

JOSHUA VIOLA WITH NICHOLAS KARPUK

"... EXCITING SCI-FI ADVENTURE ..."

-STEVE ALTEN, NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF MEG & DOMAIN



THE BANE OF YOTO

2012
NEW YORK
BOOK FESTIVAL
honorable mention

PRAISE FOR THE BANE OF YOTO

“An exciting Sci-Fi adventure delivered in a classic Hero’s Journey meets wicked new Alien World!”

- Steve Alten, New York Times and International bestselling author of *MEG* and *DOMAIN*

“Josh Viola has crafted a gritty genre-mash of science fiction and fantasy, powered by iconic characters, imaginative action, and fate-of-the-world stakes. This is widescreen fiction, people: It’s in your face, larger than life, and refuses to be ignored.”

- JC Hutchins, award-winning author of *7TH SON: DESCENT* and *PERSONAL EFFECTS: DARK ART*

“Josh Viola’s debut novel is a science-fantasy epic, overflowing with violence and dark magic, romance and heartbreak, slavery and rebellion, cruelty and redemption. Above all it is the story of the transformation of little Yoto into an enormous creature whose new powers attract the wrath and vengeance of beings who possess the powers of the gods. Go Yoto!”

- Keith Ferrell, former editor of *OMNI MAGAZINE* and author of *PASSING JUDGMENT*

“The Bane of Yoto combines hero elements of *The Incredible Hulk* with the alien landscape of *Avatar*, resulting in a rich storytelling environment that offers unlimited possibilities for video games.”

-Wyeth Ridgway, President and CEO of *LEVIATHAN GAMES*

**THE
BANE[®]
OF
YOTO**

JOSHUA VIOLA
WITH NICHOLAS KARPUK

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This is a work of fiction. All the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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*This novel is dedicated to my grandparents, Robert and Marilyn,
for your ongoing love, support and interest in everything I do.*

-Josh

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Sometimes the events meant to destroy you
are the conditions that bring you to life.

-Ancient Numah Adage

PART ONE: SONS

CHAPTER ONE

Ajyin smoldered long after the Arbitrators' purified energy incinerated the world...

* * *

These were the boundaries of Yoto's universe:

*More shadow than light... walls that imprisoned rather than protected...
more stench than fresh air...*

Others among the surviving Numah—his mother, Myrine, his father, Morik, his brother, Eon, the healer, Dilar, and his wife, Selat, their daughter, Celeste, other adults in the cramped, crowded cells that the Olokun had forced the Numah to carve for themselves out of rock, imprisoned behind gated doors that the Numah had built to harsh Olokun specifications—had known far more, and Yoto remained alert to every scrap of their tales, their stories, their *memories*, learning as much as he could of *what had been*.

Even as a child, boundaries did not appeal to Yoto.

* * *

“Tell me about the moon,” Yoto said to Eon.

“There is no moon,” his older brother said. “There hasn't been a moon since before you were born.”

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Yoto pressed one three-fingered hand against the floor of the rough stone cell to which he and his family and other families had been herded not many days and nights before.

“I thought *this* was the moon,” the young Numah said.

“It was,” said Eon, roughly. “But it’s not anymore. Now it’s just Neos. It’s just... *here*. Where we are. Where Vega and his Witch and her magics brought us to do his work.”

Yoto placed his other hand on Eon’s thick forearm, so much larger and more powerful than his own. The blue of Eon’s fur had already deepened, approaching the rich hue that would mark him as an adult. Yoto’s pale fur looked almost white in comparison. Yoto wondered why his people looked different than their captors. He stared at the ears sprouting outward from the base of Eon’s neck, his long arms framing a sunken chest and fibrous torso unevenly matched with a pair of thin legs.

“If it’s still here, if it’s where we are,” Yoto said softly, “why isn’t it still a moon?”

Eon sighed heavily, and Yoto cringed a bit at his brother’s impatience with him. He didn’t mean to annoy Eon; he never meant to annoy anyone, and he worked hard not to. But since the Olokun had brought his family and the other families to the cells, everyone got annoyed more easily, and Yoto knew why.

They were scared, Yoto knew that too, even his father and the other adults were scared. Eon was scared, too, but tried hard not to show it. Yoto tightened his small fingers against Eon’s muscular arm, but his brother shrugged away the attempt at comfort.

“You ask too many questions,” Eon said.

“Because I never saw the moon,” Yoto said, his voice small. “I just want to know things.”

“Know *this*, then,” Eon said, nearly hissing. “It would have been better for *all* of us to have died on Ajyin, better for you never to have been born. Born to die here, a life-prisoner of General Vega. That’s all you are and all the General will ever allow you to be.”

"I'll be more than that," Yoto said, surprising himself with his words.

Eon snorted. "But you'll never be what we *were*. What we were on Ajyin, free beneath the light of Neos."

"What was Ajyin like?" Yoto said, eager to change the subject. Before Eon could chide him for asking again a question he had asked so many times before, Yoto added, "Please, Eon. Just tell me one more time."

But Eon was clearly in no mood to grant his younger brother a favor.

"Tell the story yourself," he said sharply, then drew a slow breath that seemed to steady him. "Tell it to me, if you want. You know it. You've heard it often enough."

Yoto looked up at Eon, but his brother was staring at the cell's barred gate. Eon's ears pricked and twitched—Yoto knew he was listening for sounds of their father and the other males returning, but there was no sound of them. Only the sounds which even Yoto could hear, the sounds of other prisoners moaning, some weeping, others coughing in great wracking spasms. And beyond that, above and behind all the sounds of the Numah were the constant sounds of Olokun activity, the clicking of the creatures' organic armor plates against each other as they marched, the deep ugly bass of their voices and the even deeper, harsher tones of their laughter as they reveled in their power over the Numah.

"Tell me, Yoto," Eon said, his voice suddenly softer, almost soothing. "Tell me what you know."

"I know I never saw the moon," Yoto said. "I know I never saw Neos in the skies above Ajyin, when it made its own light and that was the light of life that shone down on all the Numah. Now Neos makes no light because General Vega's shield hides it from the skies. Before we are old, Neos will be gone from the skies completely."

"And?" Eon said.

"And Ajyin and all the Numah Neos shined down on are gone, destroyed by the Arbitrators before I was born."

"Not *all* of the Numah," Eon said.

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“No,” Yoto said. “You’re here, and the rest of us who are here. And that’s all who are left of the Numah.”

“It will be enough,” Eon said. “Someday you will see, Yoto, that those of us who are here will be enough.”

Yoto did not know what Eon meant, but he knew enough to nod agreement and, once it became clear that Eon was once more slipping into anger, Yoto moved quietly away from his brother and pressed his face against the bars of the cell.

* * *

Curled close to her parents in a corner of the cell they shared with Yoto’s family, Celeste watched the brothers.

She had known them all her life, and like Yoto, all of her life that she could recall had been here, on Neos. Had that not been true, Celeste knew, had Vega not captured and brought them here, she would have had a sister.

She *did* have a sister—a sister, Nilan, who had died beneath the talons of Olokun soldiers during the madness and cruelty of the capture raids. Not even their father Dilar’s great healing skills could save her.

But that had all happened before...

Before.

Sometimes Celeste wondered what it was like to have a *before*. She had none, only what memories her father and Selat, her mother, shared with her. They did not speak often of shattered Ajiyin, of the child whose body had been left there to be destroyed along with the rest of the planet, and even less often of what life had been like on the world beneath the glow of Neos. She could only imagine Neos aglow with light, radiant with the love the moon had shown for its worshipers. There was so little light in the cell, in the mines.

So little remained of the life her parents, the other adults, the older children such as Eon, had known. She wished they would share more of their memories, but she accepted their silence as the price of their pain.

Shifting slightly against her mother's warmth, Celeste turned her attention to Yoto's mother, Myrine, and smiled as she stared at the colorful beads which Myrine had somehow managed to bring with her from Ajyin, and keep with her all this time.

* * *

Someone in an adjoining cell was smoking.

Yoto pressed his head closer to the bars that faced the passageway, moving carefully so as not to awaken his mother. He wrapped two fingers of his right hand around a cell bar, stroking his parched lips with the third. Yoto breathed deeply, capturing as much of the acrid smoke as he could. Sharp and biting as the smoke's scent was, it was more pleasant than the foul, fetid odors of the prisoners who filled the cells lining the tunnel.

Prisoners whose numbers had just grown larger.

Yoto had been alerted by the sound of the next cell being opened, the mocking laughter of the Olokun guards as they roughly shoved a prisoner into it, the clang of the door closing, sealing the new captive into his fate.

The Olokun did not depart immediately. Positioning himself carefully, Yoto could barely make out the guards' massive twin-toed feet, three times the size of the largest Numah's boots. Yoto swallowed hard against the sourness that rose within him at the glimpses of the Olokuns' amber flesh between the heavy, blood-red plates of organic armor their biology produced, each guard branded with white tribal stripes opposing their natural crimson tones. Pierced at the ankles by fierce, razored talons that could shred a Numah with a single swipe, Olokun armor grew with its owner, creating a living protection that guarded the life of its wearer. The armor, and the tendrils of living material that bore nourishment and tethered the plates to the Olokun disgusted Yoto, nearly as much as the sickening color of Olokun flesh he saw beneath a gap in the plates. He swallowed hard once more, and turned his attention from the Olokun to his own, unarmored skin, its blue-gray hue comforting, natural.

Outside Yoto's field of vision, the torsos and arms of the Olokun were, he knew, even more fearsome. Did these Olokun bear on their forearms the Cestus Parasite, an organism the Olokun used in battle as a weapon and

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shield, wrapped around their arms like a gauntlet? Yoto shuddered and turned his face from the Olokun.

Though he had looked away, Yoto could still hear the guards' mutterings, the deep bass typical of the Olokun, setting his small form on edge. The Olokun tone and its resonances were like a knife to the Numah. Around Yoto, others awakened by the commotion in the next cell, pressed hands against their ears, seeking to block the hated, dreaded sounds of their captors.

Yoto did not cover his ears.

He bit down against the revulsion created in him by the noise that the Olokun called language. Yoto did not know the Olokun tongue as well as others in the cell, but he knew enough, and learned more at every opportunity.

The guards were speaking of the new captive, occasionally tossing a comment at him.

"Be comfortable here, *Numah*," one guard said. "As comfortable as you can be."

"For as long as you can be," said the other. "For as long as we *allow* you to be."

Olokun laughter was, if anything, more revolting than Olokun speech, yet Yoto did not flinch.

"And you, old one," the first guard said. "Our hospitality extends to you as well. Here! A pipe, and leaf for you. Enough for a bowlful—just don't take too much time with it."

There was the sound of something striking the floor of the cell.

"Ah: then?" came the voice of the old man who occupied the cell. Yoto had heard the elder's voice before, speaking madly to himself of other days, other places, even of other *worlds*.

"Then what? As if you aren't aware!" The guard's laughter echoed in the shadowed tunnel.

“Smoke in fine health, old one,” said the other guard. The two Olokun laughed together as they left, their footsteps like thunder in the tunnel.

For a time after the guards’ departure there had been no noise from the other cell, only the occasional cough as the old man smoked. Then there was a groan, low and long, and Yoto heard another voice.

“What is this place? Why was I brought here?”

“Pretend no ignorance with me,” the elder said. “You were brought here as was I, as were we all. For the pleasure and the punishment of the Olokun.”

The new prisoner’s voice sounded young. “I am a miner, a good one, I did their work for them. I did no harm.” Yoto cringed with disgust at the desperation in the young Numah’s tone. *He* would never admit to such desperation, nor so clearly reveal his fear.

“We do harm to them by being Numah,” the elder said. “You need know no more than that—there is no more to know, nor has there been since the Arbitrators claimed our Ajyin. Since Vega and his Witch brought us to Neos and robbed our moon of its life by making it serve as our prison. What more would you know?”

The pitch of the new prisoner’s voice grew more strident. “What have *I* done to anger them? I worked their mines, I produced my quota of the Aegis-ore, more than that! And yet they have taken me from my work, my family, brought me here—for what?”

Yoto knew that his parents and Eon had wondered much the same thing. He had spoken of such things, quietly, with Celeste, the only other Numah of his own age in this cell.

Their life in the deep mines—the only life Yoto had known—had not been pleasant, their rocky warren hardly larger than this cell. But for all the hardships, the family of Morik and Myrine had known some measure of security: one day for slaves in the mine was much like the next.

But since being brought to this cell, each day was dominated by a single, unspoken question: *Was this the day they would die?*

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“Perhaps,” the elder said, “you worked *too* well. It is said that General Vega is alert for any Numah who displays *too* much ability, whatever the task assigned to him. He eliminates the talented whenever he finds them, removing us from his fears.”

“Us? And what is your talent?”

The older Numah chuckled softly, and a thick cloud of smoke drifted into the tunnel, tickling Yoto’s nostrils.

“My talent,” the elder said at last, “is what I know, and how I came to know it.”

“Riddles!” shouted the younger prisoner, loud enough to disturb the sleep of some of those around Yoto. “Spare me your puzzles.”

“No puzzles,” the elder said almost gently. “I know many things, and learned more than a few of them on the surface.”

Yoto grasped the cell’s bars and tried to pull himself to a position from which he could hear more clearly. The surface!

“You lie,” the younger prisoner said.

“I do not. What purpose would lying to you serve? Nor, frankly, do we have time to waste on lies.” He chuckled again. “Or puzzles. I tell you truth.”

“You have seen the Aegis?” the young man said, his tone gentler.

“I have, and more.” Another heavy cloud of smoke drifted into the corridor. “I saw the first of the Aegis panels as Vega and his Witch’s powers had them grown, nurtured their life, witnessed their rise into orbit above this moon we once loved so. I saw the Aegis begin to assume its shape in the sky, a few panels growing slowly at first. Then more as the Olokun—and, yes, we Numah slaves—grew more adept at extracting the Aegis-ore and creating from it the nourishment and extracted the minerals that feed the shield’s life. The living shield that Vega feels will defend Neos against the Arbitrators. Yes, I have seen.”

“Seen enough?” the young Numah said softly.

“For what?”

“You know. Don’t pretend that you don’t.” His voice was harsh once more.

“The Aegis doesn’t frighten me,” the elder said. “It holds no sway.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“What you choose to believe, or not, is no concern of mine. I simply want to finish my pipe before... Before.”

The elder inhaled deep, the end of his pipe glowing with heat, its light revealing a shade of yellow in his eyes to the younger miner.

Yoto heard the rustle of rapid movement in the next cell. The young prisoner’s voice became enraged. “Stay away from me! Your eyes... you have it! You have Shield Fever!”

“Shield Fever is a myth,” the old Numah said calmly. “A tale told to frighten children—and simple-minded miners.”

“No, no it’s not! I know it’s real! I’ve seen others with it, seen their madness, seen them take their own lives rather than live beneath the Aegis.”

“I have no idea what you think you have seen. But living beneath the lash of the Olokun is far likelier to drive Numah to madness than living beneath the Aegis.”

“Stay away from me!”

“Silence yourself, you fool!” the elder hissed. “Let me finish my pipe in peace.”

“Let me out! The Fever! Let me –“

The sounds of rapid movement caught Yoto by surprise even as the young prisoner’s words were choked off, replaced by strangling coughs, the sound of thrashing legs and arms.

All but instantly the lights in the corridor came to life, the tunnel itself resounding with the thunder of Olokun feet on stone floors. The guards

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opened the cell, shouting for the elder Numah to release the younger. Yoto tightened his grip on the bars.

“Kill him if you will, old one,” one guard said, “but kill him later. That’s what he’s here for—and you.”

Loud gasps erupted from the young prisoner as he gulped for air. “He tried, he tried--”

“He failed,” one of the Olokun said, laughing savagely. “Perhaps he’ll have better fortune in the Arena. Now, come along. We’ll see if you fight more fiercely for the General than you did in here.”

“My pipe,” the elder said softly. Yoto heard the first hint of fear and weariness in the old voice. “I’ve not finished.”

“Yes,” the Olokun said, “you have.”

The tunnel lights dimmed as the guards took the two prisoners away.

Only gradually did Yoto release his grip on the bars of the cell. This was not the first time the guards had taken Numah from their cells for combat in the Arena, but it was the first time Yoto fully realized how helpless the Numah were before their Olokun masters. Always before they had seemed only a fact of life, as unchanging and permanent as the stone walls that imprisoned him and his family.

One day things will be different, Yoto thought as he turned away from the bars at last. Something had begun to change.

* * *

Eon *watched*.

The older son of Morik and Myrine missed nothing. Every movement and minor motion was taken in by Eon.

What did he watch for?

Information, of course. Information about the Olokun, their nature, their strengths—and above all, any weaknesses they might possess.

Older than Yoto, Eon's curiosity about the life to which the Numah had been condemned was both tempered and deepened by experience... and by memory. Memories Yoto did not possess.

Eon had known another life, however briefly. A life lived free on Ajyin, not this dark existence beneath the heels of the Olokun in the tunnels of Neos.

When he closed his eyes, Eon could see, as clearly as though it were before him, the comfortable home on Ajyin into which he had been born. He remembered when the tendrils that flowed from Myrine's head, as they did from the heads of all mature Numah females, had been ornately braided and well cared-for instead of matted and filthy. He could see love in his mother's eyes—and see those eyes without the pain that now overpowered all else in Myrine's features.

More than that, behind closed eyes Eon could see his father smile. He did not know if Yoto's young mind held even scraps of such memories, but he doubted it. Yoto was little more than an infant when the Olokun seized the Numah and brought them here to perform their labors and provide their... *entertainment*. Morik had not smiled since then, not that Eon could recall. Only when he closed his eyes could Eon see what had been, what had been taken from them.

Eon did not close his eyes often.

* * *

Yoto sat near his mother and brother, waiting.

They were waiting for Morik and two other adult males to return. *To be brought back*, Yoto thought.

To be brought back by the Olokun guards who had taken them early in the day. There was no chortling or gloating, nor any unusual derision from the guards as they gathered Morik and the others—a good sign. Guards always made it known if their prisoners were bound for the Arena. Today was not that day for Morik, though the day would come soon, Yoto feared. The Numah crowded into this cell were being held for their own trials, being held until it was time for their deaths to be put on display.

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Yoto chased the thoughts away, as far away as he could. The presence of the trial and the fates that waited in the Arena would always be there, but he did not think that those fates were due to arrive today.

But if not the Arena—where had the men been taken? Back to the mines? To other labor? Perhaps to the surface? Yoto had no way of knowing, and would not until his father was returned.

If he was returned.

And if he were not?

That possibility always existed, as much a fact of Yoto's young life as the stone walls and prison bars. Yoto had given the matter some thought, more in the days since the old and young Numah had been taken from the next cell and escorted to their certain deaths in the Arena. Deaths for the amusement of General Vega and the Olokun. Deaths that were witnessed by other Numah brought to the Arena to sit among the Olokun. Yoto had heard some of them speak of this. Of how the Numah anguish at what they were forced to witness only added to Olokun enjoyment.

Sometimes Yoto dreamed that he had been summoned to the Arena, and forced to watch as his father was thrust into mortal combat. To watch as his father died. To watch as the Olokun came next for his mother, for Eon. The dreams were as vivid as reality, and when his mother or father shook him free from the dreamworld, awakening him from his moaning nightmares, Yoto was always astonished to see them alive.

He leaned against his mother now, waiting in the cell, as was Eon and the others, for his father to be brought back. It was a quiet, fitful time, when even trivial conversations seemed too much effort. The Numah waited in silence.

Someday, Yoto found himself thinking, *that silence would be broken.*

Someday, Yoto thought, *the Numah would be heard.*

CHAPTER TWO

Eon watched.

The space where Morik customarily sat remained unoccupied—no one would take Morik’s place, either physically when he was away from the cell, or personally, should he not return. It was Morik to whom all Numah in this small group turned for guidance, for strength. If there was a leader among them, it was Morik.

Eon’s devotion to his father was infinite and unquestioned. Eon resembled Morik physically but even more, he knew, he resembled his father inwardly. Both had grown stern, close to emotionless since the incineration of the home world, the loss of their freedom.

Yet neither had lost hope, though each kept that hope well-hidden, nurturing and nourishing its spark until the time arrived when it could be brought to its fullest, fiercest flame.

Then, Eon thought... then the Numah would show the Olokun a purifying energy that would blaze hotter on Olokun flesh than had the energies the Arbitrators unleashed upon Ajyin.

Until that time arrived, Eon would *watch*.

* * *

Celeste and her mother waited and worried together. Dilar had been taken, as he was always taken, with the other adults when the Olokun came for a work detail. Dilar dug the ore, same as the others, but it was

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his healing skills, and those of his apprentice, Skoyk, that the Olokun called upon just as often—called upon to deal with injuries suffered when mining or, many times, to bind wounds inflicted on Numah by casual Olokun cruelty.

But Dilar had been unwell himself of late, and that worried Celeste just as it worried her mother. This was all exerting such a toll on Dilar. Celeste thought that she could see the light in her father's eyes dying.

As the light of Neos itself had died.

Both lights extinguished by Olokun evil.

* * *

When his father returned at last, Yoto longed for some acknowledgment, a swift embrace, an instant's closeness, but Morik had no time for such niceties.

"Matters have worsened," Morik said softly, his tone grim, when he and one of the other two prisoners had settled themselves. No one asked the fate of the third prisoner. There was no need—and none among them wished for details.

What details Morik provided were bad enough.

"We were made to witness the... *festivities* the Olokun inflict upon the Numah," he said. After a moment, he added, "And then we were made to clean the floor of the Arena while Vega and his offspring watched."

"His children?" Myrine said, her fingers closing on Yoto's small shoulder.

Morik made an ugly sound. "*Offspring*," he said again, making the word an obscenity. "And one in particular, the smallest and youngest."

Yoto stiffened.

"*Cadoc* he is called."

Yoto thought his father choked a bit when mouthing the Olokun name. "And though smaller, he is clearly stronger and more fearless than Vega's

other children. I watched as Cadoc fought past his taller brothers for the largest bits of... *Numah*.”

Morik sighed, then offered a bitter chuckle. “Were I Vega, I would be wary of that one. The youngest and smallest can become the most dangerous—should they possess the courage and the strength. Or they can surrender to their stature and live their lives as timid cowards.” He said those final words with particular venom.

Yoto curled close to Myrine, wishing that he could bury himself against her and hide from his father’s words, but aware that such a show of fear would only raise Morik’s ire.

There was a noise in the corridor and Morik fell silent until the massive Olokun had passed. When it was safe to speak once more, he said only, “Vega!” mouthing the word as though it were a curse.

Yoto had seen Vega only from a distance, but the General’s presence was as common within the mines and the prison cells as if the Olokun leader walked among them constantly. Everything they did was done at Vega’s command, every fear they felt flowed from Vega’s harsh rule.

“What, Morik?” Myrine said gently to her mate. She placed a hand on his forearm, tiny against his thick muscles. But Myrine had her own strengths, as Yoto knew, and he saw a flicker of appreciation in Morik’s eyes when Myrine touched him.

Morik drew a slow breath, then spoke in hushed but urgent tones. “Vega has undertaken to evolve,” he said. “Vega has introduced a second molting for himself, with promise that upon its completion his powers will be unequaled in all the history of the Olokun.”

“A second molting?” Eon said, surprising Yoto. It was not Eon’s habit to speak up, much less to interrupt Morik, but for once their father did not object, and allowed Eon to continue. “Such a move could prove valuable to the Numah, Father. If the molting is interrupted, if we can find a way—”

Morik nodded, and Yoto saw something new in his father’s eyes—a deepening respect for Eon. “But we must be wary, Eon. Opportunities will be rare, and we will have no more than one. We have no way of knowing

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how long this molting will last, nor what new strengths it will reveal within Vega.”

“We have a chance, Father? You believe we do?”

Morik measured his words. “A small one. General Vega’s vanity is as broad as his ambition. He parades himself and the new armor plates that are beginning to emerge, demanding that all who see him admire his... *beauty*.”

“And we can—” Eon’s voice had risen and Morik made a swift motion with his right hand, silencing his son. Yoto was not displeased to see his brother brought up short.

“I do not know what we can—or cannot—accomplish, Eon, nor do you. Idle talk and empty speculation will accomplish nothing, save to waste time and perhaps make us overconfident. We must focus on what we know. And I know only that Vega is altering his patterns as well as himself. He drags Lagaia in chains with him now, wherever he goes as though she is a pet on a leash.”

“Lagaia,” Myrine said. “The foreteller. The Witch.”

Yoto knew that name, too, both from the rare times his parents or Eon spoke to him of the forces and figures responsible for their imprisonment. He had heard the name even more often from overheard bits of gossip and legend, tales and stories of the Witch who had foreseen the arrival of the Arbitrators and the purifying energies that would strip Ajyin of its atmosphere, and deprive the Numah of their home.

The children knew Lagaia as the Witch for reasons other than her reputation as Vega’s personal prophet. They called her a Witch, Yoto knew, because of her frightening appearance. Her slender figure towered two heads taller than most Olokun. Her body glowed an eerie white, concealing all evidence of her great age. Long, ghoulish arms stretched down past her pelvis, the tips of her fingers nearly touching her knees. Dark purple eyes consumed half of her bald head, the wide pupils spotted with markings like the stars of the night sky.

Lagaia had foreseen the coming of the Arbitrators in a dream, it was said.

“Lagaia,” Morik said again. “Vega keeps her closer than ever.” He laughed bitterly. “Though that closeness may be as much his pride in being closer to her height than anything else.”

“Vega has grown?” Myrine said.

“Not so much as *he* believes,” Morik said. “But he is taller, and as the plates and armor expand to create his new form he will grow taller still. Taller, he clearly believes, than Lagaia.”

“Taller than Belfang?” Eon said.

Yoto dug fingers into palms to keep from shivering. Belfang, head of the Olokun Council, father of General Vega, and powerful despite his age. The Numah cowered before the lash of Vega—but it was said that even Vega had been known to cower before Belfang’s wrath.

Yoto tried to picture Vega larger.

Already the Olokun towered at least twice as large as the Numah, of already Vega was the largest and tallest of all Olokun. Should he grow even larger, who could withstand his power?

No one, Yoto thought. *Perhaps not even Belfang.*

Yet he knew as well that his own father believed Vega and the Olokun could fall before the Numah. And Eon believed it even more fiercely than Morik.

“But it is more than vanity that has him holding Lagaia so close,” Morik revealed. “She has had another vision, another dream.”

“And in this one?” Eon said in a voice that was nearly a whisper.

“The return of the Arbitrators,” Morik said. “The return of the Arbitrators to complete the extermination of us all, Olokun and Numah alike.” Yoto’s father sighed. “Precisely what Vega most deeply fears—and precisely what will drive him to further tighten his leash, and not simply the chain he has around Lagaia’s neck.”

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“There is something the General and all of the Olokun should fear more deeply than the Arbitrators,” Eon said. “And that is a fear we shall teach them.”

Yoto turned his face from his family and the other Numah, and for once sought not to listen, not to overhear even another word of their plans, their strategies, their... *dreams*.

Yoto’s own dreams, he feared, were as accurate as any visions Lagaia beheld—and Yoto’s dreams showed a future far nearer than the return of the Arbitrators could possibly be.

And for Yoto, a future far more fearful.

* * *

In her own cell, far from the others, the Witch, Lagaia, summoned her energies in silence and in secret, doing nothing to diminish her focus on the magics that had made Vega’s hunting haven into his...

Home.

A home that would have been no more than a distant moon for the Olokun had Lagaia herself not shown Vega how to grow the cocoons that could rise on vines to the sky, and then beyond the sky, to Neos.

And Lagaia had taken that moon and stolen its innocence, and created the hunting preserve for him, many cycles ago, fashioning the bright moon into a place of swamps and hills, of great cliffs and deep, shadowed valleys.

And then she had populated the world with creatures for Vega’s sport, plants for his intoxication.

She had grown a home for him, a vast living palace in which the Olokun General could practice his perversions and develop his own dark varieties of her magics.

All of it, every surrender, every degradation, every humiliation she had endured, everything she had given up to Vega’s power had been a wager she made with the universe.

A universe that contained the Arbitrators—a universe that could not shield her from them or their wrath.

Only she could accomplish that—and then only with Vega's unwitting assistance.

And so the Aegis Shield had begun to take shape, its heart and its energies her doing, her magic transmuting ore into a living thing that would save Vega from what he feared most.

Now, as the next move in her dire game approached, Lagaia, the Witch from beyond Ajyin, allowed herself a single deep chuckle.

Vega had no idea what he should *really* fear most.

Or whom.

Careful to give away no indication of what she was doing, Lagaia began extending the most vital net of her magic that she had ever spun.

* * *

Throughout the next days, as Olokun guards came and fetched Numah from other cells and dragged them to their fates in the Arena, Eon watched the world more carefully than ever.

He paid particular attention to the guards, watching them in a way he never had before. Where Eon had always viewed the Olokun as captors, now he saw them as targets. This leap in itself was thrilling for Eon, though he knew that for the present, his plans and the violence they contained were restricted to his thoughts. He could cause no harm to the Olokun from within the confines of this crowded cell, and his lean form seethed with the desire to face his captors without bars separating them. He would show them, then, what must truly be feared in this world.

Eon was aware that his father distrusted such thoughts, and he was equally careful to keep the thoughts to himself. He would follow Morik's guidance when the time for revolt came, and he would make no move independently of his father. But he held fast to the hope that the move would come swiftly.

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He had reason to believe that this would be the case. Small hints, unexpected comments, even one or two confidential revelations provided by Morik when he and Eon had a moment of what passed for privacy in the cells.

What Eon learned confirmed what he had suspected—from the instant the Olokun seized the Numah and forced them to begin developing the resources of Neos, the Numah had quietly but continuously developed plans for rebellion, for bringing down the Olokun and their tyranny.

At the heart of that rebellion was the Aegis, Eon suspected from scraps of overheard conversation.

Troubling scraps—Morik and others were evidently introducing subtle sabotage into the Aegis-ore, and ultimately into the Aegis itself.

Yet, were the Aegis to fail, all who lived on Neos, Numah and Olokun alike, would be easy prey for the Arbitrators.

Eon turned the matter over and over in his mind. He could see the ultimate goal, and knew should the Aegis be made to fail—and with it Vega's dream of security from the Arbitrators' return—the ensuing chaos and Olokun panic would provide the Numah with their opportunity to strike.

But Eon also knew that such opportunity rested upon several fragile pillars—that the Olokun would not discover the deception, that no slave would betray his fellow Numah, and for Eon's family, that Morik would survive the cycles necessary for the rebellion to be launched.

And it *would* be cycles—the completion of the Aegis itself would take a generation or more, and Eon could not imagine any conspiracy coming to completion quickly.

Not quickly enough to spare his father from death in the Arena.

When he spoke of these concerns to his father, Morik was stern.

“My survival, the survival of any one of us is of no matter when measured against the survival of the Numah and the destruction of the Olokun. Had we the power we would have never fallen beneath their thrall, or we would have arisen immediately upon the first lash of their whips. But

time is the only weapon we possess. For some of us—for myself, Eon, and doubtless for your mother—our time may not last until the revolt is complete. But it will be completed—if not by me, then by you, or your own children.”

“But—”

Morik would hear no objections. “All around us, Eon, our fellows are being taken to the Arena and slaughtered. I hold no illusions regarding my own presence in these cells, and hope only that the Olokun will spare you and your brother when the time arrives. This is why, no matter what befalls us, you must reveal nothing of what you know. Only if the Olokun believe you to be an ignorant laborer will you have any chance of survival. You will be made aware of the plan and the role you will play in it when you are older, when the time is right. When it is *your* time, Eon, as now it is mine.”

Eon forced himself to stand taller. “I understand.”

“Be alert to Yoto,” Morik said. “He does not possess your strength, nor anything close to it. You must protect him, as his mother does now.”

Eon glanced at his younger brother, who nestled next to Myrine. Yoto was a gentle child, and while his brother’s nature, his tenderness and affection, touched Eon, there were times when he found Yoto to be weak, and little more than that. This was no life for the weak, nor was there hope for their life becoming more pleasant. Like his father, Eon knew why they had been brought to these cells, and knew as well that he could no longer deny that knowledge.

Eon felt the future, then, felt it pressing in upon him as firmly as the walls of his cell.

It was a future without Morik, without Myrine.

A future in which he was yoked to Yoto as firmly as if the Olokun had them on the same leash.

* * *

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Sometimes in the dreamworld, Yoto saw himself grown as huge as Vega himself, armored and ferocious, a creature of rage and violence, an unstoppable, uncontrollable beast.

These were the worst of all the dreams. These were the dreams that found him weeping in terror and crying for his mother when he was shaken awake.

Even through his tears he could not mistake the disgust in Morik's eyes, and Eon's as they stared at him.

Would they, the child wondered, look more kindly upon the raging Yoto of his nightmares?

* * *

Eon found the time with Morik, even within the confines of the cell, more precious than ever. He no longer deluded himself that the time here was any more than prelude to Morik's death, and used the opportunities preparing for that moment when it arrived.

Preparing *himself*.

CHAPTER THREE

Yoto was in the dreamworld when the Olokun came for his family.

Once more his dreams were of himself transformed into something almost unrecognizable.

Once more he could taste the fine fire of purest revenge.

Once more he discovered what it was like not to be the smallest, but to be larger than any Numah ever would be.

Once more his dreams terrified him.

This time it was not Morik, or Myrine, or even Eon who awakened him from his terror.

It was the harsh, grinding metal-on-stone sound of the cell's door being raised, and the explosive footfalls of the Olokun guards entering the cramped cubicle, their ugly voices commanding that all Numah rise and present themselves.

“Adults among you—prepare to be presented to General Vega. Perhaps you will amuse him sufficiently to earn some measure of charity for your children.”

Their time in the Arena had arrived!

Yoto shook himself free of the dreamworld and emerged into this waking nightmare of shouts and rough handling and screams of terror. Some

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of those screams were his own, but even a glimpse of his father's disdain gave Yoto the strength, somehow, to cut off his cries and curl tight against his mother.

Eon stepped close and for a brief instant Yoto felt his older brother's comforting hand upon his shoulder, a quick firm squeeze as Eon leaned down. "Be strong for our father and mother, Yoto," Eon whispered. "Let their final sights be of our strength, not your fear."

Final sights, Yoto thought as the guards prodded them with staffs, herding the Numah into the corridor. He clutched desperately at the ragged hem of his mother's garments, wanting to be taken into Myrine's arms as though he were still a mewling infant, but the guards would have none of that.

"Stand on your own!" one Olokun shouted at Yoto, then jabbed him with the butt of a spear.

Yoto felt the air go out of himself, felt his knees refuse to support him, felt himself beginning to go down.

Then he caught glimpse of rapid movement from his left, saw Eon rush close, felt his older brother's fingers close around his arm, supporting him. Yoto stumbled, but with Eon's aid he did not collapse.

Yoto was weeping. He could not help himself, and through his tears he saw Morik's stern visage, but saw also his father's brief nod of approval at Eon.

My father will never approve of me, Yoto thought. *He will never have the chance.*

Yoto leaned against Eon as the group stumbled forward, goaded by the guard's shouted orders and insults, taunts and jeers.

Within minutes they had reached the lip of the Arena.

* * *

Eon drew a deep, sharp breath, steeling himself before the group, captors and captives alike, emerging from the tunnels.

He had been to the surface of Neos so rarely—Eon could barely recall the last time he'd stood beneath the sky and the vast floating panels that interrupted its purity, or glimpsed the glints of shattered Ajyin that sometimes sparkled between the Aegis panels.

Panels whose own purity, he suspected—he *believed*—was flawed. Flaws that Morik and other Numah had introduced, flaws that would bring down the Aegis someday—and with the fall of the Aegis would come the chance to make Vega and Belfang and all of the Olokun fall.

All of it, Eon thought now, *too late*, to help Morik and Myrine, too late to save his parents from the fate that would unfold within moments in the Arena.

Eon cast a quick glance upward, but no more than a glance.

The attraction and fascination of the sky and the floating panels above could not compete with the horrors that waited in the Arena.

The massive structure dominated this portion of the moon-city's landscape, resting in the bowels of a small crater and rising above its rims, a monument to the Olokun and their depravity.

The walls were made of stone, carved and placed by Numah slaves atop a colossal titan's ribcage to create a profane place that would serve both as Olokun entertainment and what the Olokun proclaimed as justice.

The guards prodded the Numah forward onto the dais.

The Arena was filled with Olokun, their scaled and armored hides rustling against one another as they awaited the commencement of the day's festivities. Eon stared at them with disgust, seeing the whole mass of gathered Olokun as a single entity, one huge being that rose and cheered, that *jeered* as one indivisible *creature*, a vile and obscene organism whose very existence filled Eon with hatred, with rage, with... determination.

Somewhere among that throng, he knew, would be Belfang and other members of the Olokun ruling Council, but it was not the Council's power the audience had come here to observe.

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It was the power of Belfang's son, who was seeking to become more powerful still.

It was the power of Vega.

Eon made himself breathe deeply and steadily, imposing as much calm upon himself as he could muster. The louder and more restive the crowd of Olokun became, the more determined Eon became that his features and stance betray none of the terror he felt within himself.

The crowd's guttural rumblings—every word and grunt a slap to Numah ears—reached its crescendo as a gate at the far side of the Arena was slowly raised, and even more slowly, a figure emerged.

General Vega swaggered to the center of the ring, followed by an entourage of obedient guards, flanked by his children, the shortest among them, Cadoc, also the boldest, striding nearly beside Vega as though he were already his father's equal.

Vega tugged at a leash that controlled a single, chained prisoner.

The alien Witch Lagaiia.

Eon stared at her, the Witch holding his attention far more thoroughly than even the spectacle of Vega, his second molting well under way now, broader and thicker armor plates covering more of his flesh.

The Witch was unarmored. No one knew her race, her origins, only that she beheld the future that had propelled them all here, that had driven them to their fates, the Numah in the mines and prison cells, the Olokun above them, always above them.

Not always, Eon thought.

He placed a steadying hand on Yoto's small shoulder.

* * *

Beating in Lagaiia's heart: exultance that she would soon be free from Vega's domination.

Beneath Lagaia's robes: the dagger that would free her.

Within the dagger: the knowledge of the destined target that would free the Witch.

Soon.

Soon.

* * *

Yoto wanted to crouch down, to bury his face in the dirt floor of the Arena.

To *hide*.

* * *

Eon stared with a mixture of disgust and awe as Vega brought up his arms, summoning a massive beast out of the shadows of the Arena.

Powerful forearms hauled the beast's weight in the General's direction. The creature's stench spread to fill the Arena, forcing the Numah to cover their mouths and noses. The four-legged lower-half of the monster's body arched up to a spinal track void of an abdomen. Dense fibers bristled from the chest cavity, flowing down the creature's torso like a waterfall of thread and twine.

Slowly, ponderously, *powerfully*, the creature worked itself into position, coming to a halt behind Vega, positioning itself above its master.

The beast's tendrils slithered down to its Olokun commander, massaging his body while forming the bond that would unite them. Slowly pulling Vega up, the creature secured the Olokun to its torso as Vega rested inside its newly extruded core pouch.

As Eon and the other Numah watched, horrified, and as the Olokun throngs cheered, the two merged into a single entity, Vega its brain, the creature his puppet.

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The Olokun audience fell silent as Vega maneuvered his pet in front of the group of captive Numah.

Keeping a hand on Yoto's shoulder in hopes of steadying the trembling child, Eon watched his parents in what he knew would be their final moments.

Morik, displaying every essence of his weathered warrior experience, stood tall with his chin arched in defiance of the General's disdain. Myrine stood at his side, and with whispered words attempted to comfort their two children.

"Eon, Yoto, stay strong for me. It will be over soon," she said.

Eon felt Yoto tremble, and tightened his grip upon the child's shoulder. "Hear her," he whispered. "Hear our mother, Yoto, and be strong for her and for our father if you cannot be strong for yourself."

But Yoto's shivering grew more violent, and small keening sounds escaped the child's throat.

Olokun guards swept in then, pulling the children of the accused Numah from their families.

Vega commanded the creature to bear him close so that he might directly address the young Numah. *His voice was more repellent than any other Olokun—more, Eon thought, than all the other Olokun voices combined.*

Yet he made himself listen to Vega's words. Eon would burn those words into his thoughts, and someday he would feed them back to Vega.

Before he killed him.

The General's armor plates rustled against each other as he spoke.

"Be alert! I'm giving you the most valuable lesson any slave can receive, a lesson best absorbed when young. You are about to witness the price of defiance. Do not look away. Do not even *think* of shielding your eyes from what I am poised to display."

Yoto broke free from Eon's grasp and sprang back to his mother's waist, refusing to let go, rattling the few beads remaining on her ragged dress as he fastened his arms tightly around her.

Before Eon could move, a guard stepped forward and struck Yoto in the temple with the butt of his spear, the fearsome blow flooring the child, his clutching fingers tearing the final beads from Myrine's rags. The beads scattered about the stage as Yoto fell to the ground.

Eon took a step, but before he could move further he caught sight of Morik, whose slitted eyes spoke clearly to his son: *Don't!*

Eon held himself immobile, watching Yoto rub his wounded face. Some distance away, Celeste collected Myrine's beads as they rolled toward her.

The guard raised the spear once more, reversing its direction, its blade now aimed at Yoto's heart, ready to pierce the child as though he were no more than a piece of meat.

Without hesitation, Morik charged the Olokun who had attacked his youngest son.

The guard pivoted with frightening, awful grace, bringing the tip of his blade up and aiming it at Morik's throat. The spear could pierce an adult Numah's body as easily as it could a child's.

"Hold!"

General Vega's voice rose above the roar of the crowd.

That voice rose, Eon realized, even above the roaring within his own ears.

The guard held the spear ready, but made no thrust.

Morik stood immobile but not, Eon realized, from fear, and certainly not in obedience to Vega's command. Morik's body was still, but his eyes darted side-to-side, measuring distances, choosing targets.

Eon felt a surge of wild, hopeless pride as he watched his father.

Morik took a step closer to Yoto and the towering guard.

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Vega and his beast cut Morik off, an appendage of the abomination hammering down in front of the Numah warrior. A billowing wave of dirt coated Morik's body.

"Heel. Or I'll feed the whelps to my pet in front of you."

A gleam moistened Eon's father's eyes, but Morik stepped back into place as Vega continued.

"Let us get to it. You, Morik, have been charged with sabotaging mining operations, with providing flawed ores for the Aegis, for the shield that our future depends upon. A shield, I might add, that is here for the protection of all, even Numah, even your lowly ilk. Yet you seek to poison this shield that will save us! What say you?"

Vega's laughter told all present that he had little interest in Morik's response.

Like Eon, the Numah prisoners found the courage to stand strong and silent. Did he imagine it, or did the Numah radiate some gathering of energy? Eon thought he saw a flicker of interest—or was it surprise?—in Lagai's eyes. What did she see? What did she know?

When Morik made no answer, Vega turned to his own people for affirmation.

"And what say you?" the General asked the crowd of Olokun.

Olokun cheers rose harshly for an instant, then trailed off, interrupted by Morik boldly stepping forward.

Eon's pride grew near to infinite as his father spoke directly to Vega.

"You destroy this moon we love and which rewarded our worship with love of its own. You kill our brothers and fathers. Disgrace our women and starve our children. Yet you expect us *to bow*, to *confess* to you on the day of our deaths?" He spat at the beast before him. "We owe you nothing!"

Morik turned then and looked into the anguished eyes of his family. Eon knew that his father was exhibiting a strength he hoped his sons would

follow into adulthood. Eon absorbed the lesson, aware that Yoto remained face down, weeping and trembling, seeing nothing.

“The Numah *shall* have their day,” Morik said, his voice now as ferocious as Vega’s, the normally musical tone of the Numah tongue grown harsh and filled with threat.

Morik drew himself to his full height and, again, Eon thought he sensed some sort of radiance emanating from Morik.

And again he saw a fleeting glint of interest—or was it fear?—in Lagai’s eyes.

Beyond the Witch, Cadoc stepped forward slightly, his eyes gleaming.

Then Morik unleashed a cry of defiance that Eon feared would be his father’s final words.

“The Numah’s day shall come, Vega. And the day of the Numah shall be the day of your death!”

Some among the Numah took Morik’s words as their signal to riot, lunging at their Olokun captors. For an instant, panic promised to overwhelm the Arena.

But only for an instant.

The butts and the blades of Olokun spears made quick work of the uprising. Within seconds those Numah who had dared show defiance lay groaning, bleeding. Some of them, Eon knew, were dying.

Eon, following Morik’s example, had not moved.

Vega resumed control with a commanding shout: “Enough!”

The Olokun General’s eyes twitched. Eon knew a thought had passed from Vega’s mind into the beast, shifting the creature in the direction of the women.

Watching Morik, the General sneered. “My mount desires a meal. My mount smells a *feast*.”

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The female scent drove the monster into a frenzy.

The pet's upper jaw slammed down upon Myrine and the other captive Numah females, blood spraying from between its teeth. A long, snake-like tongue slithered out, its soft underside running against Vega's skull as it sought the taste of the dead. The tongue lapped up the body parts of Eon's mother, the other Numah females, savoring their remains.

Cadoc dared to move close, dipping a talon in Myrine's blood, then licking it clean as he stepped back into his proper place behind Vega.

It all happened in an instant. Eon felt himself become unsteady, and bit down hard upon his own cheeks to shock himself. He would not collapse! He would force himself to watch every second of the scene before him, he would not allow himself even to consider that the scraps of flesh and droplets of blood the creature devoured had been his mother.

Grief could come later, and when it did, Eon would savor it more thoroughly than the beast before him had savored anything.

And Eon would be nourished by his grief.

* * *

Through his tears Yoto saw his mother die.

He wanted to wail for her, to beg the Olokun to spare Morik, to show some mercy.

But he could not find his voice. He was too frightened to speak, yet too terrified to look away. He raised himself up a bit.

As the final bits of flesh slid down the beast's throat, Vega began laughing, his face spotted with Numah blood.

Yoto saw Morik try to break free, but two guards flanked him, throwing him to the floor, thick Olokun talons pinning his head to the ground in the direction of the slaughter. He watched as the creature swallowed the final remains of his wife. For several minutes Vega's pet licked the floor clean, the Olokun audience applauding the bloodlust.

“Shall I tell you how I came to know of your treachery?” Vega said to Morik as he ushered his pet in the Witch’s direction.

“You revealed to me the guilty, Lagaia, but should you wish to be spared a fate worse than the whores digesting in my pet, look into the eyes of the accused and tell me which of these will bear the blade.”

Yoto watched the tall, glowing Witch scan the remaining slaves.

“He is not among us, Lord Vega.”

Vega’s broad features betrayed his confusion so clearly that even Yoto could detect the Olokun’s sudden uncertainty. Yoto watched as Vega made a gesture, summoning his Olokun prophetess, his Seer. His mother.

“Council-member Telya!” Vega shouted. “I have need of you.”

* * *

Eon watched, his rage growing but, like a fierce ember banked beneath ashes, his rage glowed in secret.

He knew Telya’s name from conversations overheard. Telya: the mother of Vega, the mother of all evil. A member of the Olokun Council, Telya advised her son, the General, in matters of science, technology, and spiritualism, qualities Belfang, her mate, had failed to instill in Vega.

Derived from another Olokun faction, her physical nature differed from Belfang’s clan. The Seer’s sleek and refined figure provided a stark contrast to the ruler’s ragged, brutal appearance. Her slim, elegant body moved with silent charm. She stood only a head shorter than Vega, her long fingers swaying at her side as she walked.

“Does she speak the truth?” Vega said.

With a sinister smile, the Seer responded, never relinquishing her gaze at the Witch. “She lies.”

Eon looked at the Witch, suddenly suspecting that the next move would belong to her.

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He was correct—had Lagaia sent him some secret signal?

As Eon watched, Lagaia swiftly removed a large dagger from beneath her coverings and charged Morik, the blade aimed at his heart.

“No!” Vega moved to intercept.

Eon held his breath, squared his shoulders, raised his chin in defiance of what he was about to see.

He heard Yoto scream in terror.

Eon’s courage only faltered for an instant—the instant that he saw the pain in Morik’s eyes as the Numah warrior saw his youngest son bury his face in his hands.

Yoto’s cowardice was the last thing Morik ever saw.

The Witch drew her arm back, but Lagaia’s blade never had the chance to find its mark.

With a cry of obscene glee, Vega commanded the beast to rear up, then brought its forearms down in a single hammer-blow on Morik, killing him instantly.

Blood sprayed Eon from head to toe, but the boy never looked away. Without averting his eyes, he knelt close to his younger brother and stroked Yoto’s head, the small Numah still covering his face, tears dripping onto the dirt floor.

Vega’s beast stepped back from the bloody mass that had been Morik. Lagaia seized the moment to dart close to the remains.

“Stop her!” Vega screamed, holding his beast immobile now as he allowed his guards to deal with the Witch.

Lagaia dipped below Olokun arms scrambling to secure her. She slid to the remains of Morik and plunged the blade into his dead body. The dagger hummed as if brought to life.

The guards pulled her away from the dead Numah.

Belfang appeared then, forcing his way through the guards, kneeling and pulling the dagger out of the bloody mess, wrapping it in cloth.

“How did she gain access to the chamber of the blade?” Belfang said softly, as though to himself.

The General did not answer his father, but turned his attention fully back to the Witch.

“Deceitful creature! You will pay for your disloyalty.”

Eon watched as resolve hardened on Lagaia’s glowing face. He thought she looked directly at him, *felt* her look directly at him with her mind as well as her eyes, then watched as she trained her attention on an Olokun guard.

Eon felt as though he was seeing with Lagaia’s eyes as well as his own.

The Witch’s pupils transfixed the Olokun guard. As Eon watched, the Witch placed the guard in a trance, instantly rendering him helpless.

Eon shivered violently, feeling the bitter cold that crept through Lagaia’s flesh, remembering the tales other children told of the Witch and the cold that seized her upon the release of the Siren’s Spell.

Even as Lagaia grew cold, her control of the Olokun guard deepened.

Eon’s eyes widened as the guard began to move at Lagaia’s command, its arms and fingers twitching gracelessly at first as she exercised her control, experimenting, then with greater fluidity of motion as Lagaia’s mastery deepened.

That mastery quickly—*instantly*, Eon thought, both watching and somehow experiencing the scene before him—extended to the Cestus Parasite, the living weapon and shield that wrapped the guard’s right arm like a gauntlet. The creature wore a thick shell, and a large antler grew from its snout. Beneath the snout sprouted groups of wet tentacles, used as both whips and stabbing weapons.

Under Lagaia’s control, the guard sprang forward. In a series of long, bounding leaps, closing the distance between itself and Vega, and without

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hesitation delivering a heavy, slashing swipe to the fibers connecting the General to his pet, severing them and barely missing Vega's skull.

Eon sensed Lagaia's frustration. The General's head had been her intended target. Eon shared her anguish.

One of the pet's arms hit the guard squarely in the chest, launching him through the air. The guard skittered back to his feet under Lagaia's control, snapping into a defensive position and bracing his Cestus shield. As Lagaia prepared for her second attack, Vega delivered another blunt strike. This one rocked the guard's body, the blow unbinding the Witch's possession.

The guard collapsed on the Arena floor in a daze. Vega and his men turned to each other, looking for an explanation for the guard's treachery.

Eon's breath hissed out sharply. Neither Vega nor his troops were aware of Lagaia's charm, her control of the now-dazed guard.

He felt her trying to summon the guard back to awareness.

Eon watched her closely, seeing her features grow chiseled when she achieved reconnection, but also noticing the glaze in her eyes, as though her consciousness itself was clouded.

Lagaia's brow furrowed, shadowing wrinkles beneath her radiant glow. Eon marveled at the display of sheer concentration Lagaia unleashed. But he knew that the Witch's efforts, like his father's defiance, would not be enough.

Even with most of the tendrils linking their minds severed, the beast and its master maintained a powerful, deadly symbiosis. As Vega roared his outrage, the pet's footsteps shook the ground as it approached the dazed guard.

With a single blow, guided by Vega, the pet crushed the guard's chest, killing him instantly.

At the moment of the guard's death, Lagaia's own hold its consciousness collapsed. She gave a single, muffled scream and fell to the floor of the Arena.

Vega looked from the corpse of the guard to the still figure of the Witch. Eon saw comprehension blossom across the General's features.

"How?" he roared. "Was he not trained to withstand her witchery? Weak minds have no welcome in my royal guard." He glared at Lagaia. "This is what happens when I put my faith in filth. Kill her!"

Vega's mother, the Seer, jumped in front of the Witch, blocking the attack.

"General, wait!" Telya said, her tone desperate. "Death is what she wants. Kill this Witch and you unleash her spirit upon us. She must be kept alive. Keep her soul confined to this vessel or she will find another to inhabit."

Vega paused, and pondered the idea. "Then we shall destroy her beauty so that none shall ever be enticed by her again. When they see her ruined features their resolve will be strengthened."

The pet leaned forward, lowering the pouch in which the General rode. Vega slid out of its embrace, his body damp from the beast's saliva and Numah gore. Attendants ran up, toweling off his armor plates with fine cloth. Vega leaned down to whisper into one of their ears, the small Olokun running off, returning to Vega with an ornate cup. With a theatrical flair, Vega swept the cup under his pet's wound, filling the container with acidic blood that dripped from its gash.

"Brace her," he said when the cup was filled.

Lagaia struggled against the guards' rough grip. Searching the crowd, desperate to find a way out, she made eye contact with the only person in the area who would not look away.

Eon's pupils contracted.

"I offered you a favor," Vega said to the Witch. "I thought of sparing you the pain that will soon visit the rest of these pathetic slaves, the fate that awaits their children." Vega held the cupful of acid above the Witch's face, slowly tilting it. "You brought this upon yourself, and I am pleased to provide it."

Acid began to flow from the cup, spreading across Lagaia's features, distorting and dissolving them. Her glow began to dim.

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But not, Eon knew, before Lagaia escaped. He felt her. Through the spell they watched the dissolvent devour her face, and Lagaia was free from pain, if only for a moment.

He felt the Witch's power leave him.

Eon did not move, aware that the Olokun were watching him, Cadoc most closely of all. He would not betray her presence, though he had no idea what that presence would mean.

* * *

Yoto felt something change in the nature of Eon's touch as the Witch was disfigured.

Something else came into that touch, something unlike anything Yoto had ever felt, something that perhaps no Numah had ever felt.

Something alien.

When the cup of acid was fully drained, and the Witch's glowing beauty fully destroyed, Vega stood staring for only a moment at his work. He kicked the Witch once, fiercely, then turned his attention to the remaining Numah from the prison cells.

"Kill the adults," he said in a tone so flat and emotionless that Yoto found it more horrifying than Olokun screams of rage.

The General displayed no emotion as Dilar and Selat and the other adult prisoners fell beneath the blades and Cestus Parasites of his most elite guards.

* * *

Skoyk, apprentice to Dilar, was spared execution because, Skoyk assumed, of his youth. He watched as the healer and Selat were shredded by Olokun talons. Skoyk could not heal them even if he possessed skills the equal of Dilar. There was nothing he could do.

Except hold Celeste close, and shield her from the depravities that followed the death of her parents.

* * *

Even through her agony, Lagaia could sense the dagger.

She forced herself to hold her awareness clear of pain and rage.

All that mattered now was the dagger and its location.

And surviving until she could once more exert the dagger's will.

Next time the blade would not fail.

Next time the dagger would find its true destiny and pierce its destined target.

* * *

Yoto wished the dreamworld would take him, wished that he could escape and be free from this living nightmare.

But he knew as well, and just as surely, that the dreamworld would never be the same again either.

From this day onward, there would be a dagger in Yoto's dreams.

CHAPTER FOUR

When the deliciously vile work of death was done, Vega turned his attention to the children.

“Face me and learn your fate.”

Yoto trembled as Eon helped him to his feet. He risked a look at his older brother, but the boy he had known was no longer there. What Yoto saw now was his brother, but grown old beyond his time.

Not aged—standing before Yoto was a powerful Numah warrior, his muscles rippling with force waiting to be released.

But it was Eon’s eyes that held and horrified Yoto.

Eon’s eyes were no longer the eyes of a Numah alone. They held something... *more*.

Yoto did not want to know what that something might be. Those eyes terrified him. Easier to look back at Vega and hear his plans than to face what had become of Eon.

“Shall I spare you?” Vega said to the children. “Or shall you join your parents *now*?”

Yoto thought of watching Myrine die, of the sounds of Morik’s death. He began to weep again, but made himself do so silently, wishing to attract no further attention to himself.

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“Answer me!” Vega roared, but it was his father who replied.

“I shall take the Numah children,” Belfang said. “Briefly, at any rate. They shall be assigned to serve portage for my guards.”

“Take them!” Vega said, turning his back upon the group, Numah and Olokun alike. “And when they are returned, be certain that they have learned *all* the lessons this day has offered.” He paused only to spit upon the still-trembling form of the acid-scarred Witch before he stormed from the Arena, Cadoc leading the procession behind him.

When Vega and Cadoc were gone, Yoto turned his attention to Belfang, watching as the elderly Olokun summoned an even more aged member of his race, calling out for Rilas to join him.

“Take these children with you, and a cadre of guards. Take them and dispose of—*this*.”

Belfang handed Rilas a tightly wrapped object. The cloth which hid the object was familiar, bloody.

Yoto felt something then, something strange and powerful, an energy coming to him from the dagger itself.

The sensation lasted only an instant, but Yoto knew that he would never forget it.

Yoto turned to Eon once more, forcing himself to look up into his brother's face, but there was no comfort to be found there.

As Belfang's guards herded the children together and began issuing materials for them to carry, Yoto wondered if he would ever know any measure of comfort again.

* * *

Eon watched with new eyes that he did not fully understand, but whose nature provided him with a deeper vision than he had ever known. Or so it felt to him as he and the other Numah children carried the burdens of their captors deep into the bowels of Neos.

The Witch had left him, he knew that.

But some bit of her, gradually diminishing, remained within him. He resolved to make the most of the lingering presence before it was gone completely.

With every step his grief over the death of his parents grew, but with every step so too grew Eon's conviction that only by hiding his grief, by keeping it to himself and himself alone, could that grief fuel the vengeance that would someday be his.

Someday and, he knew, not someday soon.

He would know the time when it arrived and he would live for its arrival, for nothing else.

Not even for Yoto, despite the vow Eon had made to their father.

Yoto was his brother, and Eon would never deny that.

But Yoto's cowardice had been the last thing Morik saw, and Eon would never forgive *that*.

He marched and watched, watched and marched.

* * *

Yoto struggled to keep up with the troop of Belfang's elite guards guided by Rilas down into the deepest layers of the moon's interior. Yoto stumbled along with the Numah children staggering beneath their burdens.

The terrain through which they marched barely resembled the upper sections of Neos, lacking the noise and fumes of machinery. Even the mining camps bore more traces of Numah and Olokun presence than these caves.

They marched without stopping, coming to a halt only after hours, Rilas at last signaling a halt as they approached the mass of a Burrower, a vast, corpulent, foul-smelling creature with powerful digging claws that made it useful as a mining probe.

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The beast had already begun digging a pit several feet into the cavern's rough soil. Its handler whistled, and the creature crept back.

Without speaking, Rilas pulled the cloth-wrapped dagger out. Yoto tried not to stare at the glowing, bloody cloth that hid the weapon from the eyes of the others. He felt that he could sense its power even from a distance. That power terrified him, and when he recognized the cloth as bits of his mother's dress, he tried to look away but found himself turning back toward Rilas and the Burrower.

The elderly member of Belfang's Council delicately positioned the blade under the Burrower's nostrils, unwrapping the bloody cloth, but not so much that any of those present could tell what the cloth hid. The creature sniffed and turned away.

Rilas lowered his weight onto the beast and forced the blade into its mouth. Gagging, the Burrower expelled a green, chunky substance before the wrapped dagger slid down its esophagus. When Rilas released his grasp, the creature shook violently.

The troops, despite their discipline, appeared agitated, many working hard to control tremors that crept into their hands. Yoto felt his own hands shaking. Even short-term exposure to the blade put the strongest Olokun warriors on edge, despite the cloth that hid it from them. The effect was equally powerful on the young Numah.

The group currently managing the operation had only been in the blade's presence for the hours since the massacre in the Arena, a short time, yet many seemed ready to snap.

With a click of the handler's fingers, the Burrower set to work, digging downward at a ferocious rate, dirt flying up as the beast disappeared.

"You're certain it will be able to reach the moon's core? It won't hesitate and try to save itself?" Rilas said.

"Certainly not, sir," the handler said. "Burrowers are berserkers by temperament, fierce but easy to control. They dig for as long as they're asked to, returning only as they are commanded. I gave this one no instructions to come back. Shame to lose one."

“A worthwhile sacrifice,” Rilas said. “I will make certain that Belfang is aware of your loss.”

Time passed. The group waited nervously, their agitation dwindling the deeper the Burrower bore the dagger. Yoto stared at his own hands, which still shook slightly.

A rumbling sounded from deep below. The handler motioned for them to move back.

“Sometimes the core’s essence seeks to bubble up when they go this deep. Should be a tiny trickle that’ll turn solid once it’s out. Still best to keep clear.”

Thick, foul-smelling liquid oozed from the opening, hardening with exposure to the air. Soon the flow stopped, steam filling the cave.

“Is it done?” Rilas said.

“It appears so.”

The rumbling started as a faint tremor.

Then the walls of the cave began shaking hard enough to bring chunks of rock raining down.

“Everyone, fall back to a safe—”

The floor of the cavern exploded, a high-pitched screech filling the high-domed room. A blast of heat roiled through the air.

The noise from below grew louder, coming toward the group even as they moved back toward the tunnel that had brought them here.

Before they could escape, a bloated, broken Burrower burst from the pit, tearing a guard in half with a swipe of its claws. The Burrower’s exposed intestines were sizzling from the heat, the smell of burning meat filling the room.

Yoto saw that the Burrower’s body had doubled in size, its teeth curved and enlarged. When the Burrower moved, a trail of lava and viscera

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oozed behind it. Yoto could see that the back half of the creature was split open.

Yet the wound did not slow the beast, which cut a bloody swath through the spear-wielding guards, aiming straight for its handler.

The handler screamed, the sound cut short as the Burrower smashed his head. It turned towards Rilas and roared.

Rilas looked around, but only a few terrified guards remained.

Yoto heard himself scream, and at the same time was aware that Eon stood as tall and still facing this beast as Morik had facing the beast that took his life.

As the monster stormed toward them, tremors sent sudden cracks up the walls. A wide chunk of stone broke free, landing on the creature, ripping its thorax in half. The Burrower's head continued squealing, not accepting death. Straining to cast off the stone that had all but destroyed it, the Burrower stumbled jerkily to its feet, retreating from Rilas and the others, and fell back into the hole it had dug, disappearing into the maw of the moonlet, its final scream piercing the air until it was cut short.

Yoto wanted to be sick, but was aware that Eon was watching him with cold, indifferent eyes.

Indifferent—and also *different*, eyes that saw more deeply into Yoto than the child could stand.

When the echo of the Burrower's scream died, Rilas stepped forward to examine the area, ordering the remaining guards to assist him.

After the guards had finished their investigation, their captain approached the Council leader.

“Did any other object come up with the abomination?” Rilas said.

The guard hesitated, still shaken. “No, it appears that when its belly collapsed, the object remained in the pit below.”

“Good. Let the story of the events here be told often as a reminder. This is a dangerous place, beyond our comprehension. Let no miners venture here again. Seal the corridors behind us as we depart. Now, let us be gone from here.”

As they left, the guards busied themselves planting explosive charges along the cave walls. Yoto nearly cried out with fear when he realized that the box he had carried was filled with explosive material.

A series of detonations rang out, walls sliding inward in a rush of collapsing stone, sealing the area.

Yoto covered his ears at the sound.

* * *

Skoyk's hand upon her shoulder was no comfort to Celeste. She had seen too much, and lost even more.

As they began their march upward from the collapsed pit, she continued to clutch Myrine's beads which she had rescued from the floor of the Arena. By now the blood that had clung to them was gone, though Celeste imagined she could still feel its sticky warmth.

She would save the beads, she told herself. She would treasure them and protect them.

And when the time was right, she would give them to Yoto.

* * *

Eon did not look back.

There was nothing there that could help him, nor would he need that blade when his time arrived.

He would need nothing but himself.

Disgusted that he had carried at Olokun order a box filled with explosives that he could have used—*would* have used—to destroy them all, Eon vowed that he would never again be so blind to opportunity.

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Never.

He focused on the ground ahead of him, on putting one foot before the next. He focused on getting through this journey so that he might move more quickly to the next stage of the larger journey that would carry him to the redemption of his parents' lives.

* * *

Just before rounding the bend that would lead them away from the pit into which the blade had been sealed, and only when Yoto was absolutely certain Eon was not looking, the younger Numah turned back.

The smoke and dust had barely begun to settle onto the collapsed pit.

Yoto hoped that the pit and its contents would remain undisturbed forever.

What was buried there was nothing he ever wanted to see again.

PART TWO: BROTHERS

CHAPTER FIVE

On the twentieth anniversary of his parents' death, Yoto paused for only a moment to remember Morik and Myrine. He no longer cared to recall if he owed them more respect than that.

Perhaps so, he thought—he remembered Myrine with warmth, and still dreamed of her frequently, when he allowed himself to dream. Too often, still, those dreams were pierced by the blade of the ornate dagger he had seen on the day his parents died.

But remembrance was one thing, and time another. Time was what he rarely had to spare. Even the abnormally long days, the never-ending cycles of light forced upon Neos by Vega through Lagaia's magics, could not grant enough time to Yoto's schemes.

Yoto pushed away from the desk whose contents occupied so much of his time, stood up and stretched. After a moment he stepped to the small window overlooking the staging areas from which the miners, their equipment and Burrowers entered the vast caverns and the Sector 8 mines from whose veins were harvesting the Aegis-ore that General Vega demanded in ever-increasing quantities.

Even after so long a time, only a small portion of the caverns had been fully explored by the Numah or their Olokun masters. As soon as a new vein of Aegis-ore or other precious material was found, exploration ceased and exploitation began, the unknown territory beyond the immediate mining operation ignored until the time came to seek new veins of ore.

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Yoto leaned closer to the slightly opened window, and listened to the sound of Neos, audible over the activity below.

The long, naturally formed tunnels reached deep into the moon, a draft forever sending a low moan through the underground world the Numah labored in.

The wide, cylindrical tunnel that opened here extended down for miles into the darkness, its natural walls smoothed and widened by Numah slaves cycles ago in order to reach the largest veins more easily and efficiently. Tributaries and side-tunnels spread off horizontally from the main shaft, rickety walkways twisting in a descending spiral along the edges. Stalactites dangled precariously from the cold, dark ceiling. Yoto went into the caverns no more often than was absolutely required by his responsibilities.

Yoto stared for a moment at the observation facility, perched on its tower opposite the building that housed his office. He did not visit the observation tower often either, though as overseer of the Sector 8 operation, he could enter, without announcement, any structure in the complex.

Yoto had no need to make frequent inspection. He knew what he would find in the observation platform. The translucent floor that allowed observers to peer straight down the mining tunnel. Bottles of intoxicants and cheap artifacts littering the makeshift shelving that lined the walls. Remains of meals. Trash.

But he also knew that the slovenliness he permitted the mine's observers did not extend to the records they kept, careful measurements of the amount of Aegis-ore harvested, milled, refined. Detailed assay documents that assured the Olokun—and especially General Vega and his ambitious, scheming son Cadoc—of the purity of the ore. Never again would artificially introduced imperfections offer rebellious Numah the hope of bringing down Vega's dream of a defensive shield.

That dream had died on the floor of the Arena twenty cycles ago. Died there along with Yoto's parents, and just as surely, killed by Vega.

Yoto's indulgent, hands-off approach to his crews served him well. The workers—most of them—appreciated their overseer's willingness to look the other way when it came to minor infractions.

That appreciation also served Yoto well. He would be no match, physically, for any of the Numah mine workers. Yoto had a lean build, far smaller than the thick, stacked physiques of his subordinates. His eyes were his strongest feature, and revealed where his true strength lay: those brown eyes revealed a sharp, calculating intelligence, an intelligence that was constantly alert, measuring advantage and disadvantage, calculating odds.

That intelligence had brought him far—farther than physical strength ever could have.

The distance his intelligence had carried him was never more clear to Yoto than when he compared his status to that of his older brother, whom he saw through the window now, approaching Yoto's office. Grimy and sweat-stained from his labors in the mines, Eon walked with force and energy, his massive frame—he was nearly as large as an Olokun, far taller and more broad than even their father had been—an engine of purpose.

Yoto suspected what that purpose was today—he had his sources, he had heard rumors, and he had been dreading Eon's inevitable arrival.

Quickly, Yoto stuffed a satchel into an alcove beneath his desk. His older brother never knocked, and Yoto had long-since learned to avoid awkward moments by hiding any materials that would cause Eon concern or rouse his curiosity. There were plenty of other matters that had caused awkward moments between them over the cycles.

Yoto seated himself before Eon reached the office.

Ducking to enter the low doorframe, Eon walked across the room toward the window overlooking the mine. He eyed the stacks of paperwork, broken machine parts, and general clutter with annoyance.

When he was younger, Yoto had been jealous of Eon's handsome features, square cut jaw, piercing blue eyes, and full head of black hair. Yoto's hair had begun thinning in adolescence, and his hair loss grew more precipitous every cycle.

But Eon's physical attractiveness could not compensate, at least so far as Yoto was concerned, for the garb his older brother was required to wear, the rough threads of a laborer's tunic and trousers hugging his corded

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frame, ritualistic scars and reminders of old injuries visible through the gaps in the fabric.

Yoto possessed more dapper taste in Numah fashion, and wore clean, well-fitted clothing free of tears. Much of his occupation rested upon maintaining comfortable subservience with the Olokun. Dressing well, presenting their masters with a crisp appearance, made his job easier, or so Yoto believed.

Eon didn't sit down. He never did, never made even a pretense of seeking to be comfortable here.

"Brother," Yoto said. He did not rise from his chair.

"Brother." Eon continued looking out the window.

"How goes the work? Lifting your quota of rocks? The Gorger processing deadline is near," Yoto said.

"I work the tunneling machines. You know this."

"Grunt work is grunt work, one job much the same as the next." Yoto leaned his chair back on two legs, putting a heel on his desk.

"It's honest work, so far as it goes. It gives me time to think," Eon said.

Yoto rolled his eyes. "Thinking seems to be the entire problem." He put his feet back on the floor and rested his elbows on the desk, intertwining his fingers as he did on the few occasions when he found himself required to discipline an employee. "Why are you here?"

"I can't just stop by to visit my little brother?"

"Theoretically, yes, I'm sure you're capable of doing that. But you never do. I'm not an idiot, Eon. You want something, or you're afraid I'm doing something. At the moment I don't feel like waiting for you to tell me what it is."

"I just felt like—"

"Out with it."

Eon sighed, and came closer, sitting across from Yoto on a small chair crafted from broken mining equipment. He leaned in, looking both left and right, a conspirator's worry in his face.

"It's time," he whispered. "The time has come. More importantly, the opportunity for which we have waited so many cycles is upon us."

The blood left Yoto's face. "No, no, no. We're not having this conversation."

"Yoto, hear me out. This time, hear me."

Yoto held up his hands. "One step beyond this and I'm a co-conspirator. I know you've been sneaking out at nights, and even that knowledge is more than I'm comfortable with. Whatever you're involved in, you do not bring it in here. Speaking of which..."

Yoto removed a key from his desk and unlocked the bottom drawer. He pulled up a piece of wooden paneling revealing a hidden section, and presented the contents to Eon.

"Look what I had to confiscate from one of your admirers today."

Yoto dangled a shiny, metal weapon in front of Eon.

Yoto watched Eon carefully, reading his features. He knew his brother well, for all their differences, and took a certain pleasure in seeing Eon struggle to come up with an excuse that hadn't been used before. Yoto's pleasure deepened as Eon failed. Finally a guilty smile settled over Eon's features.

"Who was it?" Eon said.

"You know well who it was."

"Kelk? He and I will have a serious conversation *soon*. What did you tell him?"

"I told him to forget the weapon and never to speak of it again."

"Good."

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“I also told him to forget about your dreams of rebellion. And to do so *soon*.”

Yoto turned to his desk, showing his back to Eon.

“And you should too,” Yoto said as he shuffled papers.

“Dammit, Yoto.” Eon’s whisper became an angry hiss. “It’s not *my* rebellion any more than it was our father’s, or any of our species who have fallen beneath the Olokun. The Numah were not meant to be slaves. We are not hive insects. Look around you! I do—and I see Numah brilliance and ingenuity everywhere. I watch my fellow laborers—my fellow *slaves*—fixing and improving their machines, innovating to meet their quotas with less labor. We work smarter, not harder. You yourself, Yoto, display these talents, possess these abilities. Yet all is going to waste under the lash of the Olokun.”

“And you know why that is?” Yoto said. “It’s because even an Olokun youngling could rip me in half. Or you. Or a hundred Numah at a time. Or have you forgotten the Arena and what happened there?”

For a moment Yoto thought that Eon might spit upon him. But his older brother simply clenched his fingers into fists and breathed deeply three times before speaking.

“I have not forgotten,” Eon said. “And what happened there *still* happens there. As *you* well know, brother.”

“I do. And I also know that the Olokun are not stupid. They’re cunning. And yes, we’re smart by comparison. We’re just overflowing with intelligence—those of us who manage to avoid the Arena, that is. But as the Arena shows, cunning and strength beat intelligence.”

“That’s why I came to you,” Eon said softly, and slowly unclenched his fingers.

“What do you mean by that?”

Eon sighed. “Your talents and abilities, Yoto. There’s not a device in the mines I haven’t seen you repair. Even as frail and timid as you are, the most dangerous Olokun doesn’t antagonize you. I see you move around

every obstacle like an eel through water. The rebellion needs you, Yoto. You have the Numah intellect *and* the Olokun cleverness. It is a combination we need—a combination that could make the difference.”

Yoto laughed in his brother’s face. “You *must* be desperate if you’re complimenting me, Eon. Why pretend? You’re the one who’s been running the whole sad little operation, aren’t you? Of course you are! I see the posters and the graffiti in the streets. Paintings of your logo. Poorly rendered blue hammers are everywhere. Some with slogans. I have to say, the slogans aren’t very catchy. Like that one... well, see, I can’t even remember it now. Proves my point, yes?”

“We’re not just fools plastering slogans on Olokun walls.” Eon leaned close. “We have an attack planned tomorrow. We’re going to collapse a section of the mines on the General and that bastard son of his, Cadoc, while they’re touring Sector 2. The Bursters are already in place. It has taken time, too much time, to orchestrate this, with constant risk of discovery. Everything would have been easier and faster with you coordinating. We will need you in the aftermath, Yoto.”

“How did you even get hold of a Burster?” Yoto said, fighting the sudden urge to be ill.

The Burster was a semi-sentient fungus engineered by the Olokun. When attached to a cluster of even the hardest rocks, Bursters sank their roots deep. When activated, a chemical sack within the fungus burst, its fluids mingling with the Burster’s, causing a massive explosion to ripple the full length of the roots.

Bursters were precious and rare. Yoto’s Sector received two fungi per calendar cycle, and only used them for the most difficult sections of rock, areas too resistant for Burrowers or machines to open.

“What do you think this will do for you, Eon, besides getting yourself and your fellow conspirators killed?”

“Ensure our survival.”

Yoto showed Eon a puzzled look. Then he began to chuckle. “And what makes you think that dropping some rocks on a few Olokun, even prominent ones, will ensure *our* survival?”

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“Think about it, brother. The Aegis is nearly complete. What do you think they’ll do with us once we’ve finished mining? We mean nothing to them.”

Brushing his white beard, Yoto pondered the idea for a moment. “We’re a useful people. Olokun never run out of work they don’t want to do themselves.”

Eon’s words became more precise, his voice quiet and focused. “As what? Larger numbers of Numah victims in the Arena? Unarmed combatants for Cadoc to use as sport to entertain his father? Until we all are gone?”

“Of course not. You underestimate the Olokun’s fear of the future. So long as Vega believes in the nonsense about Arbitrators, and can persuade the others to believe as well, we’re safe. He’s insane. His fears drive everything he does. If there’s even the slightest suggestion that the Arbitrators will return as he thinks they will, he won’t rid Neos of Numah. We keep him safe from the monsters in his imagination. It’s a pretty good bargain if you ask me. Plus, who’s to say there won’t ever be some malfunction with the Aegis? We built the damn thing, they’d need us to fix it.”

Neither Olokun nor Numah knew much about the Arbitrators, leaving them with limited defensive options. Only Vega’s vision, the Aegis Shield, or so the General had persuaded the Council, could protect them from a menace made of purified energy. The intense magics of the Aegis would theoretically destroy any force attempting to breach Neos’ protective shield.

Eon slammed his fist onto Yoto’s desk with enough force to cause the main drawer to slide open, revealing a satchel, its contents crawling with life.

“Dammit, Yoto. What you describe is not a life worth living! When the shield is done they won’t need us anymore. Vega will kill us in an instant if it suits his purposes!”

Yoto positioned himself in front of the drawer, concerned Eon would grow curious about the satchel.

“Just a minute.” Ensuring that they maintained eye-contact, Yoto casually slid the drawer shut. “Do you really mean to tell me that you believe in the Arbitrator tales?”

“How else was Ajyin destroyed?” Eon shook his head, obviously baffled by Yoto’s disbelief. “Besides, brother, the usefulness of the shield is irrelevant. What matters is the plan.”

“And it is a fine plan for someone who is eager to die. You’d cause less suffering, Eon, if you simply slit the throats of all your rebel friends instead.”

“I swallow my pride by telling you all this, and you mock me. Why did I expect anything different? Why do I ever?” Eon stood up and walked to the door.

Yoto moved quickly from behind the desk, cutting off his brother’s retreat.

“Eon, please.” He put his hands on Eon’s thick shoulders, and could not help recalling those times in childhood when such a touch from Eon had proved comforting. Those times were long ago, and had been for a dozen cycles, and yet at least a trace of their warmth lingered. “How about this: Accept a promotion. Become one of my supervisors. I’ll put in a good word for you with my superior.”

“Your Olokun superior, you mean?”

“Yes, Olokun. We survive through compromise, and for you to deny this is to be as mad as Vega. I can get you out of the mines. Get you somewhere comfortable so you’re not miserable, hatching plots that will only get you killed. As you said of my talents, brother, I can fix things. Let me fix this for you.”

Eon backed away, pulling free from Yoto’s touch. “How can you not understand this? This is not about my comfort. I do what I do because I care about our people!”

Yoto sighed wearily, “A little apathy could do a lot for your state of mind.” From the corner of his eye, Yoto saw movement at the window, his stomach lurching when he recognized the shape. “Give me just a moment.”

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Yoto stepped outside his office, emerging into heat that immediately caused him to break into a sweat. The stench of sulfur and smoke filled the air, wafting up from the mines below.

Trying to keep his features impassive, Yoto turned to face Jude just outside the office's entryway.

"You were coming to bring me the inventory reports, weren't you, Jude?" Yoto said, keeping his tone neutral.

Jude never looked well, his skin pulled taut over jagged, narrow features. His flesh was so pale as to seem translucent. Jude tried to imitate Yoto's wardrobe, but working in the mines left his outfit filthy, marked with rips and burns.

"Yes, Yoto," Jude said, the edges of a wicked smile creeping at his lips.

"You come every day at the same time. I should have remembered that."

"I like to be punctual, sir."

"What will it take for you to forget everything you just heard?"

Jude pretended to consider it. "Three days' extra rations and a hit of the bug."

Craylik, which was simply called the "bug," kept Yoto in good clothing and food. The bag he'd hidden from Eon contained two dozen of the bio-engineered, angle-use creatures.

"That's entirely reasonable" Yoto said, showing his generosity with a smile. "I can set you up right now. How does a long break sound?"

"That sounds excellent, sir."

"Give me just a second then." Yoto stepped back into his office. He put a hand on Eon's arm and whispered, "Whatever you're planning on doing, I'm asking you not to do it. Please, for me. Give me time to work something out for you."

"It's what Father would have done."

“And he is dead, as is our mother, twenty cycles dead today. Maybe you should imitate the family member who isn’t a corpse.”

“Just once I wish you’d put principles before security, Yoto.”

Yoto took a step toward the desk. “I have some things I need to deal with. You should get back to work.”

Eon looked toward the open door, where Jude stood, fidgeting slightly. “Why do you tolerate that pest?” Eon whispered.

“People like him are useful. Jude and those like him look more closely at the angles. You just have to keep an eye on them, as you would a temperamental pet.” Yoto grabbed the satchel from the drawer.

“Should I be worried about what’s in the bag?”

Yoto frowned, throwing up his hands with feigned indignation. “I’m an overseer, Eon. That’s insubordination. If you were also of supervisory rank, as I could arrange for you, you’d understand these things.”

They left the office, Eon taking a moment to glare at Jude before heading away.

“Your brother seems impulsive,” Jude said to Yoto.

“Mention my brother again and everything you like about your job goes away. *Immediately.*”

Startled, Jude replied, “Yes, sir.”

They walked to the Numah sleeping quarters, two Olokun guards loitering near the entrance. The guards had improvised a game involving kicking a rock, a game sophisticated enough to require a scoring system.

“Two to three, your move,” one said as the rock skittered between his feet.

The best and the brightest were too valuable to guard the mines, Yoto knew, and even a glance at the guards on-duty here confirmed his knowledge. Their bio-armor looked dingy and uncared for, crab-like exteriors tarnished. The guards’ slouches made their gear look ill-fitting.

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“Something good in the bag, Yoto?” one of them said.

“An employee rewards program,” Yoto fired back harshly. He always felt on edge when he heard the characteristic deep bass of the Olokun.

“I think we’ve been exceeding expectations ourselves,” One guard said. Both Olokun laughed. “Whatsit take to get in on that?”

“Five segs each and we do it right now, while there’s a lull,” Yoto said.

“Five segs! Be reasonable.”

“I’m giving it to you at cost. Don’t get greedy.”

The guards exchanged a look, and then nodded in unison. “Yeah, that’ll do. I don’t know why we ever try haggling with you.”

Yoto showed them an ingratiating smile. “That’s why I’m good at what I do.”

“What exactly is it you do again?”

“Whatever works.”

They passed into the sleeping quarters, the area empty with both shifts currently overlapping. A few dim chemical lights illuminated the long rows of beds with a tranquility that Yoto desperately needed.

Reaching a small lounge near the back, the Olokun guards each sat down on separate, well-worn couches fashioned of bone and woven animal remains, the support structure creaking beneath their weight. Jude pulled up a nearby chair, fidgeting with eagerness.

Yoto handed each Olokun a Craylik, the bug the size of a Numah’s palm. He served Jude only after the Olokun had received their bugs.

Jude took the bug, almost urgently placing it over his face. When he squeezed the yellow thorax, four thin legs popped out, two hooking to his nose, the other two grasping his lips for stability. A pair of needle-thin feelers rose from the top of its greasy head, each reaching up into

his nostrils. They painlessly pierced through his sinus cavities, extending their length directly to the pleasure centers of the brain.

Before activating his own bug, one guard noticed Yoto sitting on a stool, wringing his hands.

“You getting in on this?” he said.

“Bad business practice.”

“Oh come off it. I know lots of dealers that do.”

“I like to keep a clear head.”

The guard laughed. “Sounds like a miserable way to live.” He activated his own bug, slumping back, his body going limp.

Yoto stood up, watching the sedated figures.

“You may have a point.”

* * *

In the deep forest beyond the swamps, far from Yoto’s office, far from any Numah settlement, lay the cave in which the Witch Lagaia had dwelled for twenty cycles. She dwelled in hiding, it was said, to keep her disfigurement from being seen.

Those who said such things spoke from rumor and legend.

The truth, known to those Numah who, for reasons of their own, had taken it upon themselves to serve as acolytes to the Witch of Ravaged Features, was far different.

For Lagaia in her cave was surrounded by mirrors, every possible surface covered with reflective material. Nowhere could she turn that she was not confronted by her scars, by the creased and still-reddened traces of the acids that had been poured upon her.

Lagaia’s acolytes knew that the Witch wore her scars almost as badges of honor, the honor of her loathing of Vega and all that he stood for even as,

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they also knew, the Olokun General still drew upon the Witch's powers to maintain his hold upon the world he had forced her to create for him.

If Lagaia resented, or even noticed any longer, the drain upon her powers that her remote service to Vega caused, she did not show it. None had ever heard her complain.

But neither had any ever heard her boast, despite the belief among the acolytes that during the twenty cycles in this mirrored cavern, Lagaia had been growing stronger, extending her abilities and, somehow, acquiring new ones.

What she intended to do with those new abilities, with her increased strength, none could say. Nor would any speak if they did know.

But inwardly, to themselves alone, they admitted that something was changing.

More than once in recent days, the Witch had been seen to fall into a sort of trance, during which the cavern grew cold as ice, the mirrors became covered with frost, and Lagaia's eyes, sunken deep within her ruined face, seemed to be witnessing vistas only she could view.

CHAPTER SIX

Numah who didn't sweat in the mines, or serve other Olokun demands, labored in Edgefront Market.

The area offered an arrangement of trading posts filled with permitted goods and illegal pleasures. The maze of shoddy tents extended to the horizon. Jugglers danced in congested walkways, workers unloaded merchandise, visitors squeezed through busy pathways. The complex pattern of alleys made even the simplest stroll a navigational nightmare for anyone unfamiliar with the district.

Celeste knew the area well, and kept her focus on the wares for sale, measuring the Healing Ward's needs against the limited funds Skoyk had provided her. As best she could, she ignored the coarse bustle surrounding her. She could not afford to be distracted and risk wasting money through being overcharged, or cheated.

The money came too hard—and carried its own risks. She dealt illicit drugs, including Craylik, to Yoto in return for funds to finance the Healing Ward's needs.

But even if she'd had full purse, there would not be enough money to acquire everything the Healing Ward lacked. And so she shopped carefully, choosing herbs and small flasks of mineral-rich liquid, and other materials that Skoyk would combine into potions, medicants, unguents, salves—all of which would be used all too quickly to deal with the near-constant flow of injuries and illnesses the mines and the Olokun masters produced. There was no way to keep up.

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But still she and Skoyk tried. She had watched her father's apprentice grow old beyond his years as he labored over wounds and infections, treated fevers and fractures, all while trying to broaden his knowledge of the healing arts even as he sought to pass his knowledge on to Celeste.

It was not the life she thought she would have—but it was a *worthwhile* life.

Worthwhile—and wearying, she thought, as she stifled a yawn. Never enough money, never enough medicine—and never enough sleep.

“Tired?” came a familiar voice from behind her.

Celeste turned, and smiled when she saw Eon. “Always,” she said.

Eon nodded. “As with those of us who work the mines. As with all Numah.”

“Almost all,” Celeste said with a bitterness she could not mask.

Eon's eyes narrowed. “I think he's weary too, Celeste. I just think he won't admit it. Or doesn't know how.”

“Yoto?” Celeste said, the name coming close to catching in her throat. “He knows how—he just doesn't *allow* himself to put that knowledge to work. He could have so much—”

“He did have,” Eon said with a tenderness that touched Celeste.

Celeste lowered her eyes for a moment. She did not want Eon to see the pain in them.

“Have you seen him lately?” Eon asked.

She shook her head, unwilling to admit to Eon that she saw his brother regularly—when Yoto needed more supplies for his underground trade, and she and Skoyk needed money for their Healing Ward. Celeste shook her head again, her tendrils brushing across her forehead. She pushed them back, her fingertips touching the smooth surfaces of the beads she had cherished for twenty cycles.

“Mother’s beads,” Eon said. Celeste looked up and showed a shy smile. “Yours really, or Yoto’s, should either of you wish them. You know that.”

“And so does Yoto,” Eon said, again with a gentleness and kindness that seemed at odds with his mine-hardened muscles and Olokun-harshened features. “And we both wish for you to take them. As we tell you every time you offer them to us.”

Celeste’s fingers brushed against the beads again as she nodded.

“I must go,” Eon said. “I have business... elsewhere. But two things, first.” He leaned close and whispered: “You and Skoyk should be prepared for injuries, perhaps many.”

Celeste drew a deep breath. “Then—”

Eon nodded so swiftly that Celeste bit off her words.

“When?” she said.

“Soon.”

“I will tell Skoyk.”

“Good,” said Eon, as he turned away.

“You said there were two things,” Celeste said before the miner could take a step.

Eon faced her again. His eyes were deep and there was pain in them. “You should speak with Yoto,” he said. “I believe he is almost ready to listen to you. Remind him of what you two once had—I know he remembers, though he will not say so. But remind him. Make him recall what you had, Celeste. Before it is too late.”

“Too late for what?”

Eon stared at her for a long moment, then the pain left his features and was replaced by a broad smile. “For me to become an uncle!” he said, and gave her shoulder a firm squeeze, before turning once more and disappearing into the throngs of shoppers and merchants.

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Celeste watched after him for only an instant before turning back to her shopping. Skoyk would be wondering what was taking her so long.

And, as Eon had warned, they were likely soon to have need of the goods she sought.

* * *

Yoto moved to place himself in some shade, ducking beneath a cloth canopy. He looked up in the sky, staring at the Aegis' giant panels, irritated by the way they amplified the heat. The plates covered more of Edgefront each time he visited and muted the sky's color, drenching the world below in brown hues.

Only occasionally, now, could even a glint of shattered Ajyin's orbiting shards be glimpsed between the panels, reminding Numah and Olokun alike of the homeworld the Arbitrators had destroyed.

"Sky's getting smaller everyday," an old, burly Numah trader said. He leaned against a post in his shop, twirling his fingers in his beard. "Like livin' in a box. Makes you wonder what they're going to do with us once it's finished."

Yoto chuckled in feigned solidarity with the trader, but could not help but think of his brother.

Even as he thought of Eon, he caught a glimpse of his older brother in the distance, handing off a piece of parchment to Mazen. Yoto frowned—he knew of Mazen, a young follower of Eon's, another doomed soldier in the doomed rebellion.

Squinting against the heat, Yoto walked close to his brother and Mazen, attempting to look casual, disinterested. When he became aware of Yoto's presence, Mazen jumped back with a start, ready to escape.

"I hope that's not what I think it is," Yoto said.

Eon ignored his brother, and gave Mazen a commanding stare. Mazen nodded, and then retreated quickly. Eon turned back to Yoto, and made no attempt to hide the fact that he saw movement in the satchel hanging from Yoto's waist.

"I've got business of my own." Yoto gave the sack an affectionate pat.

"A vile trade, brother." Eon had thought to tell Yoto of seeing Celeste, but now he held his silence.

"We all make our compromises." Yoto began walking down an open path.

"Everyone knows what you're doing, Yoto. You'd have to be deaf not to have heard. Your little side-venture is the worst kept secret on Neos."

"Then we have a lot in common. We're both bad with secrets. Funny that you never try to stop me, though."

Passing around the deep grooves cut by the huge wheels of the massive wagon that bore the immense body of the Gorgor which was transported from mining site to mining site to process the Aegis-ore, Yoto and Eon approached a building on the outskirts of the market.

The clatter of commercial activity dwindled out the closer they came, replaced by noises of a less acceptable tenor. Somewhere nearby a Numah scream erupted, piercing the air until it was cut short. Harsh, rumbling Olokun laughter followed. Most Numah citizens wouldn't come here other than under duress.

"Where are we going?" Eon said.

"Funny thing, I know exactly where I'm going. What I don't understand is why you're going there with me." Yoto didn't bother to look back.

"Maybe I feel like I don't see enough of my brother."

"Or you feel like interfering. Which happens more often?"

Yoto turned around and placed a hand on his brother's chest. "As much fun as this is, I need you to wait here."

"Are you insane? You know what goes on in there, in places such as that. They'll tear you apart and laugh as they do so."

Yoto grinned, pleased to be the brave one for a change, and hurried toward the entrance.

* * *

The attendant rose from his seat beside the door, more nervous and guarded than any Olokun Eon had ever seen. Eon stiffened, ready to move in should the Olokun so much as lay a finger on his brother.

Yoto greeted the Olokun and showed him the contents of his satchel. Closing the bag, Yoto looked back at Eon with an arrogant smirk and a wave before he disappeared into the building.

Eon remained where he stood, and surveyed the area. It was his nature, wherever he found himself, to consider all possible exit routes. That impulse was as old as he was—or at least, he thought bitterly, as old as the time in the Arena that he would never forget.

But this day Eon found himself scanning not for a path of escape, but for another route into the structure that now held Yoto, an avenue to rush the building should he hear his brother cry out. Moments passed and he began to worry.

It shouldn't take this long to sell a sack of bug.

Gusts of sand blew up between Eon and the doorman, who had once more seated himself, but maintained glaring surveillance of the tall Numah.

A loud crash echoed from within the building, the sound alerting the doorman, who sprang from his seat and looked through the doorway.

This was his chance.

Eon clenched his fists and charged forward. He did not consider the odds he would face—only that, once more, he must protect Yoto.

As their father had requested.

Eon raced closer, his Olokun target still gazing inside the building. Eon raised his arms, ready to strike when the door burst open and Yoto spilled out, a female Numah, bound by chains, clutching at his legs.

“Please, you have to help me! You don’t know what they do to me in there,” she said.

Yoto let out an awkward chuckle and gently pulled away. An Olokun, barely visible through the shadowed doorway, tugged at her chains.

“Not unless he pays, slave,” the Olokun said, jerking the chains again. The female Numah slid backwards, her arms stretched toward Yoto. Her fingernails scraped the rough boards of the walkway, peeling away thin strips of flaking varnish as the Olokun dragged her back into the building. The trail of scratches turned to thin paths of blood as her fingernails broke.

“Please! Save me! Get me out of here,” she begged.

Yoto shrugged as he took several casual steps backwards.

My brother is uncertain, Eon realized.

That was a posture Yoto rarely revealed.

Yoto might be unsure how to act, but Eon was not. Outraged, he jumped forward to help the chained slave.

Yoto blocked his brother with his body and, smiling, reached into his bag to remove a shiny, gold seg.

“No harm done, Eon. Let this one be on me,” he said.

He flicked the coin toward the chained female, its shimmering metal twirling in the air, then dropping to the floor. The drumming noise of its rotation on the wooden surface stopped when the slave’s fingers seized it.

“We have to go,” Yoto said. “We must go now.” Yoto grabbed Eon’s arm and pulled him away before he could take any further action.

Though he could have shrugged off Yoto’s grasp as easily as he might swat an insect, Eon allowed his younger, smaller brother to guide him away from the building.

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But he could not stop himself from looking back at the Numah female, watching as she struggled to her feet and examined the gift Yoto had tossed to her. Eon knew the seg would be of no use to her. The brothels held nothing she could buy, nor anyone willing to barter with her. As Eon stared, she squeezed the coin and arched her arm, preparing to throw it at Yoto.

Her chains snapped, the force dragging her back inside. Before the slave vanished from Eon's sight, the seg flipped free from her hand, soaring straight up, her Olokun master snatching the spinning coin out of the air.

The door closed and Eon turned away, shaking off Yoto's hand.

"We could have helped her," Eon said. He thought of Celeste and again thought to mention her name to Yoto, and once more did not.

"No, Eon, we really couldn't have. This is the way things are. You of all Numah should understand that by now, Eon. You should have understood it long ago. You're not going to change anything by disapproving words or empty, hopeless actions. Nor are you going to accomplish anything by getting beaten to death by a doorman. Or executed in the Arena when your treason is revealed."

Eon stopped still. Yoto took two more steps, then turned to face him, his features wrinkled with disdain.

"You know I'm right," Yoto said.

"You're just a coward passing off your fears as wisdom. A little coward, Yoto. As you always have been. As our father knew you to be."

He stared at Yoto for another moment, waiting for his brother to display some sign of emotion, some indication that Eon's words had wounded him.

When his brother remained impassive, Eon turned and stalked away angrily, his hunched shoulders showing Yoto his own, deeper disdain.

* * *

Yoto watched Eon for only an instant, turning in the opposite direction and setting off at a rapid pace, again skirting the grooves worn into the soil by the coming and going of the huge wagon that bore the Gorger within its cocoon.

What he had come here to accomplish was done, and he had other ventures to pursue.

* * *

Eon made it only a few steps before turning back toward Yoto. He did not wish to part on such a note—a note that was more and more frequent between them.

But Yoto was already gone.

Briefly, Eon considered looking for his brother, but the warren of shops and shacks offered too many directions for Eon to pursue. And Yoto was not the sort to leave a trail for his brother—or anyone else—to follow.

Besides, Eon thought as he turned away from the area and began making his way back to the mines, he had other matters to consider.

Above all, Mazen—and the mission Eon had assigned to the small young Numah who reminded him so much of himself—and of Yoto, had Yoto been brave.

Had Yoto been more like Mazen.

Had Yoto not been a coward.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mazen worked his way through the section of Edgefront that nestled along the cliff walls. Like all Numah villages, Edgefront clung to existence at the fringes, far from the water and life-giving resources that the Olokun kept close to their own habitations.

As he moved, Mazen thought of Eon, of the responsibility Eon had entrusted to him, of his own fears that he might fail.

He wouldn't fail—he *couldn't*. Not with Eon believing in him.

Shaking the doubts from his mind, Mazen focused on his quarry.

The target, Jude, moved effortlessly, finding every back alley and shortcut as though his path was long-mapped and deeply memorized.

Holding back just enough to keep from being detected, Mazen watched Jude pass behind an Olokun guard guiding a Ranthos laden with building materials.

A thick, nearly impenetrable shell covered the top of the Ranthos' body, extending from its tail to the tip of its snout. Two large fangs protruded from the narrow mouth that the Olokun had bound with leather straps. Yellow and black stripes adorned the sides of the Ranthos' body, marking the point where the shell gave way to a thick hide. A coat of white fur lined its underbelly. The Olokun used Ranthos for pulling heavy loads and carrying great burdens, but the beasts' temperament and size proved too large, unwieldy, and aggressive for most Numah to handle.

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Their unwieldiness made the Ranthos perfect cover for swift moves, Mazen thought as he slid beneath the giant beast, its fur tickling his neck. He narrowly avoided the creature's hard-stomping clawed hooves as the Olokun guard maneuvered it in front of a structure's newly erected frame.

Eon said this would be easy, Mazen thought.

And indeed, the mission sounded simple in theory: Trail Jude when he left the mines, see where he goes, see who he talks to.

In practice, the crafty Numah moved as though knowing he was followed at all times.

Mazen could not give up. As one of the youngest members of the rebellion, he had everything to prove. Still an adolescent and small for his age, Mazen turned his age and slight size into advantages, persuading Eon that he was the perfect choice for tailing. Mazen could disappear into crowds, could keep track of moving targets in chaotic environments, and moved with great agility.

When Jude looked back, Mazen ducked behind a busy produce stand. He dove under the cloth back of the tent, sliding between the feet of the two sellers. Climbing up a cluster of beams on the other side, he crawled onto the roof.

Running across a rickety bridge connecting two high stone buildings, Mazen hoped his instincts as to Jude's intended direction didn't fail him. Already the assistant had nearly lost him three times in a matter of minutes.

Mazen skidded to a halt at the edge of a warehouse overlooking a district crowded with meat vendors. The stench of flesh intermingled with constantly kicked-up dirt, the smells of life and movement fueling Mazen's energies.

A large pack of Olokun stared up at him for a moment. They often shopped at the market, haggling and constantly looking for better offers than they could find in their own bazaars deeper within Neos. Olokun only frequented the village market to take advantage.

Jude turned a corner, looking left and right but, fortunately, not up. Mazen slid down a rigid awning and rolled through a gap in the milling crowd of Olokun and Numah, effortlessly breaking into a run.

Eon called him the clever mouse. The boy could maneuver through anything, break into anything, and poke his nose into virtually everything.

Nothing made Mazen prouder than Eon's praise. He wished often that *he* were Eon's younger brother, rather than Yoto who collaborated so willingly with Olokun oppression, who was such a coward.

Mazen's own younger brother, Kelk, though still a child, was more brave than Yoto ever would be.

The path grew darker. Jude was working his way toward the slums. Beyond a certain point, even the Olokun military didn't bother to police the area, looking the other way when members of their species came here in search of illicit pleasures, accepting small—or not so small—offerings of graft and tribute from those Olokun who opened establishments here.

The district stretched nearly to the crevices at the top of the cliffs, one of the few spots offering an uninterrupted view of Ajyin's shattered remains, the bright points in the sky framed by the jagged teeth of Aegis construction.

Olokun only built shops in Numah villages for illicit purposes. Mazen recognized the building Jude sought, a brothel known for providing some of the most brutal distractions Neos had to offer. Jude nodded with easy familiarity at the burly Olokun guarding the entryway, then passed through the curtain.

In his brief time with the rebellion, Mazen had already infiltrated several buildings. He knew from experience that most gaps in Olokun design persisted because the Olokun failed to account for how small a space a flexible Numah could squeeze through.

Mazen scaled a pile of garbage in the narrow service corridor behind the building, ignoring the pain when jagged debris cut through his thin sandals. Eyeing the grate covering the ventilation system, he looked around the junk pile, selecting a broken ladle for its sharp edge. Holding his breath and hoping the metal made little noise when it yielded, Mazen

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used the ladle as a lever to pry the cover off, placing it silently on the rood beside the exhaust pipe it had covered. He slithered into the shaft, its walls only an inch wider than his shoulders. The tunnel passed above the main rooms of the brothel, giving Mazen a nasty tour of the entertainment available here.

One room had dozens of sacks suspended from the ceiling, thin appendages extending down, attached to the backs of Olokun heads, their expressions pinched from the intensity of the intoxication the bags' contents provided.

In another room, a small Olokun soldier was using a variety of surgical instruments as he methodically cut apart a group of Numah women.

Near the back of the building, Mazen looked through the grating to see Jude in a dark room, and the person opposite him froze Mazen in terror.

Cadoc, the General's most dangerous son, whose power some said nearly equaled the General's own, sat facing Jude in the small room. The son resembled Vega in miniature, all the muscle and swagger in a smaller vessel. The smallest of Vega's offspring was also the fiercest. None of Cadoc's brothers dared to ridicule him for his size. He was too powerful.

Cadoc's fleshy armor wore the colors of every tribe, tattoos carved into his body, badges of dark honor gained by killing each tribe's greatest warriors in battle. Lines of yellow, red and blue crisscrossed his torso in ornate patterns, combining holy symbols into a great warning: This Olokun carries the protection of the gods.

Cadoc had lost half the shell covering his face in a battle many cycles ago. The open wound revealed gnarled teeth that were typically hidden behind the plating. To Mazen, the arrangement of Cadoc's fangs looked like a grim smile.

Mazen pressed close to the grate, listening.

"Why do your people always smell so foul?" Cadoc said casually. "Even freshly bathed, there's a stink, a musk more pungent than my father in heat."

"I wouldn't know, sir," Jude replied.

“Ah well, it doesn’t matter. Now then, tell me what you *do* know. If I sense a lie, I will gut you where you stand. In this place, as you must know, they have no issue with disposing of bodies discreetly. Not that anyone would care about your disappearance.”

Jude gulped audibly. “A worker named Eon is planning an attack against your father during the tour of Sector 2.”

“How do you know this?”

“I overheard him trying to recruit his brother, Yoto.”

“Did he succeed?”

“No. Yoto tried to bribe Eon with a promotion. My employer likes to be comfortable. He’s not really the rebellious type. You need not fear Yoto.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. I like to know all the players I face, whatever the game I am playing. Who needs bending and who needs breaking. How do they plan to attack?”

“With Bursters, a cave-in, I think.”

“You think, or you know?”

“A cave-in was what Eon described. I apologize for my vagueness, sir.”

“Good, good. I value clarity.” Cadoc threw down a stack of coins. “If this information is useful, there may be more work for you. I’ll use the same channels to reach you.”

Cadoc stood up, putting a hand on Jude’s shoulder. “However, if you’re wrong, you’re going to die screaming.” His laughter was grotesque. “I once kept a Numah alive for three days after flaying off most of his skin. I know your anatomy better than any of your healers. Keep that in mind.”

“Yes, sir.”

Cadoc paused, turned his head, sniffing. “What is that scent?” He raised his head.

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Mazen's eyes met Cadoc's through the vent. The young Numah yelped involuntarily, his head striking the top of the vent. He scrambled backward through the shafts in a panic.

"Did you think I wouldn't smell you, little vermin?" Cadoc called directly into the vent, his guttural tones echoing from the walls of the shaft.

Mazen threw himself out of the grating and rolled down the stack of trash, tripping and stumbling until he found his footing. Out of the corner of his eye, Mazen saw Cadoc burst through the front door, laughing as he bounded down the street.

Running up a flight of stairs, Mazen jumped over a railing, falling a great distance, tearing through the cloth rooftop of a food seller. He plowed through a flurry of screaming Numah and frantic animals struggling to free themselves from broken cages, barely eluding the clutching hands of Numah who hoped to earn a bit of Olokun coin by capturing the boy and turning him over to their masters. Mazen cleared the market square in a shower of curses. Risking a look back, he watched Cadoc jump from several levels above, hitting the street hard enough to buckle a wooden platform.

I can't outrun him. I can't beat him. My nightmare has come to claim me, Mazen realized.

Cadoc was the central figure in a popular bedtime story told to Numah children that if they misbehaved Cadoc would come for them.

Mazen knocked poles out of several stands as he ran. Cadoc leapt the obstacles easily, tucking his feet, never losing speed. Mazen ducked through alleys, using every trick and secret he knew. Cadoc simply jumped over everything in his way, scaling buildings and running along rooftops, laughing at Mazen from above.

"At least make this worth my time, infant!" Cadoc yelled, kicking at a gutter hard enough to rip it from the wall.

Mazen had run out of tricks. The monster would kill him. He had failed Eon, and in his failure would be found the death of Eon and the revolution.

The rebellion must receive the information, must know that Eon had been betrayed. They needed to know they were walking into a trap. Mazen made a grim vow: If he couldn't survive, at least he could reach the drop point and deliver the message.

Running to the edge of a scaffold, he jumped down two stories, his ankle twisting on impact. He rolled, hitting a crate with his side. Splinters bit into his arm and back, blood dripping as he tore himself free from the wreckage.

Hobbling into a narrow side street, he pulled out the piece of paper Eon gave him. Using a splinter, he dabbed the blood from his arm and scratched a message, telling them what Cadoc now knew.

He looked for the spot and saw some graffiti. A blue hammer, their symbol of hope. Stuffing the parchment behind the loose stone in the wall, Mazen limped back toward the main street.

Cadoc dropped to the ground next to a vendor. He tore a metal support pole from the tent, the vendor screaming as his shop collapsed. Sticking the end in his mouth, Cadoc sharpened its tip to a razor-sharp point. His fangs showed as he smiled at his work.

With one graceful movement, he flung the pole like a spear.

Mazen felt heat in his lungs, felt his back slam into the wall. Cadoc had pinned him to the spot.

"It's good to put a face to a problem," Cadoc said, striding toward Mazen.

"And *you* are our little problem, I believe. Someone has been creeping into secure areas, making off with rare goods and information. Doing so under cover of night, skulking like a coward. I find cowards infuriating."

Mazen swallowed hard against the pain, struggling not to show his fear, holding his gaze on Cadoc, trying not to reveal any indication of where he had hidden the message.

"You betray yourself," Cadoc said, taunting Mazen. "If your eyes look everywhere but one direction, that one direction becomes significant."

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Cadoc ran his hands along the wall, moving as though taking a leisurely stroll. “Your people can’t help but communicate your secrets. It’s one of your weaknesses. Your faces, your bodies, your foul odors, they’re sending out signals all the time. It’s noisy just being near you.” His claw struck the loose stone, knocking it to the ground.

Cadoc unfolded the note, his eyes rapidly scanning the message.

Blood was filling Mazen’s lungs. He tried to hold back the tears. He had failed Eon. His incompetence might destroy the rebellion. He feared for his fellow rebels, for his younger brother Kelk, who already was engaged in small deceptions and distractions aimed at keeping the Olokun off-guard.

“Not many of my people take the time to learn to read your tongue. Your handwriting is excellent, might I add. Most people in such a rush wouldn’t have your flair for calligraphy. Written in your own blood as well. But I’m afraid this won’t do.”

Cadoc smeared the note in the blood seeping from Mazen’s midsection. “All they get is a bloody rag. A love letter from me to the rebels.”

Cadoc strolled to the secret hiding place, putting the ruined message back, delicately inserting the stone. Returning to Mazen, he pulled up the small Numah’s chin so their eyes met.

“You were a good hunt.”

Mazen inhaled and spat a thick stream of blood into Cadoc’s face.

“I would expect no less,” Cadoc replied, not bothering to wipe his face.

With one fierce swipe, he tore off Mazen’s jaw. Only a few teeth dangled from the wound.

The boy made a few choking noises as the blood soaked his clothes.

His final thoughts were of how he had failed Eon, who he wished had been his own older brother.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Situated snugly between titanic spires, the Olokun breeding colony filled much of the lower regions of Neos.

Still grinning from his victory over the small Numah spy, Cadoc moved toward his father's palace, the living den whose soft, fatty tissues quivered with life. Webs of nerves branched out from the lair and climbed the bluffs to create a great canopy of fleshy foliage, concealing it from the Numah markets above.

While he savored the time he spent flexing his power among the Numah, he was always pleased to return to the more natural environment the Olokun had created for themselves. The Numah structures, fashioned by their small hands from dead materials, were as fragile as the Numah themselves.

Olokun structures were alive—and living, lasted. They replenished and renewed themselves, stretching endlessly, harboring thousands of Olokun embryos in spongy constructs whose origins were in the life-matter of inferior creatures but whose presence offered both comfortable living quarters and testimony to the Olokun mastery of the materials of life.

And it was, he told himself, *Olokun* mastery of life's materials—not just Vega's mastery.

Cadoc did not privately doubt nor publicly question his father's mastery of life-making and life-altering. Only a fool would do so, and not simply because of Vega's blood-thirst. No one with eyes could question the reality of Vega's abilities—this moon that was now their home was proof of that,

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as was the transport cocoon that permitted transit from Ajyin to Neos in the first place, and the Aegis Shield that was even now growing larger above them.

Even the length of day and night bent to Vega's whim—when in the mood, the General would cease the rotation of Neos and keep one or the other of its faces turned starward, the other bathed in darkness for five, ten, a dozen times longer than the normal cycle.

The fact that Vega's powers and abilities were in large part derived from the Witch, Lagaia, meant little to Cadoc. Lagaia served Vega because Vega was in command. That would not always be true. That would not, Cadoc thought, be true for much longer. He would see to that.

And when that time came, when the father had fallen shredded beneath the son's talons, Lagaia would serve Cadoc, just as loyally, and be just as servile in lending him her power.

Soon, he told himself, and then pushed such thoughts deep into his mind as he prepared to enter his father's home.

Cadoc pushed his still-bloody hands into the den's entrance-way, its slimy surface linking immediately with his nervous system.

The gateway retracted, gargling sounds making his presence known. Cadoc entered the chamber, waiting until he was in Vega's presence to finish licking Mazen's remains off his fists.

"I have pressing matters to attend to, Cadoc. For your sake, I hope this isn't a social call." Vega rose, the shadow of the aged warrior engulfing his offspring.

Cadoc leaned back confidently, resting an arm on a nearby egg sack. "I have information concerning the rebellion."

Vega scoffed openly. "Calling it a rebellion implies danger. The Numah pose no more threat to us now than they ever have."

"I apologize, Father," he said with a hint of a sneer. "Perhaps dying from a Numah-engineered cave-in while performing an inspection is simply

a petty nuisance. Sabotage, after all, is no more than an insect sting or a minor rash.”

Vega said, “Go on.”

“They’ve planted Bursters in Sector 2. They’re going to level it once you’re in place.”

“How did you learn of this?”

“I have sources. A network of sorts. I have cultivated my garden of information. The sort of thing true leaders do. You should try it. Some creatures are actually more useful if you don’t kill them.” Cadoc extended his tongue to remove a fleck of blood from a knuckle. “Not that I mind killing them.”

“You’ve taken this much initiative, why don’t you deal with the threat yourself? I’m not postponing the inspection. Belfang’s persistence on the matter has become a thorn in my armor.”

Cadoc sneered more openly now. “And if they bring the cavern down upon you?”

“Then you will have failed and succeeded simultaneously. I will be dead and the accused will have to answer to *you* in the Arena. Whichever the outcome, Cadoc, you will have won.”

Cadoc’s father summoned his mother and Seer, Telya, to his side and whispered a few words to her before returning his attention to his son.

“Are we through here, Cadoc? The Council leader is due to arrive at any moment.”

“Such formal language to use, *General*, when speaking about your father,” Cadoc said.

Vega scowled, rising to his full height to glare down at his child. “A relationship of blood and blood alone. Belfang is blinded by the old ways. His strategies are plagued with failure. If you plan to rule Neos one day, I would suggest you pay attention.”

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A coarse voice came from behind them. “Those failure-plagued strategies have ensured your survival so far, Vega.”

Vega turned, and when he did so Cadoc could see beyond him an elderly Olokun dressed in ceremonial robes, an affectation few Olokun followed any longer.

Despite the harsh words he had just spoken, and which Belfang had so clearly overheard, Vega bowed deeply to his father, waiting for the fossil to slink toward him.

In keeping with the tradition of the Council, Belfang brushed Vega’s head. “Rise, my son.”

Cadoc followed at a discreet distance as his father, his grandfather, and the members of the Council left the den. As they walked, Cadoc found himself unable to restrain a certain grudging respect for Vega and what he had accomplished since the chaos of Ajyin’s destruction and the desperate relocation of Olokun and Numah to this moon.

Vega himself had formed the Council to help preside over the world he’d created on Neos. The assembly was responsible for the government’s highest deliberative functions, and consulted the General with legislative and administrative advice regarding both the Arbitrators and the Numah. Advice Vega often ignored. Vega held no illusions—the Council plotted against him, desiring nothing more than to bring him down in due time. Their schemes rarely inspired more than amusement in Vega, and never once had he felt truly threatened, a fact he frequently boasted to Cadoc. For amusement he had toyed with the Council from the time of their creation, giving them false leads to pursue and bad information to investigate.

The group of Olokun strode down a long corridor, their footsteps echoing loudly on the metal floor, a rare bit of inorganic construction in an Olokun building, commissioned by Vega in order to show the Numah that in the corridors of Olokun power, Numah handiwork was fit only to be trod upon.

Numah engineers had composed the hallway from industrial scrap, the edges melting seamlessly into the organic fibers of Olokun architecture.

Leaving the metal-floored corridor behind, the group entered a room through a soggy split at the end of the hall. The light surrounding them shifted from cold blue hues to a mucous green luminescence.

They paused at the center of a round chamber.

The living floor adhered to Vega's two-toed feet as Cadoc and the others watched the General establish the connection, joining his body like an extra limb to the environment they stood inside of. Light itself bent as the room warped to Vega's unspoken commands. The walls rippled and bubbled, enclosing them inside a translucent pod of tissue.

Outside, Cadoc knew, massive tubes of flesh began venting exhaust from the structure. The neck of one tube enlarged as the cocoon bearing the Olokun burst through its opening as though being born, suction-tendrils emerging to clutch at the fibrous tube that climbed above them.

The cocoon rose, climbing the tube that led to the Aegis Shield as an insect might climb a vine, gaining speed as it gained altitude, until it had passed beyond the atmosphere.

Cadoc forced himself to stand motionless even as the others, Vega included, shifted their weight against the thrust that tugged at them. He wanted them to see he was impervious to such forces and vectors, that he was better than they, stronger and more powerful.

Gradually, the thrust dwindled as the cocoon broke fully free from Neos' gravity. Grudgingly, Cadoc admired the skill with which Vega commanded their climb far above Neos and around completed sections of the Aegis.

Cadoc did not allow his attention to be distracted by the Aegis. He kept his gaze focused upon Vega, Belfang, and Telya, measuring the attitudes and glances that darted among them, considering the various levels of superiority he possessed to all of them.

Cadoc kept an especially close watch on Belfang as Belfang himself observed Vega's work.

Beyond the walls of the cocoon, Numah operators guided large mechanical drones that emerged from an organic satellite the size of a small

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fortress. Groups of the machines carried a single colossal organic plate beginning the long, slow process of affixing it into the protective shield's grid, joining the flesh of the plate to the shield's circulatory system which would nourish and sustain the new plate's growth. Fibers met openings and melded; capillaries and veins filled with fluid; the plate's color deepened and became alive.

In a well-rehearsed, neutral tone, Vega said, "As you can see, everything proceeds on schedule."

Belfang responded without hesitation. "Unlikely. The Aegis must be complete within one cycle."

"One? Impossible. I'd need ten times the labor."

"Perhaps you would have them, were you not so eager to see to their slaughter."

"The Numah are rebellious. You know this. They must be kept in line to avoid anarchy, to prevent further attempts at sabotage."

"I'm not blind, Vega. Do you forget how often I've swallowed my gorge at the sight of your activities in that Arena of yours? Some, certainly, deserve their fate. But too often you use other slaves for sport. As does your... son."

Cadoc drew himself even taller as Belfang's eyes moved in his direction.

Vega spat upon the floor at Belfang's feet.

The elder Olokun recoiled a bit, but maintained his dignity—and his anger. "That is an insult and a grave one to my line. But let it pass. I'm sure you know the consequences should you fail. If the Arbitrators return before the Aegis is complete, we all are doomed. Finish this—and finish this in a single cycle."

"Do not attempt to command me, Belfang. Were it not for me, all of us would have died with Ajyin and there would be no line. *I* am the authority of Neos, not you. I will not allow you to lecture me like a whelping Numah."

“The Council you created, Vega, is the mind behind your power. We control the life-matters of Neos, we alone have truest access to the visions and forewarnings that will save us. Brute force alone, of which you are such a master, will not save us. You must learn to listen if you wish to survive, Vega, no matter how much that offends your sensibilities.”

“I will listen, *Father*. I will listen attentively and obediently—just so soon as you entrust me with the location of the weapon.”

“The blade is gone, Vega. We destroyed it long ago, soon after you destroyed the first of the great threats the Aegis faced. You did well that day, I must admit, and have told you so, and told you often. But I and my guards also did well that day, removing the weapon and its temptations forever. You know this.”

Vega turned, gnashing his teeth, a visage Cadoc recalled from childhood punishments his father had delivered.

“I did well, yes, because I knew even then the uses of power, as I know them far better now—and *you* wasted a source of immense power simply because you didn’t know how to use it?”

“Even before the events in the Arena, the Council had determined the dagger must be destroyed.”

“Idiocy!”

“Sanity,” Belfang said, with a calmness that came close to impressing Cadoc. “The blade could threaten our existence here on Neos. We have no other place to retreat to should the Arbitrators return. Any threat to Neos must be destroyed. As was the dagger.”

“You owe your lives to me! Had I not listened to the Witch, had I not worked to make this moon habitable for our colony, had I not hand-selected the members of the Council for transfer, you would have all died on Ajyin along with Emperor Trusk and his babbling congress.”

“Enough discussion, Vega. I am your father, your elder. Bow and deliver the respect you so often disregard.”

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Cadoc swallowed the impulse to smirk as, slowly, Vega obeyed Belfang's request.

The General kept his eyes down-turned as he knelt, and then, still crouching, moved close to Belfang.

"Yes, Father," Vega whispered as he embraced the elder Olokun, and with a ferocious thrust-

-stabbed his throat with clawed fingers, kissing him on the forehead as Belfang's blood drained onto the bottom of the orb, its fibers drinking up the viscous fluid.

Cadoc did not move, did not breathe, did not look away. He watched every second of Belfang's slow death, every second of it reminding Cadoc that Vega still possessed the capacity for surprise.

"So many times you could have altered this course of events, Father," Vega said in a hoarse, almost loving whisper. "Had you shown me even a shred of respect, you could have learned from me and saved yourself."

Vega turned to Cadoc, who faced him with pride.

"This is how you maintain authority, Cadoc. I should hope you'd do the same to me if I ever succumb to such foolishness."

Cadoc lowered his eyes in hopes that his father would sense respect—and that Vega would not see in his son's gaze just how often Cadoc had thought of administering the same sort of justice to Vega.

Looking down, Cadoc reflected on how Vega's own eyes were changing. They appeared to be developing fissures at their edges, an orange hue creeping towards their centers. Cadoc recognized the syndrome—one of the symptoms of the Shield Fever seen in Numah who spent too much time near the Aegis. He had never heard of the illness developing in an Olokun, but he felt a sudden hope that Vega, who had spent more time close to the shield than any other member of their species, might be succumbing to the disease. Cadoc looked forward to witnessing its progression.

“I’ll keep that in mind, Father,” Cadoc said, raising his head and allowing himself a smirk.

The Seer chuckled, clearly entranced by her master’s dominance.

“Telya, be prepared to gather the remaining Council members in my main dining hall. I will tell you when: have them ready to report without hesitation or delay. We have matters to discuss, but we shall discuss them when *I* say. The others will seek to block me once they realize Belfang is gone. Best to take action soon.”

Cadoc was no more affected by the tug of gravity as they returned to Neos than he had been by their flight from its grip.

He was *strong*, and he had no doubt that his father knew it.

CHAPTER NINE

The most finely-wrought of plans became disasters all too easily.

Eon had taken upon himself the signaler's responsibilities precisely because the task left him exposed, with the greatest potential of being spotted by Vega's security forces. If the plot were to fail, he wanted to give his people every opportunity to escape while the Olokun dealt with him. The rebel's vantage points denied them clear sight of the target area and Vega's presence there—only when they saw the signal wands would they know that the time to strike had arrived.

He waited now, in position, signal wands ready to be waved the moment the entourage passed through the tunnel.

Eon made himself breathe deeply and slowly, trying not to dwell on all the things that could go wrong—nor those he feared already had.

Mazen's disappearance and the bloody parchment left in the hiding place worried Eon, but too much depended on the attack and on making the attack now. He had no doubt that brave little Mazen was dead, but he was equally confident—and he knew, perhaps over-confident—that Mazen would not have betrayed the plot.

The fact that Vega's inspection of the area had not been delayed, much less canceled, told him that Mazen's sacrifice had not been in vain. The boy had revealed nothing.

The central chamber of the Sector 2 mine had originally been an expansive, naturally formed cave, with thin rock bridges arching back and forth

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across its interior. Balconies of basalt jutted out in a dozen places, providing Eon and the rebels ideal locations to plant the Bursters.

His present location was reached only with difficulty. No bridge led to his shelf of stone. Eon had rappelled down from three other sections on thin rope with his supplies: a pair of light wands for sending the signal, a flare to summon the other revolutionaries to finish off any remaining guards, and a pickaxe, the only weapon he would have should the Olokun confront him.

Constant Olokun patrols in advance of Vega's inspection tour forced him to keep low, cautiously raising his head every few minutes to survey the area.

At last he saw the elite guard march into view at the far end of the chamber. Moments later Vega and Telya emerged, strutting into the mining chamber filled with nervous Numah.

The General neared the position—and the moment of his death neared.

Clenching the light wands, Eon prepared to give the signal.

Just short of the proper spot, Vega stopped abruptly, and grew visibly enraged.

Eon fought the rise of panic. Had one of the members of the resistance made a mistake? Did he suspect something? Had he somehow spotted Eon?

In the quiet of the mine, the reason became perfectly clear, as Vega stepped furiously closer to the ranks of Numah. Those ranks shuffled aside, distancing themselves from a mine-worker who had fallen asleep standing up.

The Numah receded like a tide as the General stepped off the path, slowly approaching the sleeping miner.

His guards stood a few paces away from the snoring worker. Even with the commotion surrounding him, the miner had not stirred from his sleep.

Probably drunk, Eon thought, heartsick at the realization that cycles of planning and sacrifice—including Mazen's life—might be undone by a single worker's weakness.

Vega pointed to the Numah with an expression of disbelief. "How does that happen? I couldn't fall asleep standing if I wanted to."

"The Numah have differing physiology. That could be the reason," his mother the Seer suggested.

"More likely he's intoxicated," Vega said. "Either way, it's appalling and unacceptable. Honestly, how does one even handle an act of insubordination such as this? Do I kill him where he sleeps? Do I wake him and then kill him?" He thought for a moment. "No, no." He pointed at the Numah, who somehow maintained slumber even with the General's booming voice a few paces away. "Prepare him for the Arena."

Vega slapped the worker three times, quickly and hard, stepping back as the Numah opened his eyes and tried to focus them.

The worker gasped in surprise when he saw who stood before him, finally coming fully awake only when powerful Olokun claws took hold of his arms. He wailed in confusion as the guards dragged him away.

"This is the whole reason I do these inspections," Vega said to his Seer. "Standards must be maintained."

The General shook his head wearily and returned to his inspection.

Eon tightened his grip upon the wands. *All is not lost!*

The first guard set foot within the target zone.

Eon leaned forward, waiting for the perfect moment. His stomach tensed. He felt as though he was falling from a great height. He scanned the group below, realizing only now that the General's Seer and guards were the only Olokun accompanying him. *Cadoc should be here*, but Cadoc was nowhere in sight.

Eon raised his head a bit more, seeking to spot the General's son, but saw him nowhere.

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Less than ideal, but he would handle Cadoc later. He had been waiting for a moment with Cadoc for twenty cycles, since he saw Myrine's blood glisten on the Olokun's razored talon.

Eon pushed thoughts of revenge from his mind. He could not allow himself to be distracted by such things. For now he made ready to send the signal and bring down death upon Vega.

The kick nearly sent Eon flying from the platform. His flailing arms caught the edge, his body jerked hard as he brought himself to a grinding stop.

Cadoc himself stood upon the ledge before Eon, examining the Numah's small observation post.

"Quite the minimalist, Eon," Cadoc said, surprising Eon with the use of his name.

Does he remember what I remember? Eon thought, seeing Cadoc's tongue as it flicked Myrine's blood from his talon.

Cadoc grinned, kicking a rock off the platform with a show of boredom. "I expected you would have some sort of trigger up here. Perhaps I underestimated the complexity of your little scheme."

Eon hoisted himself back up. He stayed in a defensive posture, waiting for the inevitable attack.

"If you wait for me to make the first strike in this fight, you'll lose the opportunity," Cadoc said, pointing at the procession below with a nod of his head. "You'll have to take the initiative."

Eon looked for the signal wands, spotting them between himself and Cadoc. He might die at Cadoc's hands, but he could still accomplish the death of Vega and the Seer.

Eon stood tall until he was eye to eye with the Olokun warrior. If Eon could bring him down even for a moment, he could trigger the collapse and salvage the mission.

He charged forward, ready to deliver a powerful strike. Cadoc lowered his skull and snapped it forward, a head-butt slamming Eon to the ground.

Through the dizziness Eon felt blood dripping down his forehead and into his eyes, blinding him. He steadied himself, but the killing blow he expected didn't come.

"This is laughable," Cadoc said with contempt.

Still blinded, Eon could hear Cadoc's footsteps nearby. The spinning in his head made him retch. He blinked against the blood, and fought for vision, for focus. Cadoc's brightly colored tattoos came into slow, blurry view.

He bit down against the urge to wail his despair when he saw that Cadoc rested a massive, armored foot upon the signal wands. Any hope of accomplishing the attack was now lost—survival itself was the only issue that remained.

Eon held himself steady, seeking to give Cadoc no signal that he could see. Surprise, now, would be the sole edge Eon could hope for in a fight with Cadoc.

The Olokun warrior glared out in the direction of the procession, watching with a gloating pleasure as the General and his party left the target area. As the final cadre of guards exited through the far end of the chamber, Cadoc raised his foot, bent and picked up the signal wands.

"So very organized, so sloppily executed. Your rebels are too high up to see their target. They rely solely on your command. They placed all their faith in *your... leadership.*"

He examined the wands carefully. "You wouldn't, by chance, have simply used the standard code normally associated with setting off a blast, would you? No. That'd be far too careless for such a bright miner." Cadoc lit the wands.

Eon tried to get to his feet, but gravity dragged him down. Striding forward, Cadoc set a foot on his chest, gently pushing him flat. Looking sideways from the ledge, he saw Numah going back to work, many entering the blast area.

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“Here we go, perfect timing! Right, Eon?” Cadoc swung the sticks through the air, the light leaving trails in the haze. He gave the blast signal.

The sound of massive explosions filled the mine as a series of concussive bursts shuddered through the area. A massive chunk of stone slammed into the ledge above them, caroming off at an angle, barely missing their own perch. At the peak of the vibrations, Cadoc began to laugh, holding out his arms as though trying to embrace the destruction.

Fueled by rage, Eon emerged from his stupor, levering himself from beneath the Olokun's foot and throwing himself at Cadoc. The Olokun backhanded him into the wall. Rough rock scraped against Eon's shoulders as he slid to the ground.

The cave continued to shudder with aftershocks, rock falling from the ceiling and the walls.

“For an experienced miner, you did a terrible job of planning the scale of your detonation. Unknown instabilities in the rock, I suspect.”

Cadoc strolled along the edge of the stone ledge, surveying the damage below.

“I'd say you only meant to produce a blast half those dimensions. You would have swept up a great number of your own people even if your plan had worked the way you intended. It's funny how many of his own followers a *hero* can murder while pursuing his goals.”

“Why haven't you killed me?” Eon said.

Cadoc turned, his armored brow raising. “Are you curious? Or are you making a request of me?”

Eon glared, any hope of a response failing him.

“The damage has been done. You proved a pathetically easy hunt, a weak foe. Nowhere near as feisty as your little messenger whose fluids I drank from my hands.”

You drank my mother's blood as well, Eon thought.

“Ruining your plans and keeping the General alive is all I really needed. For now. *Now*, you look like fools on both sides, and I have killed more slaves in a single move than ever before. It’s a personal accomplishment that I shall savor!”

Mazen, thought Eon. He trusted me so, and died as a result of that trust.

“My father, of course, would have killed you here or, at best, had you destroyed in his Arena. I’m smarter than him, you know. I have a sense that you, disgraced and a failure in the eyes of the Numah, will be of more use to me alive. However useless you now are to yourself and your kind.”

Cadoc came close to Eon’s face and said, “This is, of course, not over. Nor will it end until I declare it is finished. Until then, deal with the consequences of your failure. Goodbye, Eon.”

The Olokun jumped from the ledge, hitting a nearby wall, sinking a claw into the rock face to slow his descent as he slid down to ground level.

Regaining his balance, Eon crawled uneasily to the edge. His vision clearer, he could see Numah trying to escape the rubble from the collapsed cave. A wave of panicked, hysterical shouts and cries for help echoed through the cavern.

Taking his last piece of rope, Eon secured it to a stalagmite and rappelled down into the chaos to offer what assistance he could, to provide whatever help the surviving Numah would accept from him.

CHAPTER TEN

Yoto felt rage burning through his stomach.

His Olokun supervisors he served so well and faithfully had sent reports of a collapse in Sector 2.

Eon!

Yoto did not lie to himself. He had not risen this far by allowing himself to believe falsehoods or avoid ugly truths. Eon had put his plan into motion and launched the most serious assault on Olokun control since...

Perhaps since their parents' time.

And now Yoto must deal with the consequences.

But first he must discover what those consequences were.

He nervously moved a Craylik between his fingers. For a moment he considered bringing the bug to his face and squeezing, seeking escape through its piercing tendrils.

But Yoto had not risen so far by giving into desire for escape, either.

And within seconds he had additional reason to be glad he'd not taken the bug to his face.

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Cadoc entered Yoto's office brusquely, leaving two Olokun guards flanking the doorway. Yoto stuffed the bug back in his sack, slamming the drawer shut.

Ignoring the illegal creature, Cadoc took a moment to stare at Yoto.

Yoto had to remind himself to breathe. Even lungs could be dangerous to use in Cadoc's presence.

"You are the overseer for Sector 8?" Cadoc said to Yoto.

"I am."

"Good. You will accompany me to Sector 2."

Fighting the impulse to glance at the closed drawer where his contraband—and his profit—was stashed, Yoto nodded without speaking. There were larger matters at stake than a bag of bug and a pouchful of segs.

Matters, Yoto knew, of his own life—and death.

Had Eon's treachery doomed his younger brother as well? Yoto had no way of knowing—any more than he knew whether or not Eon still lived. He wasn't sure how much he cared.

What he did know, he realized as he followed Cadoc from the office, was that Eon's plan could not have been fully successful—not if Cadoc still lived.

And watching the Olokun warrior's massive muscles ripple beneath his tattooed armor, Yoto had no doubt at all that Cadoc was very much alive.

They reached Sector 2 without exchanging another word.

In the dust-filled chamber, Cadoc and Yoto walked along a rim overlooking the devastation, the Olokun setting a leisurely pace despite the frantic efforts of workers tearing at the piles of rubble below them.

"Since there are workers still trapped inside the pile, some of them still perhaps alive, where would you start in order to save the largest number of slaves?"

Yoto pointed left to a mound of rocks near the right.

Cadoc nodded thoughtfully, and they continued walking.

Yoto forced himself to find the strength to speak. “Sir, may I ask—”

“Our engineers have spent the time since the explosion examining the cave-in to come to that same conclusion. You made your decision from a moment’s observation.”

“If it’s the same conclusion, why ask me?” Yoto said.

“The source of information is as relevant as the content. And I’d like you to oversee the rescue effort.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll get started right away.”

Yoto took a step, but Cadoc’s clawed hand came up, stopping him. The Olokun unfolded a piece of paper, turning it toward Yoto.

It was an unmistakable portrait, though a poor example of artistic talent, of Eon.

“This is our primary suspect in this act of sabotage. Do you know him?”

Yoto knew the trap when he heard the invitation. Olokun loved to bait Numah into betraying their own.

“He’s my brother,” he said without hesitation, making certain that his voice was even and calm.

“Fascinating. Thank you for your honesty.” Cadoc had avoided looking directly into Yoto’s eyes as they spoke. When their eyes finally met, Yoto felt his insides clench. He watched the naked muscle around the Olokun’s eyes open and close in a slow blink. “Will that be a problem for you?”

Yoto answered instantly. “No.”

Cadoc led Yoto to a group of workers. The chosen workers’ physiques struck Yoto as odd—they weren’t miners; he recognized some of them as

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sub-supervisors, support crew members, one or two mechanics. Only a few would he even describe as muscular.

But he noticed the sharp look in many of their eyes, little gestures showing a crew paying attention, absorbing and considering the details around them. Had Cadoc actually taken the time to pick out Numah smart enough to make the job easier? Or was this another trap the Olokun warrior was setting for him?

“These are your men. I leave you to make arrangements however you see fit.” Cadoc walked away. Yoto knew as a certainty that the Olokun wouldn’t walk far.

Yoto took a few deep breaths before taking control.

“Pay attention! How this happened, what—or who—caused this disaster is not our concern. Only the job before us. Give me your names.”

He stored the Numah workers’ names in his memory, ready to use as required when building camaraderie among the team and establishing himself firmly as its leader. “We’ll split into squads of two. As you drill, try to keep an even distribution of weight. This means drilling in two places at once when necessary. We don’t need more rock slides making this worse. Helken, Ulen, you’re on my team. Everyone else, listen for any noise or any signs of life. Getting as many out of this alive as possible is our priority. This assignment can earn you points and consideration or—” he cast his eyes in the direction Cadoc had walked, certain that the workers would not mistake his meaning. “Or not. Do you understand me?”

The workers nodded as one, several of them nearly saluting.

“Then let’s begin. Spread out evenly around the site.”

They put their drills to the stones, creating a path through the rocks. Within a short time they had pulled several Numah from pockets of debris, some barely breathing, some crushed to death or asphyxiated.

Yoto was aware that Cadoc was watching from higher ground, doubtless observing and measuring the speed at which Yoto’s team turned the mountain of fallen rock into a catacomb from which they extracted the few survivors and the countless dead. Yoto was pleased when he saw

Cadoc turn away and climb to a higher perch, a stone ledge overlooking the scene.

Working deeper into the precariously piled stones, Yoto remained attentive for any sound of life, straining to hear above the sound of drills and shifting rock.

There was something—a soft cry. Yoto signaled for the drilling to stop. He cocked his head, pressing an ear to a gap between stones, listening.

A familiar voice called out for help, and the dread that Yoto had feared since Cadoc's arrival in his office erupted throughout him.

He motioned to Ulen and said, "Cut an access path here. As the rock begins to break, I need you, Helken, to start drilling in here. Be careful. It's a tricky stack, and we don't want it coming down on our heads."

As they set to work, Yoto fired up his own drill, the kick of the machine leaving his hands numb and quickly coating his face in dust. The rock blocking the entrance broke into sections, cleared away by his two helpers.

With the path opened, Yoto set the drill aside and looked to the others. "I'm going at this one alone, at least initially. If anyone approaches asking for me, and I think you know who I mean, yell my name. Show no fear. Just call for me. Understood?"

They both nodded.

Stooping down, Yoto crawled into a small pocket of space.

He found Eon half-buried in debris, a small puddle of blood pooled below the point where the rock had crushed his knee.

When Eon looked up, a pleading look came into his eyes. "Brother, please, you have to free my leg. I can't be found here."

"What are you doing here at all?" Yoto said, his voice controlled, almost flat.

"I was trying to save lives," Eon said.

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“And you were failing, clearly.”

“The rocks shifted as I worked, pinning me. Help me out of this and I will be on my way.”

“Eon, it’s not that simple,” Yoto said, avoiding the temptation to tell his brother just how far from simple matters were. “The stone that pins you is holding up this whole mound. If I drill into it, we’ll all die with you. I need others to put in supports. This is more work than I can physically do by myself. And if I summon too much help, Cadoc will figure out that we’re up to something.”

“He’s still here?” Eon said, his eyes wide.

“He’s running the operation.” Yoto could not recall ever seeing Eon so frightened.

Eon shook his head, incredulous. “He’s the one who set off the Bursters!”

Yoto looked weary as Eon recounted the day’s events, the failed attack, Cadoc’s treachery.

“This is idiotic,” Yoto said when his brother had finished. He headed towards the exit.

“What are you doing?” Eon said.

“I’m not playing this game.”

“What?”

“You failed, Eon, as I warned you that you would. But don’t expect me to believe that Cadoc set off the explosions and then let you go? That’s insane.”

“But he is insane! Damn it, Yoto, don’t you understand?”

“I’ve had enough talk with him to know that he’s too smart for a course of action that foolish. Olokun kill each other for rank constantly. They even have battle ceremonies for the right of succession. If he had let Vega die, he’d be the likeliest candidate to become the next General. It’s the easiest

way for him to acquire power from a father he could never kill in combat. What you're saying makes no sense."

Eon shook his head. "I've told you the truth, Yoto. Why can't you believe me?"

"Because it requires me to believe that Cadoc is either a fool or insane. The other alternative is that you created this story to disguise your own failure, your own incompetence. Which do you think I'd find likelier?"

Yoto started to crawl back out. "I'm bringing in a full crew to get you out. I'm not sneaking around for your sake."

The two Numah in his team helped him to his feet as he squirmed out of the tunnel. He rose from the ground and found himself facing Cadoc.

"Did you find something?" Cadoc said, feigning innocence with an aplomb that both impressed and frightened Yoto.

Yoto stared for a moment, trying to find an angle, trying to find a way past the obvious solution.

But the obvious solution was the only solution.

"The suspect is inside. He's pinned beneath a structural support for a pretty large section of the mound, so we'll need a team to get him out."

Cadoc nodded. "Your cooperation will be noted."

Yoto went outside and yelled, "Arsik, Lex, Zek, I need you out here." The acoustics carried his voice far, and all three reported to him within moments.

"I need your group to bring me back a pallet of support beams. We've got someone pinned and bleeding, and we'll need the supports to free him." All three ran off, returning within minutes with a platform laden with adjustable support beams.

Using drills, they created a wider pathway to Eon, carefully placing supports around the column pinning Eon's leg.

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Yoto kept close to his brother, directing the operation and trying to ignore Eon's screams of pain as the vibrations shook the rock that imprisoned him. He was less able to ignore the sharp looks of betrayal that Eon cast in his direction, a look that did not waver despite the pain.

Each time Yoto emerged from the chamber to issue commands or request materials, Cadoc was nearby, watching him thoughtfully and, perhaps, warily. Yoto was careful not to appear nervous in the Olokun's presence.

They chained Eon without even bandaging his wound. As he hobbled away from the rescue operation, the guards all but dragging him, Eon glared at Yoto, who would not meet his stare.

Yoto stared only at the ground beneath his feet, littered with scraps of rock and tattered clothing, stained with Numah blood.

While his workers returned to their labors, Yoto stood back from the mound of stones. He did not look up when Cadoc approached.

"I would like to leave," Yoto said when Cadoc did not speak.

"Very well. You've accomplished the primary task I had for you. Your team is doing a commendable job. Return to your duties. You will hear from me."

"There is no doubt of that, is there?" Yoto said wearily.

"No, I suppose not."

* * *

In the cavern of the Witch of the Ravaged Features, Lagai's acolytes drew on heavier clothing as the temperature grew more and more frigid.

But within the ice the Witch's power and plan burned with a heat as fierce as any star.

Her time had come once more.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Yoto feigned sleep behind his desk, imitating the sort of laziness he normally exhibited after completing all of a day's tasks. Usually those tasks were completed well before they came due. Yoto put some effort into making himself appear somnolent.

No one believed the pretense. News had spread fast.

But keeping his eyes closed provided Yoto at least some small comfort, though he would not allow himself to sleep. He might never allow himself to sleep again.

His one attempt to sleep had been unavoidable—and disastrous.

Reaching his office, still filthy, sweaty, vile from his labors at the rescue site, Yoto had not changed clothes, nor even begun to clean himself.

He sank into his chair, stared for a moment at the surface of his desk, but could find no comfort in the familiar objects there.

For a long, tempting moment Yoto allowed his fingertips to rest on the drawer that held the satchel... that held the Craylik.

But no.

No amount of bug could help him now, and he had every reason to keep his thoughts as clear as possible.

And one reason above all: Cadoc had his eyes on him.

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Slowly Yoto drew his trembling hand away from the drawer and clenched his three fingers into a fist in an effort to steady himself. The gesture did little good. He had no energy. He could not hold his eyes open, his head up.

Slowly Yoto leaned forward, lowered his head and rested it upon his desk-top. He closed his eyes. He slept.

The dreamworld took him.

Sleep brought nightmares he had considered banished cycles ago. Sounds of screaming muffled by large hands on his head. Streaks of red shot past the gaps between his fingers no matter how tightly he shut his eyes. He heard the deaths of Myrine, of Morik, *felt* their blood spatter him, saw himself coated in red in his dreams as he had seen Eon coated in the Arena, heard Eon tell him of Cadoc tasting their mother's blood, saw himself as a child weeping blood-red tears that were absorbed by the floor of the Arena, nourishing the very place of his parents death as their flesh had nourished Vega and his beast, saw the young Cadoc in the Arena, lapping at the blood of Morik and Myrine.

Yoto whirled through the dreamworld, seized by forces he did not understand, could not control, was unable to resist.

He saw Eon, he saw his brother in the Arena, comforting Yoto after their parents' death, and at the same time gazing upon Yoto with a disgust beyond contempt.

He saw that same look, a look of shame as well as disgust, on Eon's face as Cadoc's guards dragged him from the rubble in the collapsed cavern. A look that said, *you are no brother, you are no longer my brother.*

A look that could *kill*.

Yoto spoke to himself in his dreams; his voice in the dreamworld was far stronger and more forceful than his own real voice. His words carried terrifying weight here.

If Eon dies—once Eon is dead—you will truly be an orphan.

But you will have one less reminder of that day.

Do you find that a fair exchange, Yoto? Your brother's life in trade for what he reminds you of? Your brother's life for your dark memories of the Arena?

Of course you will have new memories of the Arena. Do you suppose that Cadoc will not insist that you watch Eon meet his doom?

Or that Eon's last vision of you will be of the coward your father foresaw—whose cowardice has now cost the life of Morik's elder son? Morik's only real son.

Eon!

At the moment those words were spoken in the dreamworld, Vega's control of Neos' orbit permitted the moon to move into a position that allowed the light from the small world's sun to pierce directly through the Aegis panel above the mine. The glare struck Yoto like a torch, its heat intense and nearly unbearable.

The heat awakened Yoto from his dreams.

Yoto let out a wild wail, pushing himself backward, kicking over the desk. Papers exploded into a momentary fluttering cloud, tools and writing implements clattered across the floor.

Yoto lay shuddering fiercely—he was shivering despite the heat that had roused him. He felt as though he was shaking off something, though he was not sure what.

Gradually Yoto brought himself under control, gaining dominion over his body long before his racing thoughts grew calm.

At last he rose and walked, a bit unsteadily, to the window, staring out as Eon had the day before. His brother always looked toward the farthest horizon when in thought. What pleasure or insight the far vista provided Eon mystified Yoto; no matter how hard or carefully he looked, Yoto saw only workers doing their best to appear busy and avoid his gaze.

Whatever Eon saw, and whatever thoughts his vision provoked held no appeal for Yoto.

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Thinking like Eon wins you only a death in the Arena. If there has ever been time not to think like my brother, that time is now.

Ignoring his ruined desk, Yoto began pacing the work area. Movement helped him think; thinking made him restless. He scanned the shelving around him, not certain at first what he was looking for. Without warning, an image took shape in his head—he was not sure whether it emerged from his thoughts or from the dreamworld.

The heat that had filled the office a moment ago was suddenly and inexplicably replaced by a chill, a deep and penetrating chill that reached far inside Yoto and wrapped itself around him.

But he paid the cold no attention.

He was seeing something new.

Something else was taking shape beyond the image of a mechanical device. Something far more complex—a plan, a plot, one that if accomplished properly could save Eon without drawing Yoto into danger. Or too far into danger, anyway.

Yoto pushed those thoughts deep into his mind. For now he would concentrate on the real, on what could be *made* real from materials close to hand.

Yoto hesitated before setting to work. These thoughts, the device he envisioned and the plan he refused to allow himself to consider, were alien to everything he believed about himself, about his life, about the sort of life required of one who would survive under the yoke of the Olokun.

And yet he felt compelled—as though he no longer controlled his own actions.

But if he did not—who did?

That question would not be answered now, if ever—and Yoto found it easier to yield to the compulsion.

After a moment Yoto began collecting various items, snatching up a bundle of thin pipes, then a spare small drill's engine followed by a handful

of wires. The activity raised plumes of dust from the seldom-disturbed shelves. Working on pure impulse, Yoto went along the shelves grabbing every item fitting the image in his head. He sat down on one of the legs of his overturned desk and started fitting pieces together with a multi-pronged tool taken from his belt. Parts clicked together, a spark cracking as he fit a wire into a connector.

When Yoto at last looked up from his work, having brought together the device he had seen in his head, he found himself still alone in dead quiet and the darkness.

Idly, Yoto twiddled the object in the dim light, taking a moment to admire his own craftsmanship.

Then he stood and looked down at himself.

What he saw shocked him.

For the first time since his promotion as overseer of Sector 8, Yoto's clothes were filthy and torn.

It was as though the clothes belonged to someone else—or were worn by someone else. It was as though he was no longer the Yoto whose life required the accommodations and compromises that made his life possible.

He heard again, unexpectedly but with absolute clarity, the voice of the dreamworld's Yoto, speaking now in wakefulness, saying a single, devastating word:

Eon!

And beyond that word, the plan.

The plan he had forced into the recesses of his mind would not remain there, but moved now to the forefront of his thoughts, dominating all others.

A decision had been made, though Yoto was uncertain whether he had made that decision himself.

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Yoto drew a long slow breath, then moved with speed. Gearing up, he placed instruments in the many belts wrapping his body. He moved to the exit, then stopped abruptly.

The pieces of the device that now dangled from his sturdiest belt had fit together easily, perfectly.

But one piece of the plan still didn't fit at all. The flaw nagged at him like a loosened tooth. He stomped back and forth in the office, the sound of his own footsteps nearly causing him to ignore the sound of skittering on the floor near his feet.

Crayliks had escaped the satchel and crept out through cracks in Yoto's ruined desk.

"Dammit!" Yoto exclaimed when one of the bugs clambered over his foot.

Then: "Yes!"

He yanked the half-empty bag out of the drawer and set to work scooping up the bugs.

Whether or not Yoto believed in the wisdom of the plan that had come to him uninvited, all of its pieces now fit together perfectly.

* * *

The Olokun had hidden their prison within the high walls of a deep valley, a jagged bowl of stone saturated in shadow. Even the muted light of Ajyin's shards refracted by the Aegis could do little to brighten the compound.

Unlike the cells carved from stone in which Yoto and Eon had passed the final days of their parents' lives, this prison was alive.

A living, almost self-aware structure engineered by the Olokun, the prison had grown like a tumor until it came close to filling the valley. Large ducts wrapped the gnarled building's uppermost towers, expelling a thick gas foul enough to force Yoto to wrap a piece of cloth across his nose and mouth. Numah slaves ordered to scrub the vents, it was said,

had choked to death on those fumes, and Yoto had no wish to join their numbers.

Other Numah slaves had provided the few bits of mechanical artifice within the structure's organic reaches.

Creeping behind a cluster of boulders along the rim, Yoto peeked around, startled to see a group of five guards standing stiffly at the entrance.

The sight struck him hard—the prison was essentially self-guarding, and had been designed and bred to require only minimal Olokun presence. Yoto had heard that no more than a single guard oversaw each of the prison's floors. Generally a single guard likewise patrolled each of the facility's three entrances.

More guards than usual now: having the notorious leader of the Numah rebellion in their captivity had evidently warranted a tightening of defenses.

Or had Cadoc ordered the guards here expecting Yoto to betray his nature, as he had clearly expected him to betray his brother?

Yoto slumped down behind the boulder's protection. This was it, additional guards or not. He would succeed or fail whether he faced a single guard or five times that number. He would be outwitting them, not out-fighting them.

Yoto clutched up a small skull from among the debris and leavings of small scavengers that littered the ground where he sat, and launched it hard in the opposite direction from the prison entrance. As he listened to the sounds of the skull shattering on some distant stone, Yoto felt his body tighten.

No turning back.

Quickly he flung half a dozen more bits of bone, enough to sound as though the prison were being approached by—

By more than one small Numah, come against his every instinct to do what he could for the brother who loathed him.

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The crack of bone against rock alerted the guards. The Olokun broke into a run, remaining in formation, moving toward the noise.

As soon as the guards were out of sight Yoto dashed forward across the empty space, hands braced against the items on his belt to prevent their jangling.

The sphincter that served as the compound's circular entrance remained constricted. The muscle would only relax if interfaced and commanded by the Olokun.

The metal of a long-confiscated, improvised injector glinted in the dim light as Yoto slid it out of his pocket. He stabbed it into the sphincter-shaped lock and squeezed its control button, fluid burbling into the prison's flesh.

Over the cycles Yoto had acquired many illicit devices, contraband taken from workers who couldn't object to their overseer's demands and the threat of punishment they carried. The worker he'd seized the injector from had claimed he had developed it as a single-use Olokun bypass-key, a chemical hack capable of confounding their security.

The worker had planned, no doubt, to use the injector as a means of gaining access to Olokun quarters for petty theft. Until the dreamworld had spoken to him, Yoto had no idea what he might use the device for.

Now he desperately hoped that the worker's skills were adequate to fool the prison's locks.

After a near-eternity, the door began hissing open, the circular hole widening.

Already Yoto heard stomps and shouts coming from the direction in which the Olokun guards had run. Yoto had known the ruse would not fool even simpleminded guards for long, but he had hoped for more time than this.

Gripping the widening lip of the entrance, Yoto pushed his head through. The orifice began contracting, closing so rapidly he yelped, yanking himself free from its grip as it resealed.

“No, no, no!” Yoto whispered, then wordlessly cursed himself—and the insane plan that had brought him here. Where had such a plan come from?

To have risked so much—to have risked all!—on a plan that rested upon an untried, and now obviously unready, device confiscated from a worker... *Madness!*

But madness whose consequences he must now deal with.

Yoto faded fast into the shadows.

Two panting Olokun guards ran up and resumed their posts at each side of the entryway.

As Yoto held his breath in the darkness, one of the guards spotted the injector on the ground, picking it up delicately between the tips of two claws.

“You been usin’ Quel?”

“On the job? You know better.”

“Wasn’t here before the excitement. Some like to rise themselves up for the hunt.”

“And I’m telling you I’m not one of them.” The Olokun frowned, snorting a whiff of the night air. “Stinks like slave here.”

“It’s a prison for Numah, fool. It always stinks like slave. The place is full of them.”

“No, I mean right here where we stand, idiot.”

The other joined, inhaling Yoto’s scent. “Would explain the injector.”

“A slave left it. Must be.”

His head shifted skyward. Yoto froze, his back pressed deep into a crevice in the prison wall above them. Again he felt himself seized by the

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shuddering that had overcome him in the office, again he clamped down against his body's involuntary motions.

But he could not control his scent.

The shadows concealed him, but the Olokun would sniff him out soon enough.

Yoto went to work at the knot around the satchel hanging from his waist, his fingers clumsy. When the bag was open, he reached in, grabbing at the Crayliks seeking to avoid his grasp, finally getting a firm grip on a single bug.

He withdrew the Craylik from the satchel, held his breath and let it fly.

The bug spun through the air, Yoto's underhand throw sending it on a gentle arc towards the ground behind the guards.

"Bug!" they both yelled in chorus.

They scrambled across the dirt, shoving each other as they closed the distance between themselves and the spot where the Craylik had landed. Talons locked into place around the bug's torso, one of them pulling it up for observation.

"Got it!"

The other guard gazed at the bug and went for it.

"Not on duty, remember?"

"This is different. This is a gift from above. And it'll just take the edge off."

"Give it back to me!"

The two scuffled, giving Yoto his opportunity. He scuttled deeper into the shadows, feeling in the darkness until he found what he sought: a handhold sprouted by the prison to permit workers to access the upper reaches of the outer wall, the tower, the exhaust vents whose gases were so thick with Olokun odor that no Numah would come close.

But Yoto had no choice.

He grabbed the handhold and scaled the wall to the ducts above, leaving the Olokun to their duel for the Craylik below.

Before he had scaled half the distance, Yoto felt himself growing nauseous and lightheaded from the effects of the vented gases, but he shook off those responses as well.

If he died here it would not be from Olokun stench—there were too many other ways for the Olokun to rob him of his life.

By the time he reached the vent Yoto had grown almost accustomed to the stench. He could endure this. Somewhere within these living walls, he had no doubt, Eon was enduring far worse.

The exhaust vents and the lines leading inward from them looked hardly large enough for a Numah, even one as small as Yoto. Stringy blobs of film stretched with the cylinders as they exhaled their fetid stench.

He reached an arm inside as a test. Suction pulled his body close as the duct tried to swallow. He yanked himself free, his arm coated in a dank, clinging sludge.

Yoto removed two small mining tools from his belt, placing one in each hand. He took a breath of foul air and entered the vent.

One foot after another, he slid into the mouth of the duct as it ingested him. Fully consumed, he dug his tools deep into the flesh of the tube to keep from being sucked too rapidly or too far down its throat. As he inched his way down, his tools lacerated the walls, thin streams of goo leaking down on to his already filthy clothes.

Yoto moved swiftly—he did not have far to go.

* * *

Within her frost-rimmed cavern, the Witch of the Ravaged Features reached out with her powers.

The weak one was her focus, but freeing the strong one was her goal.

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And beyond that—the largest goal of all.

* * *

The pink, veinous membrane beneath Yoto emitted a faint glow. He pressed and cut, creating a small bulge in the canopy.

Finally, with only a soft snapping sound, the blister popped and a netting of fibers dumped Yoto's body to the floor. The spongy ground beneath him felt like a giant tongue. Disgusted, he sat up and gathered himself, wiping the gunk from his body.

Then he heard the familiar, heavy, hateful tread of Olokun feet, making a squishing sound as they struck the prison's gently writhing floor.

Yoto went pale. He jumped up and ducked around a corner, shrinking into the shadows deeply enough, he hoped, not to be seen.

But the approaching Olokun had no eyes for anything but what he held proudly before him.

From his vantage point, Yoto watched as one of the guards strolled almost casually down the corridor, past the alcove where Yoto skulked, paying no attention to his surroundings.

Only the Craylik he carried mattered.

"Mine!" the guard chortled as he entered a small room some distance down the corridor. He did not command the sphincterous door to close behind him.

Yoto moved carefully, sticking to the shadows as he crossed the distance to the opening, taking care to ensure that the other guards remained outside.

Confident that he had the corridor to himself, he allowed a bit of hope to return, displacing the fear that had driven him from the moment his ruse at the prison had failed.

Now he had a chance again.

And he was determined to make the most of it.

Holding himself absolutely still, not even breathing, he waited until he heard the unmistakable sound of a Craylik's thorax being cracked.

And still Yoto waited, endlessly waited, until he was certain enough time had passed.

He crouched and carefully peered around the corner and into the room where the Olokun guard had surrendered himself to the bug.

The guard was slumped in a deep, wide chair, the Craylik covering much of his features, his eyes closed.

But it was not the intoxicated guard that Yoto stared at.

A large wrinkled, pink wad of flesh dangled from a network of fibers at the center of the room. He had stumbled into the brain of the prison. Here and there the prison walls sported viewing spots, rectangles of translucent flesh that showed various locations throughout the prison. A subtly writhing surface next to the guard's seat bore studs and controls, growing from its surface like warts.

This was the command center, Yoto knew. This was precisely where he intended to be, and contained precisely what he needed to accomplish his plan.

He moved to the control panel, chuckling gently as he passed the sedated Olokun. "Top shelf bug, no?" Yoto allowed himself to say softly, certain the guard was beyond hearing, beyond caring.

Yoto's fingers played over the knobs and studs, and as his hands moved, his eyes darted from display to display. Most of the images were of empty, pulsating corridors, sparsely guarded despite the number of Numah held within the prison's cells. Yoto felt only a vague concern for the Numah he saw huddled in their cramped, low-ceilinged cells. Only one Numah prisoner concerned him.

Only one.

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Yoto began to breathe more heavily as he looked from image to image: where was Eon?

When he finally found him, when the central image viewer cast up the sight of Eon, bruised, swollen, his forehead resting on his knees, his wounded leg swollen and inflamed, Yoto nearly wailed.

I did this to Eon. He braced himself against the sticky wall. I am responsible for what has been done to my brother.

But he did not allow his despair to last long. There was no time for self-indulgence.

Quickly, without permitting himself to become frantic, Yoto explored the other controls, keeping his eyes on the displays until he saw what he wanted: a map showing the location of the cell that held Eon, a cell deep in the belly of the living prison.

Yoto flicked the controls deftly, magnifying the images and the tracery of lines that connected them. He memorized the pathway the prison's brain displayed, then turned to face the network of fibers and ganglia that had brought him the information.

And among the living fibers were the bits of Numah mechanical work that Yoto had known would be there.

Looking up at the brain, he studied its construction for a moment, the arrangement and interlacings of connections that controlled the facility, the location of the mechanical enhancements the Numah had been forced to provide.

He walked up to the pulsating mass, brushing its surface with his fingertips, touching it and feeling its heat. At last he reached to his belt and removed the device he had built in his office. He clamped the device's jaws around one of the brain's central nodes, positioning it between two ganglia and a mechanical pressure regulator that was unmistakably of Numah origin. Yoto's device would override the regulator—and in doing so would override the brain's ability to control the flow of fluids through its body.

Yoto grabbed another tool from his belt and twisted a bolt on the device counterclockwise. It hissed and shot a misty spray from its gears as it spun tightly around the vessel, bracing it like a vise.

He intended to give the prison a stroke.

A deep growl rumbled up with the force of an earthquake, the lights flickering. He had miscalculated. Something had gone wrong deep inside the fortress. He thought he heard a guard cry out.

The structure went dark, all power in the facility dead. He ran into the hallway, the darkness and chaos concealing him. He could hear a gurgling noise from the lower levels and the ominous sound of rising water.

As Yoto had planned, something had ruptured in the beast's anatomy. The lower levels would fill with fluid from a ruptured organ.

I don't have much time.

* * *

Like tendrils, Lagaia's power reached out, the strongest and most powerful of them guiding the actions of the weak and selfish Numah, but other tendrils distracting the Olokun, soothing the organic alarms of the prison, all of the effort aimed at freeing the one whose body and nature she sought.

She did not allow herself to feel excitement.

That would come later.

* * *

The cell's very blackness brought some solace to Eon, but no comfort. In the darkness he could hide from the devastation of the failure he had created. Here, he could prepare himself to meet his fate—and here, now, he found himself hoping that none of the others would seek to alter that fate. Enough Numah had died for his errors.

He raised his head slowly, studying what would be his last home. Rows of twisted teeth grew from the ground, reaching upward until they pierced the roof, sealing him in.

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At first the sound of rushing fluid didn't even register in Eon's thoughts. He heard a few of the Numah prisoners shouting, but that was not unusual. They were shouting when he was brought here, they would be shouting when he was taken away. Eon had not shouted, nor spoken a single word. He would not give Cadoc or his troops the satisfaction.

Slowly, but with gathering force, the shouts of the other prisoners were matched by the sound of rushing fluid, a splattering, splashing roar of a sound, torrential—a flood!

The prisoners' shouts turned to screams.

Now the screams swelled nearly to the same volume as the roar of the flood, as the prisoners on lower levels climbed the bars in an attempt to keep air in their lungs.

The screams from the floors below him grew even more desperate—and some screams were choked off unfinished, a last horrid liquid sound the only farewell the prisoners could speak.

His location on the fourth floor brought Eon no comfort. Whatever this flood was, it would reach him soon enough.

* * *

Yoto passed through the area between the brain and the spiraling ramp leading toward the cells.

Another giant organ had erupted, fluid pumping at an impossible speed down the passage leading to the cells. Yoto lit a flare and set out along the path that would lead him to his brother, trying not to slip in the viscous muck that now reached his calves.

* * *

Eon had heard the pitiful pleas of many of his fellow prisoners dwindle and die within a matter of minutes. So many gone, over such a short period of time. The Olokun used the fourth floor single cells for high risk prisoners. Eon had no one left to listen to.

The fluid burned at the wound on his knee. The low ceiling gave him no room to stand erect on his cot.

Without options for self-preservation, or hope of escape, Eon made a decision and accepted it.

He seated himself calmly on the cot, where he would let the liquid engulf him.

Death would come soon, nor would Eon resist it.

* * *

Something prompted Yoto to duck into a small cove just in time to avoid a guard fleeing the flooding prison. The guard slipped in the waste pouring through the corridors, caught his balance, and raced on into the deepening darkness.

Yoto felt a certain sudden satisfaction, in addition to his mounting fear. If the guards were fleeing without even attempting to stanch the flood-tide, Yoto had damaged the prison beyond easy repair, perhaps beyond any hope of repair at all.

The Olokun will seek pain to pay for this, he thought. He sloshed forward once the guard had disappeared around a curve in the corridor.

Yoto found that he was far less frightened of some distant Olokun retribution than of the situation he found himself in now—a situation that he had created.

The flood surge grew stronger. Vile liquid rippled at Yoto's waist.

* * *

The fluid had reached Eon's chest. He would be breathing it soon—but not, he knew, for more than an instant.

The sound of splashing came from the corridor. Eon turned his head and saw a flickering, moving light and the vague shadow it cast off. The shadow steadily shrank, the figure advancing closer to where Eon sat imprisoned.

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Olokun guard? he wondered, surprised to find that he did not care. Perhaps the Olokun considered Eon important enough to keep alive regardless of cost, and had sent someone through the flooding filth to retrieve him.

Let him come, Eon thought, feeling a surge of excitement but denying himself any hope. If the approaching figure was a guard, Eon was ready to seize the opportunity to inflict a final bit of damage on the species that had kept his own in shackles for so long.

Whether or not he would be a match for the guard didn't matter to Eon. He had already prepared himself to die. Now he prepared himself to take one more Olokun with him.

Eon slowly sank into the juice, never relinquishing his gaze at the shadow as he hid below. He would strike the moment the cell was opened.

* * *

Yoto stumbled and splashed deeper into the prison, all but submerging himself in the murk. He held the flare above his head to keep it dry.

He kept his mind focused on the task of finding and freeing Eon, doing his best to ignore the trapped Numah he passed. He could feel the dream-world within him as he splashed forward. Those around him would never dream again.

Many were already dead. Dozens of arms extended out from the cells, heads jammed between bars, mouths open as though still trying to scream. Yoto nearly lost his footing, the vomit rising in the back of his throat. More corpses to populate his nightmares.

“Eon?” he yelled.

Silence.

This has to be the place, the cell ahead must be Eon's.

Was he too late?

Yoto swam to the cell's door.

No sooner than he reached it did a powerful grip latch onto Yoto's legs and drag him under the surface of the liquid. He found his arms braced between the cage's teeth, his head pulled up to the bars. The flare dropped from his fingers, casting shards of light through the water before the muck extinguished its flame.

But with its dying glare the flare revealed the faces of the brothers to each other.

Eon released his grip and Yoto darted to the surface, gulping air as soon as he broke through.

For a moment neither spoke, each catching his breath.

Eon arched his neck to raise his mouth above the surface of the liquid, angling himself so that he could stare at his brother through the tooth-like rods.

Yoto gulped air and sought words. "Not the traditional welcome for a rescuer," he said through his gasps.

"You forgot something last time we met, Yoto? Something unsaid in your betrayal of me? If so, you've gone to great effort to say it."

"We can talk," Yoto said, "and die, or you can permit me to rescue you from your prison."

"The prison *you* condemned me to, Yoto. Had you shown this sort of strength earlier, neither of us would be here now."

Yoto bit down against a curse. "We'll discuss my failings later, brother—and yours. For now, let me get you out."

"Why bother helping me now? All is ruined."

"Be quiet, Eon, and let me work."

Eon silently glared at his brother. Yoto drew a deep breath before diving back beneath the black fluid. He examined the cell's teeth as he reached for something from his belt.

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Carefully, Yoto placed a small Burster on one of the thick fangs. Bursters lost some of their potency when detonated in liquid, but this would do enough damage to achieve Yoto's goal.

He detonated the Burster, opening a gap in the cell's teeth wide enough for Eon to squeeze through.

Yoto rose to the dwindling pocket of air at the surface. "You should be able to—"

Without warning, Eon yanked Yoto back under, a Cestus Parasite bound to an Olokun wrist just missing the younger brother's head.

Still drowsy from the effects of the Craylik that remained latched to his face, the guard from the control room stumbled through the liquid.

The next blow was aimed at Eon, a Parasite banging against the bars. Eon clutched the extended arm and twisted it between two rows of teeth, locking the guard in place.

Eon descended and slid through the gap, freeing himself.

"Let's go," Eon barked.

"He'll drown here," Yoto said. "They'll find him here."

"Exactly," Eon said coldly as he began moving away from the cell.

"The more bodies they find, the harder they'll look for those responsible."

"You think one less would cause them to relax their search even a bit? You're a fool, Yoto—it was your faulty escape plan that killed the Numah here, and you're quibbling over an Olokun who just tried to tear you apart? It doesn't matter. He'd seen your face. They'd hunt you down."

Despite his injured leg, Eon kicked out vigorously, swimming towards the exit.

Yoto looked to the struggling, dazed guard, then back to his brother. Shaking his head, he gave up, and followed.

They both disappeared into the fluid as it rose to the ceiling. Behind him, Yoto heard the death-struggles of the trapped guard trying to free himself. Soon he would be pulling at the Parasite, his chest heaving as he lost the ability to hold his breath. After a few minutes a thick plume of bubbles would rise from his mouth. He would sink to the floor, still hanging by his arm.

* * *

A faint orange haze, icy with cold fog, shone through the flooded corridors. The brothers followed the path, swimming frantically to reach the exit. Yoto jerked at Eon, stopping him from going further. He motioned to another room. The signals did nothing but confuse Eon. Yoto wasted no time and swam off alone.

He made his way through dark trenches and back into the control room. Rising to the ceiling, he poked his nose into a pocket of air, taking a few deep breaths. Claustrophobia nearly overwhelmed him, but after a moment spent braced against the ceiling and the wall, he regained his calm.

The massive brain shimmered in a lifeless murk. Yoto glided beneath the giant blood vessel, unlocked the clamp and placed it back on his belt. He might need the tool again, and he wished to leave no trace of the breach he had engineered.

When he returned to his brother, Yoto shook the device on his belt for emphasis.

Bubbles spiraled after Eon as he moved upward towards the exit sphincter in the outer wall.

The semi-transparent film revealed the remaining Olokun guards still at their post outside the prison, confused by the calamity.

But not so confused that they failed to see the brothers swimming toward them. The presence of the two Numah enraged them.

Eon stopped swimming and stared back at the guards, taunting them with his glare. Yoto grew nervous, hiding his face from the guards' gaze,

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turning left and right as though hoping a solution would present itself. This had grown more complex than he ever dreamed.

His lungs began to ache and he knew he would not be able to hold his breath much longer.

Now what?

Eon continued to watch as one of the guards slammed a fist into the spongy barrier, taunting them, daring them to make the first move. Yoto couldn't understand his brother's actions until he saw the flickering light near the cliff walls behind the Olokun.

The lead guard's head ruptured, its insides hitting the barrier with a wet slap. Sensing the open wound, his Cestus Parasite detached from his wrist and made its way to feast on the organs. Two more small explosions covered the transparent film with brains, the remaining guards dropping to the ground, their heads destroyed.

Something approached from the direction of the cliffs. As the distorted figures grew closer, one broke from the group and swept up the ravenous Parasite. The figure charged the passageway and shoved the creature into the mound of tissue, its mandibles tearing through the film.

The gash unleashed the fluid, spitting Yoto and Eon onto the gravel outside. An outstretched hand wrapped in bandages pulled Eon up. Yoto rubbed the juice from his eyes and saw four rugged Numah males surrounding him. Mining equipment hung from their belts. Yoto knew them all.

"You are able to travel, Eon?"

Eon stood and brushed clumps of mud and muck from his garments.

"Will your wound impede you?" one of them said, pointing to Eon's injury.

"I'll be fine, Hamel." Eon reached over and pulled Yoto to his feet before turning back to his ally. "The prototype worked as planned it seems."

Hamel was older than Eon, quite round and unkempt, his face a tangle of messy beard.

“Beautifully,” Hamel said. He raised a weapon in the dim light. The cylindrical frame contained multiple chambers and supported two large barrels. “This is its first real test. So we are fortunate that it performed as expected.”

“Well done, Hamel, and you as well, Ranar and Jodin,” Eon said to the rebels.

“Some adjustments to be made, of course, and I have refinements and improvements in mind already, but—” Hamel’s grin was feral as he gestured at the dead Olokun on the ground before them.

* * *

Stunned, Yoto leaned in for a better look at the weapon that had killed his enemies at a distance. Weapons of any sort were forbidden to the Numah, but this sort of device was far beyond the blades and small clubs the Olokun law forbade. Squinting, Yoto recognized some of the weapon’s elements.

“I knew someone was stealing my parts, but I assumed it was for something, well, more sane than this.” Yoto placed a finger inside one of the barrels to examine it. He felt old responses and reflexes taking hold. He shouldn’t have to be dealing with this—his plan had not included anything other than liberating Eon and disguising any part he had played in the rescue.

“I should have you demoted for this, Hamel,” Yoto heard himself say. “You could get us all killed over this stupid toy.”

Hearing himself, Yoto abruptly fell silent. Hamel let out a deep cackle.

“This toy just saved your life.”

“You know Numah weapons are forbidden by Olokun law.”

“And you were obeying *their* law when you did *that* to *their* prison?”

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Yoto grew angry. “I came here to get my brother back. Alone. No one was supposed to know. No one was supposed to be hurt. *That* was going to appear to be an accident.” He pointed to the Olokun bodies. “Now look! Every guard is dead, their brains loaded with scrap metal from my mining supplies!”

Hamel swatted Yoto with a powerful pat on the back. “Oh don’t worry, tiny, the Parasites will eat it right up.”

“The Olokun will not be fooled by any of this. You know I am right. And we’ll all end up dead.”

Yoto stared at the group as though seeing them for the first time. They had worked for him, answered his questions and obeyed his orders even as they served Eon’s plans for revolution. He felt a sickness deep within himself growing even as he felt something else leave him.

How had he gotten here? How had he found the knowledge, much less the strength, to accomplish what he had? He had no answers, nor did he believe he wished to know those answers—but he would not allow the rebels to mock him.

“No one among you with anything to say?” Yoto demanded. “I came here to rescue my brother and be done with this, and have *him* be done with his madness. Now you have—”

“Enough, Yoto!” Eon said.

“No. You have no authority over me! I’m not a child! Nor am I one of your... *rebels*.”

Eon grabbed Yoto’s shoulder firmly. “Thank you, brother, for my rescue, whatever you thought its outcome would be.” Hamel laughed from behind them. “But whatever you had intended, your plans must now be changed. We must leave before more Olokun arrive.”

Yoto waved his hand in Edgefront’s direction. “Fine. Go with your rebel friends. I’ll make it back on my own. Stay away from me. Do not implicate me in this.”

Eon wrapped an arm around his younger brother, Yoto trying to push him away. But Eon drew close and softly said, “You can’t escape this, little brother. You *are* implicated, as you well know, and as your actions destined. You’re more of a revolutionary than any would ever suspect.” Eon chortled and made a broad gesture at the ruined, dying prison. “And an effective one! You are a part of this war now, Yoto. Play your role—it will be an important one.”

“No,” Yoto said firmly, pulling free from Eon’s grasp.

“Come, Eon,” Hamel said before setting out in the direction opposite to Edgefront. Eon raised a hand to touch Yoto once more, but caught himself and abandoned the gesture. He turned his back on his brother and limped toward the others.

Yoto turned away and did not look as the members of Eon’s resistance force disappeared.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Fluid trickled down from the walls of the prison, sluicing through the levels of the prison and out a hastily installed metal shunt fashioned by a Numah engineer impressed into Olokun service to drain the now-dead structure.

Cadoc strode furiously along the edge of a series of pools and quagmires into which bodies had flowed along with other debris, Numah and Olokun corpses bobbing in stagnant waste. The Numah smelled worse dead than alive, and their horrendous stench forced Cadoc to breathe through his mouth. Biotic compounds of the ward had already begun decomposing. Bloated walls made the walkways a tight act of navigation for Cadoc and his men. The environment proved nearly too toxic to investigate.

Inside the control room, Cadoc brushed his talons against the immense, ruined brain, puzzled by its appearance and whispered to himself, “Curious.”

The tattooed warrior led the team down the dark tunnels. He held a large staff twice his size outward to light the way. A chemically-activated rock at the top sizzled with a bright yellow glow.

Bands of shadow chased the group as they passed holding cells harboring dead Numah prisoners. The winding passages led to Eon’s room. The warrior examined the area, noting the absence of a single bar. He kicked the dead guard still attached by his arm. The lifeless body rolled over. Cadoc froze.

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He stabbed his staff into the carcass. The light shone down, exposing the Craylik clinging to the guard's swollen face. He delicately plucked the bug from his nostrils.

One of the accompanying guards leaned toward his neighbor. "Looks like it's still got some juice left!"

Cadoc snapped his head in the guard's direction. "If I ever find one of these on any of your faces, you will never wake up."

The guard tried to cover himself and his error. "Sorry, sir. I meant nothing."

"Quiet!" Cadoc turned his back to the others. "If I wanted to purchase a Craylik, who would I talk to?"

Another guard spoke. "There's a Numah overseer in Sector 8 who usually has them."

The warrior crushed the bug in his talons, already knowing the overseer's name.

The name he had muttered to himself, over and over, since learning of the disaster at the prison.

* * *

The Numah Healing Ward was centrally located, equidistant to four separate mining sectors.

It was not much of a facility—little more than a quantity of medical supplies stored on rough shelves in wide crevices in the rock; a warren of improvised rooms with crudely fashioned doors; a table or two for examining and treating the injured; some beds for those too ill to be moved. The Olokun had little interest in whether or not injured Numah were healed. The Olokun cared only about Numah who were healthy enough to work.

Yoto walked at a rapid pace, trying to project a casual demeanor, and knowing that his efforts were failing.

He had to play out the next few days correctly to avoid any more Olokun suspicion than would already be aimed at him. He needed to clean himself and attend to his duties, to appear to be the good, servile Numah he always had been, an important worker for them, as close to indispensable as he could manage. The sort of Numah who in no way subverted the rules the Olokun imposed.

The sort of Numah who would betray his own brother in order to win Olokun favor.

Yoto stepped cautiously through the Healing Ward's entryway, moving with an even stride, trying not to draw any attention from the healers and their assistants moving frantically through the area to tend to injured Numah recovered from the mine collapse.

Then he saw her, and against his will he stopped and caught his breath.

Celeste seemed hardly to notice his presence, staring at him only briefly, angrily, before striding onward. Yoto could hear the small click of his mother's beads as they brushed against each other, Celeste's tendrils bouncing in time with her pace.

Matching Celeste's speed, Yoto followed her.

"We must talk," he said in a low tone.

"Not a good time," she said brusquely.

"This cannot be delayed."

"Come back tomorrow. The day after would be better. We're overwhelmed." She stopped in front of a whimpering Numah, checking his bandage with practiced efficiency.

"I don't think you understand. This can't wait."

Celeste released a deep sigh and turned toward Yoto. "Fine, follow me. And be brief."

They moved between moaning victims on improvised stretchers. Reaching a small storage area, Celeste closed its door behind them.

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The intimacy caught Yoto by surprise. He found himself eying the beads adorning Celeste's tendrils. They were still lovely. As was Celeste, despite her obvious exhaustion and bloodstained garments. The beads complimented Celeste's long, slender neck. Even with her lips pursed and her expression irritated, she could not hide her captivating beauty.

Tendrils extended from the heads of Numah females, often woven together in intricate patterns. Celeste had bundled her tentacles together and drawn them to one side of her face, the beads interwoven. Myrine had worn her tendrils like that, Yoto thought—and just as swiftly cast the memory aside.

Markings like stained glass outlined her large, exotic eyes. Her pale blue skin was flushed in contrast to her pouting, indigo lips.

There was a time, cycles ago, when that face had meant more than the universe to Yoto. Perhaps, he thought, surprising himself, it still could.

Yoto stared too closely, and for too long. Celeste snapped impatiently, "What is it, Yoto?"

"I can't accept any shipments for a while."

The healer's stare narrowed. "What?"

"There are a lot of eyes on me. Too many eyes, including Cadoc's. The situation is delicate, to say the least. I can't have drugs or Crayliks around me."

"This is not a warehouse, Yoto, nor am I your inventory-keeper. Things are difficult for me as well. Olokun have been here looking for answers. I barely kept the Craylik hidden from them. You contracted me for the bug, you'll accept the delivery on time and on schedule."

"I can't take them. Simple as that," Yoto said.

"Then suppose I simply inform the Olokun that you're the Craylik dealer? Perhaps I should tell Cadoc directly?"

"A hollow threat, since you're technically the supplier, as guilty as I am, you're perhaps guiltier in their eyes." Yoto gave a little laugh. "You won't

turn me in. We have too much knowledge of each other, too much history.”

“You’ve become vile, Yoto.”

“And yet you tolerate me.”

“In the past I did,” she said. “Now we have a business relationship, no more than that.”

“I just need you to help me out with this, Celeste. Just hold onto the Craylik-”

“And become the Olokun target when they next search the Healing Ward?” She looked as though she was about to spit.

Yoto sighed, taking a moment to come up with a different angle.

“We’ve known each other a long time, Celeste. And for some of that time we knew each other well. Whatever you do or don’t do, think of our other history, this has been a profitable partnership the last few cycles. And now you won’t assist me with a small matter?”

“Small? There is nothing small about Eon and his escape, Yoto, neither in Olokun eyes nor the eyes of the Numah who follow him. And this is about Eon, isn’t it?”

Yoto paused a moment too long to attempt to deny her.

“I thought so,” Celeste continued. “You don’t want any of your business coming to light if they come around looking for your brother.”

“Can you blame me? How many Numah have been taken to the Arena for much less? Does self preservation not register with any Numah but me?”

“Not every slave seeks to profit from enslavement, Yoto. But we’ve had that discussion before, haven’t we?”

A part of him wanted to tell her the truth. That he had masterminded Eon’s liberation almost single-handedly, and with improvised equipment.

Yoto wished to see the look of surprise such a revelation would earn, to see Celeste's self-righteous expression melt from her face.

And, he realized, a part of him wished for Celeste to know, at last, that even Yoto was capable of doing something for reasons other than expediency and profit. But he remained silent.

"The goods are staying here. Do what you want with them. Throw them away if you must."

"I need the money, Yoto. You know what we use the funds for. There are Numah who depend upon it. Can you at least attempt to understand that?"

"I'm not saying I won't be able to move the bug, Celeste. I just can't do it now."

She sighed as she always had when Yoto won an argument. "Fine. I'll handle things. But expect no more favors from me soon."

Yoto exhaled, showing her his relief.

"Sometimes, Yoto, I just wish..." She trailed off. "I'll rework the shipment numbers to justify the extra inventory drugs and intoxicants, and find some way to hide the Craylik."

"Thank you, Celeste." He put a hand on her shoulder as he turned to leave. "You're a good friend."

"And you're a coward," she said softly, almost as an aside.

"What?"

"I'm helping you, but I don't have to feel proud of this, and I don't have to respect you for it either. You're weak, Yoto. A weakling and a coward."

His face sagged. Leaning in closely, looking deeply into her eyes, hiding nothing in his own, Yoto simply said, "You're wrong, Celeste."

He walked away without waiting for a response.

* * *

Celeste stood still for a moment, watching Yoto's back as he moved out of sight.

The Yoto she had just seen, seen only for an instant, had startled her.

What she had seen in his eyes reverberated in a nearly forgotten place within her, a place she had forced herself to try and forget.

A place where she saw Yoto's eyes as she gathered scattering beads from a bloody floor.

Celeste shivered, then returned to the injured and dying Numah. But no matter how hard she worked, it was hours before she could shake off that image.

* * *

Yoto bent down and pulled his desk upright, several drawers tumbling out of their sockets as he righted it. Settling into his chair, Yoto listlessly rocked back on its legs. He looked across the desk at the shelf-lined wall beyond. He froze, unable to breathe.

After an eternity of hesitation he forced himself to rise, and step to the shelves for a closer look.

A wet Craylik, dark stains from dried muck and fluids discoloring its body, lay crushed in the center of the middle shelf.

There was no message, there was nothing but the Craylik.

Nothing else was needed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Nightfall brought silence to the collapsed portion of Sector 2. Destruction and broken bodies still cluttered the floor of the cavern, despite the near-constant effort to clear the devastation.

Now the Olokun had called a halt to the operation. Work would resume tomorrow. Any Numah still beneath the stone would not notice the delay.

Jude lurked out of sight and waited for the last of the healer teams to depart.

His tiny silhouette disappeared beneath giant sections of unstable rock. He crept cautiously down the columned corridor of slag, overstepping dead slaves stacked throughout the zone. Jude's softly echoing footsteps came to an abrupt halt as he peered down. He gave a grim smile.

He overturned a body and patted it down. The sound of rattling metal drew his attention to a pocket. Jude's dirty fingers dug into the pouch and retrieved a handful of glimmering coins. He carelessly dropped the corpse and moved on.

Like a hungry animal scavenging for a morsel of a meal, Jude crouched over another victim, clawing at its garb. A sound echoed down the corridor. A hissing whisper caught his attention. He rose to inspect.

A heavy draft escaped through a newly opened crack in the south wall, an opening produced by the effects of the explosion. Jude approached, moving his palms through the gentle breeze. Leaning forward, he squinted

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into the crevice. Dust particles blew out into his eyes. He jumped back with a groan and kicked the wall.

The draft suddenly grew stronger, its temperature dropping rapidly.

The draft became a bitterly cold wind, but something about it struck Jude as... inviting.

Something prodded at him, telling him to follow the wind to its source.

The impact caused the hollow section of rock to crumble. Light and dust swirled above the collapsed portion, slowly revealing a hidden passage. He stepped through the layer of powder and into an unnatural formation of tunnels. A diaspora of erosion stretched in every direction. The channels flowed like a system of roots from a single point.

Still rubbing his eyes, Jude approached, brushing the obsidian stone of the wall.

“And where do you go?” he whispered to himself.

It seemed that the frigid wind answered him, showing the way.

He squeezed into the largest tunnel and pushed his head forward. He sniffed and caught a whiff of something unfamiliar. The scent filled his nostrils and sparked ecstasy deep within his brain. Something called to him. A feeling. A desire.

The tunnels narrowed as he went further. Each bit of forward progress deepened the claustrophobia he felt. But the tunnel became more even as it tightened, transforming itself from rough terrain into a smooth, glassy surface.

The sort of surface created by a Burrower, not by Numah-wielded drills.

Jude slithered his way deeper. The tight pathways forced him into uncomfortable, even painful postures, his shoulders twisting at awkward angles as he followed the changing nature of the walls around him. His ribcage expanded and contracted rapidly as the walls touched his chest. He ignored the impulses his body screamed for him to obey, his mind held

tightly in a trance of his own making. A trance born of the greed that drove him forward.

Surely a tunnel formed so carefully will lead to treasure well worth the effort of reaching it! Jude thought.

At last he spotted an opening ahead, only a short distance from him. Eager to reach his goal, unwilling to wait any longer, Jude relaxed his caution and paid an immediate price. As he scrabbled forward his left shoulder slid into an unseen groove and wedged there, trapping him.

Biting off a curse, Jude stretched his right hand until his fingertips reached the lip of the tunnel and gripped it tightly. He pulled, tug after tug, his shoulder aching as he tried to free himself. He felt panic beginning to flood through him, and writhed violently, his shoulder dislocating itself as he broke free. Jude bit down against the agony, his left arm flopping uselessly at his side.

Moving carefully now to avoid further injury, Jude crept forward until his body emerged from the tunnel. He fell a short distance into the open area to which the tunnel led. The room was bathed with a light unlike any Jude had ever experienced, and he squinted as he adjusted to the glow.

Some scraps of strange and unfamiliar plants sprouted from the smooth walls and climbed up toward the skeletal system of a giant Burrower affixed to the ceiling. The flowers grew as though drawn to the creature's remains.

The creature had frozen in a horrific pose, its limbs askew, its spine arched from its death-throes, evidence of a fierce struggle before death. The Burrower's large skull still boasted a powerful jaw filled with razor sharp teeth, each as large as Jude himself.

The Burrower had been dead a long time. Within the Burrower's exposed ribcage, a ripple of stalactites spread inward toward a single radiant shard. That shard was the source of the light that filled the room.

Whatever it is, Jude thought, it will be valuable.

His eyes adjusted now, Jude scanned the floor for something to throw at the shard in hopes of breaking it loose from its perch, but the

bowl-shaped room, with its unblemished texture, had been swept clean of debris. Not even a single loose pebble could be seen.

Turning around, favoring his injured shoulder, Jude used his good hand to grip the edges of the threshold he had just passed through, dragging himself up and using the crags at its edges as footholds. When he'd reached the highest point possible, his single usable hand barely able to maintain his balance against the smooth wall, Jude twisted himself around, squatting down on his haunches before jumping, frantically extending his right hand and catching one of the Burrower's ribs. His body swayed; his good arm couldn't hold him here for long.

But the glowing shard hung only a few feet away. Jude forced his body into motion, moving himself back and forth. Gaining enough momentum, he swung forward, forced himself to release his grip, and flew free, reaching wildly for the rib directly below his prize.

Jude's fingers nearly slipped, but he clamped down hard and did not release his grip. Slowly he pulled himself up, wrapping his legs around the boney support. Jude pressed his face against the rib and, eyes closed, worked his way along its length.

When he opened his eyes and raised his head, the glowing shard was within his reach. Squeezing his thighs against the rib, Jude leaned through the stalactites and fanned his fingers out in the direction of the treasure.

He braced his dislocated shoulder against the area where the rib met the ceiling. His legs shook feverishly. Stretching his entire body to its limit, Jude's fingers met the shard.

The touch intoxicated him instantly, igniting his senses with the same ecstasy he had experienced when he entered the cave, but deeper, richer, more... *complete*.

It was as though he had become one with the shard and the light it cast.

It was as though Jude had ceased to be solely himself. Something cold, bitterly cold, dwelled within him.

It was as though he was no longer himself, but had become something... *more*.

Forcing himself to concentrate, not to surrender completely to the sensations, Jude peered more closely, and saw that the shard was not a bit of ore extruding from the ceiling and impaling the Burrower, but something from outside, something that had cut through the Burrower.

What was powerful enough to slice into a Burrower? What material was strong enough, sharp enough to do such a thing?

Nothing Jude had ever heard of, nothing on this world—and the thought made him rear back unexpectedly. In his confusion his legs loosened. His chin ground against bone as he slid downward. Jude caught himself before the fall. He teetered at the tip of the rib for a moment before his weight disturbed the delicate balance that had kept the skeleton in place, and the bulk of the creature's remains tore free from the ceiling.

Jude fell, and the skeleton's thorax and the portion of the ceiling to which it was attached disintegrated and showered the floor with fragments of mineral and bone. Only the Burrower's skull and mandibles remained attached to the ceiling.

When the clatter subsided, and choking from the dust the collapse had roused, Jude struggled to rise. His body ached from the fall, but he made himself stretch, testing to make sure he had not further injured himself beyond countless bruises and abrasions. Nothing permanent, nothing that wouldn't heal eventually.

As he began to brush the debris away with his good hand, Jude saw his treasure resting next to him.

He stared at the glowing shard, and as he watched the object, it seemed to acquire substance, shape, form.

Form.

It was a dagger.

A dagger unlike any Jude had ever encountered, and not simply because of the eerie radiance that emanated from it.

Through that radiance he could see that the blade was ornate, multiple layers of finely chiseled craftsmanship tapering to its tip. Whoever had

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fashioned the weapon had applied equal care to its haft, a thick, strong handle that glowed less brightly than the blade to which it was attached.

Such a weapon would bring a fine price. This was true treasure, worth all of the effort and risk that had been required to reach it.

Jude reached for the dagger.

Its size gave no hint of its weight, which was immense. At first Jude found himself struggling simply to lift the dagger from the floor of the room, but as soon as he had raised the blade out of the rubble, he felt the weapon grow lighter in his hand.

Jude tightened his grip on the haft, feeling that ecstatic rush race up his arm and spread throughout his body, deepening and intensifying.

And changing as it pulsed.

Jude felt a sudden warmth in his shoulder, a pleasant and comforting warmth that seemed to pulse in rhythm with his heartbeat.

The dagger vibrated slightly in his hand.

The vibrations intensified and with their growth the heat in Jude's injured shoulder grew as well.

The glow emanating from the dagger brightened, bathing Jude in its light.

He felt movement in his injured shoulder—muscle and bone shifting within him, rippling beneath his skin.

There was no pain.

Jude stood without breathing as his shoulder healed itself in a matter of seconds, the warming glow building to a fierce white heat that did not burn, then diminished slowly as it traveled through the rest of his body.

Tentatively, at first, Jude raised his left arm slightly, a small gesture that just moments ago would have reduced him to whimpering agony.

Now the shoulder felt wonderful—he could not remember ever having such a sense of the strength and power muscles could contain.

His muscles.

Jude raised his left arm high, then brought it down in a swift slicing chop, slapping his left hand into place over his right, his fingers twining together around the haft of the dagger, holding the weapon as though it had been created solely for him to grip.

He raised the blade before his face and stared at his reflection.

Before Jude's eyes the bruises and scratches he'd suffered from the fall were disappearing, small rivulets of what could only be thought of as bladelight moving beneath his features, removing every injury and blemish.

Jude watched his features subtly twist in the blade's reflection. He looked stronger to himself, the weakness that he'd always feared his face displayed now vanishing along with his wounds.

Before he could draw more than three breaths he was wholly healed.

Trembling slightly with excitement, Jude loosened the rope around his trousers, untucked his tunic, and slid the dagger down his back, fastening it securely and then tucking his tunic in place, hopeful that the thick fabric would mask the dagger's glow until he could find a safe hiding place for the blade, which was warm against his skin. Jude tightened the rope at his waist, then cast a quick but thorough glance around the room to make certain he'd overlooked no other treasure.

With the blade and its glow secured beneath his clothing the cave quickly grew shadowed, only murky illumination available from some of the room's strange plants. No other shards shone; there was no further treasure here.

Jude turned to hoist himself back into the tunnel, and as he did so the Burrower's skull creaked and groaned above him.

Jude moved more quickly, but not quickly enough—with a great groan the skull tore itself free from the ceiling, crashing down upon Jude,

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trapping him within the prison of its monstrous teeth, the Burrower's skull knocking Jude to his knees.

He nearly panicked.

But then a calm came over him and he thought for an instant that the calm was coming from the dagger at the base of his spine. Jude set out to free himself.

For a moment his feet slid helplessly against the glassy floor as he tried to lift the skull from its resting place above him, but even the new strength he felt was not enough to lift the Burrower's remains.

Jude maintained a crouch, shifting until his back was pressed firmly against the skull's inner surface, the dagger a reassuring presence flat against the base of his spine.

Drawing a deep breath and holding it, Jude extended his legs until the soles of his feet were pressed firmly against the Burrower's jaw.

An unexpected surge of energy flowed through him, his muscles bulging from the force of the surge. He flexed his legs, pushing.

The mandible snapped open.

Jude leapt through the razor sharp teeth and without looking back scurried into the tunnels. He shoved himself through the tight shaft. Pressed against his back, the dagger vibrated and cut through the rocks hugging his waist, melting the stone into a waxy ooze. Jude did not pause to marvel at the magic, but kept himself in motion, unstoppable.

He gasped as he reached the relatively fresh air of the main mining area.

He had not taken more than a few steps through the cluttered cavern when a voice spoke.

An Olokun voice.

"Odd finding you here after my orders were for all Numah to leave this place." A deep bass chuckle echoed through the ruined mine. "All *living* Numah, of course."

Jude did not move. He watched as shadows pulled themselves away from the figure as he emerged, as though the Olokun were shedding a cloak.

Revealed, the figure was unmistakable, even in the dim light, his garish tattoos identifying him.

Cadoc.

Vega's son stepped forward, his scarred face wet with blood.

"H-hello, sir," Jude said.

"Why are you here, Jude? Did you not hear my orders? Or did you *choose* to disobey me?"

"I thought I heard a voice in the deeper tunnels," Jude said, desperately hoping his lie sounded plausible. "I crawled down to see if anyone needed my help."

Cadoc pushed Jude aside and gazed into the passage from which the Numah had emerged. Jude angled himself so that his back—and the dagger hidden there—was not revealed to Cadoc.

"Doubtful," the Olokun said after studying the tunnels for a moment. Cadoc casually wiped the blood from his mouth with his forearm.

"As I discovered when I explored the tunnels. No one," Jude said.

"Nor, clearly, were you expecting to find anyone here when you returned from your mission of... *mercy*."

"No. No, I wasn't."

"I was indulging myself." Cadoc grinned, showing the full size of his fangs. "You Numah do smell foul, but I find myself desiring an occasional taste of your flesh, a sip of your blood. You can understand that, Jude, can you not?"

"I-"

"No matter. It's actually quite convenient for me to encounter you here."

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Cadoc stepped over to one of the dead miners and gestured at the collapsed sections of rock.

“The information you provided me before the attack was very good,” Cadoc said, his attention still focused on the destruction.

“I was worried, sir. I feared the disaster would reflect badly on General Vega.”

Cadoc gave an amused chortle. “Nonsense. He’ll make the Council believe he welcomed the attack, deliberately exposed himself to risk in order to expose the conspirators. My father is a clever old monster. Any occurrence, any move the Numah make can be used to his ends, as he has so often shown.” He leaned over the mangled body of a Numah and caressed its face. “Before he is done, my father will doubtless be claiming credit for *my* handiwork.”

Jude held himself immobile as Cadoc rose and stared into his eyes. “I have work for you, Jude.”

“However I may be of assistance to you, sir,” Jude said in as submissive a tone as he could muster. “As you know.”

“I need you to eliminate a threat.”

“A threat? Who?”

“Eon. And his brother, Yoto.”

“Eon still lives?”

“By my indulgence—I have used his life to further the exposure of the conspirators. But that purpose is now served. His usefulness to me is done.”

“But why Yoto?” Jude did not like the thought of losing Yoto’s protection—and losing it as a result of his own actions.

“Eon was freed from our prison. I found Craylik in his cell, Craylik used to deter a weakling guard. But Craylik is something very few can obtain. Yoto is among the few.”

“Yes. He’s got a well-earned reputation for providing the bug, sir.”

“I have heard this.”

Jude cleared his throat, waiting for Cadoc to say more. The Olokun remained silent.

“How should I do it?” Jude said at last.

“The method is your decision, your choice. But the deaths need to be public. Eon and Yoto need to die in front of the Numah, before the eyes of their rebellion.”

“Why not one of your own assassins, sir? You are far more powerful than I am.”

Cadoc laughed harshly. “If *we* kill them, whether by assassin or in the Arena, they become martyrs. If the Numah themselves kill the brothers, and do so in public, their luster will be tarnished, any tales told of their revolutionary prowess destroyed by their deaths at the hands of their own.”

“But, sir, their followers will tear me apart.”

“The risk you must take. Why, *I* could tear you apart here. But you’re a clever little creature, Jude. You’ll find a way. Should you succeed, you will acquire Yoto’s position as overseer. No more groveling beneath his corruption and incompetence. The pay is excellent, I might add. Excellent enough to keep an obedient Numah secure for the rest of his life.”

Jude saw a wonderful future—and saw as well himself being dismembered by enraged Numah. “This will be tricky.”

“Keep in mind, as I know you do, that this request also serves as a threat. You can live well, or you can be dead.”

Jude backed up a step, wobbling slightly. “I will see to it immediately, sir.”

“Establish a petty motive for your actions. They gazed at your female. They owed you money.” A horrific smile spread across his features. “Tell them they had used the rebellion as a front for their own avarice. Tell

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them they stole the rebellion's wealth, and sacrificed Numah to do so. Something unflattering, something tawdry."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't fail me, Jude."

Jude bowed, and moved slowly away, careful to keep his back and the treasure that rested there hidden from Cadoc's eyes.

* * *

Within her mirrored cavern the Witch of the Ravaged Features summoned all of her strength for the work that lay ahead.

The time of her liberation had arrived.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Yoto tossed and turned violently in his sleep, the dreamworld tormenting him.

Every time he closed his eyes, a swollen Numah monster rose into view, its arms shackled by stone cuffs, its treelike legs planted deep in the murk.

A dull thud reverberated through the water, and with each rhythmic beat the Numah's eyes blinked.

The hollowed out sockets of those eyes turned toward Yoto, accusing.

The pounding continued until he woke, realizing that the sound of real pounding came from outside his room. Stumbling out of bed, Yoto walked to the door, roughly yanking it open.

He looked out, and then down. A small boy stood there, staring up at him.

“Yes?” Yoto said.

“Eon wants you at a meeting,” the child said, his attitude severe beyond his age.

“You may tell Eon, youngling, that I appreciate the invitation, but decline. Tell him I said no.”

“It's Kelk.”

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“I’m sorry, what?”

“It’s not ‘youngling.’ Kelk. That’s my name.”

“Yes, Kelk, I haven’t forgotten your name. How could I forget the name of such a youngling who stole parts from my office to make that rubbish rebellion device?”

Kelk stood silent, irritation rousing his face with mention of the weapon Yoto took from him.

“Well, Kelk, the answer is still the same.”

“I was instructed not to come back without you.”

“Then you’ll either be disappointing my brother, or you will be waiting here awhile.”

The child took two steps forward, bringing him inside Yoto’s room. He crossed his arms, staring at Yoto defiantly.

“I could just pick you up and move you back outside.”

“Try it.”

Yoto sighed. Evicting the young Numah would cause a commotion, and he wished no commotion in his life. Easier to go along, and to make clear that his life held no room for Eon’s meetings or the revolution they fostered—or hoped to.

He had rescued Eon—all debts were canceled. He would make Eon understand that, and he would do so now.

Walking back into his sleeping quarters, Yoto tugged on trousers, grabbed a thick garment, draped it over his shoulders and returned to the unsmiling boy.

“Lead the way, Kelk.”

* * *

Jude felt the dagger beneath his clothes grow warm as he moved toward his destination.

It was not a comforting warmth.

* * *

Yoto remembered these tunnels from his childhood. The section had run out of useful resources long ago, but someone had continued extending them downward in the intervening cycles, their path spiraling deep into the rock. A noise crept up to the edge of Yoto's perceptions. The sound of ritual. It grew into an energetic roar as he and Kelk drew closer to its source. The chants irritated him.

"Why am I doing this?" he said, as much to himself as to Kelk.

"Why would you save your brother if you didn't want to help?" the boy responded.

So even this child knew of Yoto's part in the destruction of the prison. The rumors were circulating widely. Too widely.

"I can value his life and still think he's a fool," Yoto said to cover his displeasure.

"Have you ever heard Eon speak to our people?"

"*Our?*" Yoto nearly snorted. "I've not had the pleasure."

"Hear him. It might change your mind."

"Aren't you a little young for this?"

Kelk shrugged. "The Olokun killed my parents. Cadoc murdered my brother. Is that enough reason?"

"I..." Yoto had no words. He was thinking of Morik and Myrine.

"They took something from you. From you both. Eon told us once," said the boy.

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“That’s in the distant past.”

“And so it no longer matters to you?”

Yoto had no answer.

Bits of rock and grit fell from the tunnel’s ceiling, but the miners who had excavated it had done their work well. Yoto was surprised to realize just how well when he and Kelk emerged into the meeting area.

* * *

So many of the Numah creatures, Lagaia thought, as she extended her senses into the vast opening where the Numah were gathered.

So many of them.

But only one who mattered.

Only one who could fulfill *her* destiny.

* * *

Numah hid many things in the depths of played-out mines, and that night they clearly intended to put their ability to keep secrets from the Olokun to the test.

Hundreds of rebels filled a wide expanse before Yoto.

They hammered at the floor with the soles of their feet, chanting in the same rhythm.

As he entered the huge chamber, Yoto heard a shout of excitement and watched as the gathered Numah turned excitedly toward the far wall, more than one of them shouting “EON!”

Yoto passed along the back wall following his small guide.

He stepped through to a narrow side corridor, the child now gone. Eon sat on the ground at the opposite end of the room.

"Impressive gathering, isn't it?" Eon said.

"Pretty good for a failed saboteur."

"Most assumed the Olokun statement was a lie. Which, after all, it was."

"Not in the way you'd like it to be." Yoto leaned against a wall, keeping his distance. "Did any of your fellow conspirators survive the blast?"

"None have reported in."

"Works out conveniently for you, then, no one to contradict the story. You were just a worker trying to help in the rescue of mangled workers. So much more noble than admitting that you mangled the operation itself."

"These are matters of no importance, any more than you or I are important. Listen to them, Yoto! Our people are angry. They are ready for action."

"And the bodies will continue to be piled up for the Olokun," Yoto replied flatly.

Eon rose, wincing as he put weight on his injured knee. He maintained his balance with a staff, taking a few cautious steps.

"It's bodies now or lifetimes of Olokun, Yoto."

"Is that what you're going out there to say? Some clever words to get us all killed over *your* principles? You had that child drag me down here for another dose of your empty-headed idealism?"

"If my dreams are so foolish, Yoto, then what do you offer that's sensible?"

"Survival. To survive. That's all. That's enough."

Eon shook his head. "Animals want to survive. I'd like to think we're better than that. I don't know what I can do to convince you that some things might actually matter more than security. I know that a part of you already believes this. The part of you that took the risks you took to save me."

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“A mistake,” Yoto said, almost spitting the words. “And far too large a risk.”

“The mistake was your trying to do it on your own, Yoto. And that mistake cost the lives of too many Numah prisoners, while saving my own. You may say those lives mattered nothing to you—but had you only contacted my allies, you would have had the support you needed to save *all* of the prisoners.”

“I had no interest in saving all of them.”

“Clearly. For that matter, brother, had you joined us earlier there would have been no need for my rescue. I would never have been imprisoned—Vega and Cadoc would be dead as planned, and we would be well on our way toward winning our freedom.”

“Spare me,” Yoto said, and turned to leave.

“Will you at least stay to hear me speak?” Eon said softly, in a tone that reminded Yoto of the occasional comforting words Eon had spoken to his younger brother in the cycles after their parents died.

Yoto thought for a moment. “Fine. I trust I will not be obliged to agree with what you say? Don’t expect me to be.”

Eon nodded, treating his brother to a weary smile. “Find a place in the audience. I will be speaking soon.”

Yoto nodded somberly, and left his brother, working his way down the left side of the crowded cavern, taking a position two-thirds of the way back. Close to the exit, he told himself wryly—he wouldn’t have to stay here any longer than he wished.

Gathering energy rippled through the crowd, and Yoto stepped up and onto a narrow outcropping of rock to get a better view of his brother in his element.

Yoto watched as Eon stepped through the passage and approached the stage. Cheers rose to a fevered pitch.

He carefully moved up a small set of stairs to a raised platform, a giant flag with a blue hammer roughly painted on it waved behind him. Looking out at the audience, he gave a thoughtful smile. A hush fell over the crowd.

Yoto wondered what it felt like to have such power over so many. He found himself curious about what Eon would actually say.

* * *

In Lagaia's cavern the mirrored surfaces were completely covered by ice.

But Lagaia herself was warmed by the power she sensed—the power of the dagger and the power of the target to which she would guide its blade.

* * *

Eon raised his arms.

“To you here tonight, I thank you.”

Yoto watched with grudging admiration as Eon held the stage easily, as though born to the task.

“I have seen far too much death. We all have. The scars on your faces tell a story, a story of pain and suffering. But we are not broken, my brothers and sisters. We can let the pain be a burden, a weight around our necks,” he waited for the words to sink in before continuing, “or we can turn it into a weapon!”

The crowd roared.

“We will not let our trials consume us. We will use our pain to forge our hope!”

Eon's voice grew in power. “There are those who are comfortable. Who do not wish for change.”

Yoto bristled at the direction of Eon's words. Even halfway out of the crowd's sight, standing to the side in an alcove, Yoto felt as though a thousand eyes had suddenly fallen on him.

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“But they are simply waiting, those who doubt. All Numah have the will to transform, the capacity to rise up. Our cautious fellows are waiting for Numah such as yourselves. We are the kindling waiting to ignite their fire. We are the sparks of the revolution!”

The cheering climbed toward an even higher crescendo, counterpointed by the stomping of Numah feet.

“I ask those of you here tonight, join me, and help bring freedom to our people!”

The walls of the tunnel echoed with the cheers of the Numah.

* * *

Eon's speech continued along paths long-familiar to Yoto, the sort of rhetoric Yoto had heard from his brother most of his life. He understood why it worked so well on other Numah, but the words were too familiar to hold Yoto's attention.

He ignored the angrier parts of the speech, the portions aimed at Yoto himself. As though he was nothing more than a pawn, a piece of dried wood, simple-minded and ready to bow to Eon's pressure and join his cause.

I don't agree with you, Eon, with any of this—but your vanity won't let you accept that simple truth, will it?

Yoto turned his attention to Eon's audience, warily looking to see how many of his own subordinates were in attendance.

In the distance across the room, a familiar, scurrying shape caught his attention as it shifted lithely around the leftmost perimeter of the crowd.

Jude was here.

But Yoto knew far too well Jude was not in attendance to hear Eon speak.

Yoto kept his eyes on Jude, and caught an instant's glimpse of a glimmer on his back.

“Behold, my brothers and sisters, the weapon of our liberation!” Eon suddenly bellowed.

The sudden increase in Eon’s volume drew Yoto’s focus back to the stage. Hamel stepped forward along with the others who’d assisted in the prison escape. They hoisted bright-barreled weapons over their heads and let out a warrior’s howl that the crowd answered in kind.

Even the mere presence of the weapons put Yoto further on edge. An object capable of obliterating a living creature at range was an explosive invitation to death in Vega’s Arena.

Demonstrating his creation, and his vast pride in it, Hamel turned the weapon towards a stuffed figure resembling a massive Olokun warrior propped against the far wall.

He squeezed the trigger, and the target burst into shreds. Chunks of stuffing forming a cloud that floated to the ground, the gathered crowd delivering a bloodthirsty roar of approval.

Yoto turned away from the madness and sought to spot Jude once more.

A glimmer caught his eye again, and he followed it, identifying Jude. Yoto’s skin went cold as he worked out the pattern Jude pursued. Jude was moving forward, towards the stage.

Jude’s advance visibly agitated the crowd. Wherever the small Numah stood, the audience close by him grew immensely louder, their energy reaching a spontaneous fevered pitch.

Pausing closer to the stage, Jude sneered at Eon.

The open display of bitterness and anger sealed Yoto’s suspicion.

Jude never did anything unless there was a clear path to profit in it for him. Yoto understood that approach to life, though seeing it so nakedly revealed on Jude’s features raised a sickening feeling in Yoto’s stomach.

Am I that low? he wondered. *Is that how I appear?*

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Jude would never have come here, never have been close to any rebels at all if he could avoid it.

He was here for something—something profitable.

And what, Yoto realized, could be more profitable than bringing down Eon and with him the revolution itself?

Who would Vega and Cadoc send to murder a rebel, the leader of the rebels? I know I would send Jude or someone like him.

Gradually, as Yoto watched, Jude moved further toward the stage, passing the center of the room, then turning slightly as though to measure the distance between himself and the exit.

Planning his escape, Yoto thought before his eyes were captured by the glowing object at Jude's waist.

A blade hung from Jude's belt. Did none of those in the audience notice the strange glow the blade radiated? No—they were too deeply bound in Eon's thrall.

Jude himself seemed changed, his muscles more defined, his expression more intense than Yoto had ever seen on him. He looked taller.

His progress around the crowd and toward the stage became more deliberate, faster.

Denying everything he had said to Eon just moments earlier, Yoto knew that he had to act.

Moving swiftly along the edge of the crowd, Yoto merged with the audience, ducking and shoving his way through the throngs of cheering Numah. He could track Jude to his left, yet he could not move nearly as fast as the assassin.

The closer he came to the stage, the more the people fought back, pushing when he shoved. A cluster of muscular miners barred Yoto's way for a moment, their arms creating an impenetrable wall.

Yet their fellows offered no resistance to Jude.

Yoto watched helplessly as Jude easily sneaked closer to Eon.

In desperation, Yoto flung an elbow into the back of the head of the bulky Numah directly ahead of him, rocking the large miner. Taking advantage, Yoto dropped to a crouch and knocked the miner's legs from beneath him. Yoto sprang through the opening he had created, avoiding hands that clutched at him, tearing free of those who managed to grasp hold.

He had lost time.

Already Jude neared the front ranks of Eon's admirers. Picking up the pace, Yoto climbed over the backs of several people in his way, ignoring their protests and the blows they aimed at him. Jumping onto the stage, he found himself facing Hamel and his men.

"Greetings, Yoto," Hamel said, his tone mocking—the weapon he held pointed at Yoto revealed his true feelings.

"Get him off the stage!" Yoto shouted over the blare of the crowd.

Hamel and his crew gaped. "Are you to embarrass your own brother *now*?" Two of his crew grabbed Yoto's arms to prevent him from approaching Eon and interrupting the speech.

Yoto writhed against their grip but could not break free. "He's in danger! We all are!"

"Nonsense. This place is as safe as any Numah gathering can be," Hamel said.

Yoto struggled to free himself even as he saw Jude jump onto the far end of the stage, drawing the blade from his belt.

The crowd gasped, and Eon's guards moved to intercept Jude, but their leader waved them off.

Staring at Jude, Eon shook his head almost wearily, showing more disappointment than anger. "And what do you intend to do with that?"

Jude looked to the blade, then back at Eon. His lungs heaved in and out, his eyes were wide with frenzy. In all the cycles he had known him, Yoto

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had never seen such an expression on Jude's face. He would not have believed him capable of it.

"I am here to reveal your betrayal of the rebellion!" Jude shouted.
"Yours—and your brother's!"

Hamel and his crew raised their weapons, releasing Yoto.

Yoto shoved his way past the weapons' barrels. He hesitantly approached Eon and Jude, with his hands kept out in the open, empty for his assistant to see.

"You must stop this, Jude," Yoto said softly, keeping his most persuasive tone.

"You don't make the rules for me here, Yoto. Not here. You're going to listen to me. Now, all of you, on your knees." Jude threatened the group on stage with the dagger. They responded by bringing their guns to tighter bear on him.

"If you don't stop this nonsense now you'll be dead, Jude. I've seen what these weapons can do. It's not pretty," Yoto said.

"And you think you know what I'm capable of?" Jude waved his dagger.
"On your knees! You and Eon both—you who have stolen funds from the rebellion. You who sacrificed scores of our fellows in the prison—sacrificed them to save yourself and only yourself!"

A soft muttering flowed through the crowd. There had been rumors since the escape, and now Jude seemed to be confirming them.

"You little coward!" said Eon. "You lying coward!"

Enraged, Jude charged Eon, holding the blade forward.

Eon pivoted and dodged the attack, his powerful arms sweeping in to restrain Jude.

But Jude moved more swiftly, and overpowered him, twisting free from Eon's embrace.

Eon stumbled back, utterly shocked. Jude smashed his shoulder into Eon's chest, sending him skidding against the floor, his staff clattering to the ground.

* * *

Now, Lagaia thought fiercely—now you fool, use the dagger, let the dagger find its destined target!

But she could sense as well that something else was at work, something beyond her abilities to control.

She made a final desperate *push* to control Jude and the blade and guide the dagger to its true home.

But even as she tried, she knew she had failed.

And for the first time, Lagaia could feel the cold that flowed from her and surrounded her.

* * *

Yoto was shocked—he had never seen anyone who could best Eon in a physical contest. And certainly not a vermin such as Jude.

Jude spun wildly, wielding the blade.

Yoto heard himself yell, “Jude, stop!”

Blood spattered Eon's face, and it took a moment for Yoto to discover the source of the blood.

Yoto looked down. Streams of gore bubbled out from the knife that Jude had plunged into his heart.

His body went numb, all senses retreating, the world becoming soft at its edges. He fell to the floor of the stage, motionless.

Light swelled inside Yoto, everything in the universe becoming an intense white as something else stared through Yoto's own eyes, something else witnessed the energy that was flaying him.

JOSHUA VIOLA'S *The Bane of Yoto*

Yoto's breathing stopped.

Yoto died.

* * *

The ice in Lagaia's cavern melted instantly, turned to steam by the heat and the anguish of the cry that escaped the Witch's throat before she collapsed.

* * *

Only an instant had passed. Jude still stood a few feet away, his hands now empty of the dagger he had buried in Yoto's chest.

Eon jumped up in a rage, ignoring the pain from his injured leg.

He snatched the weapon from Hamel and pulled its trigger.

The chamber released its explosive and a projectile blasted Jude's right shoulder, the force cart-wheeling him into the crowd.

Eon took aim again. Hamel jumped into his view.

"Stop!"

"Get out of my way! He killed my brother!"

"You'll hit one of our own, Eon, there's no clear shot. Let the others deal with him."

Eon glared, but he lowered the weapon. As he did so, a wave of agony erupted from his leg. He collapsed, sobbing, into a pool of his brother's fluids.

Teeth clenched, Eon turned to see Jude meet his fate but found himself watching helplessly as Jude scrambled through the crowd, casting aside far larger Numah as though they were small children.

The group of broad-chested Numah miners who had obstructed Yoto earlier now sprang forward to tackle Jude.

In an instant their bodies writhed, their screams of pain rising above the crowd.

Jude kicked his way free, knocking over a wailing Numah, three long, red trails along his face where Jude had dug in his fingernails.

He threw back an elbow, another Numah grabbing his broken nose as he dropped to ground. The last of the attackers fell backward, stunned by the brutality.

Jude looked crazed, his muscles twitching, his eyes dilated.

Having seen what had happened to those closer to the stage, the others began to back away from the small man.

Eon regretted releasing the weapon, regretted not shooting.

He watched Jude race toward the exit, a path clearing for him as though the Numah feared he bore a contagious disease.

Jude was gone and none moved to pursue him.

Ignoring his pain Eon turned.

His hands slipping in the blood that flowed across the stage, Eon crawled to Yoto's lifeless body.

The vast room had fallen completely silent.

Tears rose in Eon's eyes and he watched as they dropped into Yoto's blood, mingling with it, diluting it. If only Morik had seen how brave Yoto had been.

"Goodbye, Yoto," Eon said. "Goodbye my brother."

THE BANE OF YOTO



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