the nearest service lift for the short ride up into the overhive. Luna used her thumb and voice prints to access Sector 100A. I used mine to lock the lift doors and back her into a corner with the duty end of a hellgun pressed up against my chin.

I needed to know if I still had standing, but more than that, I had a crucial point or two to make. “Caraluna Rainer, what do you think of my mother?”

“What?”

“Your mother is a sharp woman and a delight. I’ve enjoyed meeting her, and if she was my mother-in-law, I wouldn’t complain.”

*No, this wasn’t that sort of proposal.*

“Paric, what does that have to do with anything?”

“Ignore the mother-in-law reference and answer my question.”

“Lady Kilhaven is soft-hearted and warm. You were lucky growing up.”

“How do you think she will feel when she sees me today?” I didn’t know what Confessor Lewin or Lord Rainer had been telling my family but had to assume they were in the dark on all of it.

“She will be overcome with joy to see her son alive and well.”

I needed her focused attention and an imprint of strong emotion to lock it in. “Her son the *mass murderer*?”

“Paric—”

“Luna, look at the scar on my ear. Do you remember it?”

Already face to face, I turned my head slightly to the right.

“It’s gone. They must have removed it when they repaired all your other skin damage.”

“Why would they do that?” It had been a small scar, one that even a mother could love.

Luna shrugged, “It’s what they do.”

I turned my head further and bent my ear forward, showing her that there are two sides to every wound.

She saw it. “They missed the back side. That was careless.”

“Luna, if anything inexplicable happened to you, I’d want your mother to know the truth. I’d want her to know whether you were alive or dead.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

I flicked my ear once more, “Never forget.”

I let Luna make the introductions before I walked into the living room. It gave my mother a second to compose herself, and she held her breath until I emerged from the long front hall. I wasn’t a ghost after all.

“You look as good as new.” She actually wept this time. They’d been locked out completely until the others had decided my fate.

“Lady Kilhaven, I will be staying on the premises with your son for his security,” said Luna.

I couldn’t let that one go by. “I’ll need a bigger bed and some clean sheets. Maybe some his-and-her restraints.”

Lady Kilhaven returned in all her glory and manners. She didn’t even ask why. “Caraluna, we’ve got plenty of extra rooms. We’ll put you in a room right down the hall from Paric. It’s a quiet wing.”

“That works for me,” I said. “We’ll have plenty of privacy.”

Luna didn’t crack a smile. “You’ll also have plenty of restraints, and I’ll be reprogramming the release codes.”

“My safe word is Starfire, in case you get too rough.”

“My safe word is porcupine.” Jenna poked her head up from behind the couch, summoning her brother, the bear.

I’d messaged Asher, hoping to restock my work clothes. It had been two months since I’d canceled on her, and I’d only gotten my comms device reenabled today. When

she finally replied, it wasn't what I'd expected.

*"I saw the video. I know what happened to the last set of armor and its owner. What was I wearing the last time we met?"*

There are some images a young man never forgets, at least until something better comes along to replace them. I offered Asher plenty of details on the curve, cut, and color of her bodysuit that day. It had kept me occupied while the designer's skilled team fit my body armor for a night of brutal punishment.

"When?" she replied.

"Now or sooner. Wear something new. I've grown bored with your last outfit."

An hour later, Asher didn't disappoint, and it was good to see the look on Luna Rainer's face. She wasn't the only beautiful woman in my world.

Ash used my undivided attention to her advantage. "You still owe me a training session. When will you pay up?"

"Tomorrow. Clear your calendar. I've got a special afternoon outing planned."

"Will she be coming along?" Asher nodded at Luna.

"She's my junior arbiter escort. They were selling them down in Sector 44B for a bargain price, and I couldn't pass one up. I thought it was for one night only, and now, I'm stuck with her."

Asher whispered, "I saw the video."

Her green and yellow camouflage dress worked perfectly. No one ever saw the anxious young woman hiding underneath.

"So, that's why you brought me new boots," I replied.

The last pair, soaked in blood, had been incinerated in the Medicae ward with the rest of my clothing. Even my body armor had gone into the recycler. Asher had thought through every detail, and it woke me up.

I sent everyone out of my bedroom suite. Everyone except Ash. She didn't want to sit down, and she couldn't hold still long enough to look me in the eye. Having shocked her before, I'd utterly broken Ash's reality with my back-alley execution. She was anything but bored. I led her over to my bed and told her to lie down. I gently slid her hands into my over-large restraints, but I didn't activate the locking sequence.

"Do you trust me?" I said.

"You canceled our date."

"Is that what it was?"

"Maybe. Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you cancel?"

"You saw the video. Would you have gone out with me after that?"

"That was the same night?"

"I messaged you twenty minutes before it happened."

Asher pointed her chin at me, "Nobody has ever been that desperate to avoid seeing

me.”

“I was. That video showed the highlight of my night.”

Asher finally looked me in the eye, searching for the truth. “It was the first shot, wasn’t it? When they blew the bottle of Starfire out of your hand.”

She was right. *How could she know that?*

I pressed the activate switch, slowly clamping her wrists in place. “I’m impressed by your insight. Starfire. That’s my safe word. What’s yours?”

Her anxiety fled, replaced by a fire that burned right through her dress.

“I’ve forgotten mine,” she whispered, “but maybe you can show me what it means to need one.”