

## Prologue

### **First Age 3<sup>rd</sup> Day of Calibration City of Meru, Blessed Isle**

The chiming of the essence clock pulled Veras from a vivid dream. Bits and pieces slipped through his fingers like sand as he came fully awake. A ship in a storm. A red head with captivating eyes. The rest faded leaving nothing but vague impressions.

Veras raised a corner of red silk to peer at motes of dust drifting through shafts of sunlight. It was far too early for civilized people to be awake. Giving a luxurious stretch Veras contemplated another hour of sleep, but couldn't afford to be late. Sliding from the sheets he sighed at the loss of the inviting warmth. By the Sun he needed some coffee.

The canopied bed floated two feet off the ground on a cushion of swirling essence. It sprawled in scarlet opulence across the southern corner of his chambers, a monument to decadence. He'd never liked the monstrous thing, but the women certainly did. The imprint his companion for the evening had left was already cold. She must have left sometime during the night. What was her name? Sara? Suni? Eh, something like that. Hera would know.

"Good morning, young master," chirped a golden skinned automaton as she hurried into the room, ruby eyes twinkling. She wore a not quite human smile, pristine white robes draped over her arm. "I've brought your clothing for the feast."

"Thank you, Hera." Veras yawned as he crossed the marble floor to the shower chamber along the south wall. He slid out of his night robe leaving the silvery fabric in a pool next to the opaque doors. They slid open with a hiss at his approach and he stepped into the tiled chamber. As the doors closed a rain of pleasantly warm water washed over him.

"More pressure. Hotter," He ordered.

"Of course, master." Sheryle answered. The spirit of the house tended to the tasks Hera wasn't able to. The water increased in temperature, and the soft rain became a hard staccato. He relaxed and closed his eyes as it cleansed the sweat from last night's exertions.

Veras gestured at the doors and they slid open. As he stepped through a gust of pleasantly warm air dried his well muscled form. A selfbrush rose from the night stand to comb his long blond hair. Another magical convenience he'd accepted, though he felt ridiculous relying on magic for such trivial things. Unfortunately he was lazy, so it was hard not taking advantage of such conveniences.

Veras gazed through the bay window at the city of Meru thousands of feet below. The city sat atop a perfect disk a dozen miles across. The disk was affixed to Mount

Meru with a narrow spire of rock shooting through the center. From here the city had the look of a sundial, with the peak shrouding the western section of the city in shadow.

Ivory towers of all shapes and sizes stabbed into the azure sky, some rising even higher than his floating pagoda. Thousands of airships from tiny soarboards to massive battleships moved in precise lines between the towers. Below them millions of ant like figures crawled across the city floor, though the sun had only been up for a half hour.

The city had risen early to prepare for Salina's Great Feast, and many of the buildings had been decorated with essence murals to commemorate the occasion. The ivory spire closest his window showed a man far enough beyond handsome to be called beautiful. Each perfect white tooth was taller than a man, and twinkling blue eyes big enough to pilot a warbird through sparkled in the morning glare. Desus. Damn, the man was everywhere.

Veras' gaze was drawn to movement in the south side of the capital. Odd. The throng gathering there was larger than he expected. Countless figures were arrayed in clean lines. He'd seen parade presentations by the Dragon-Blooded host, but never so many before. There had to be at least a million. Nearly a tenth of the host had been called back to honor the Solar? Veras frowned. It seemed so wasteful.

"Shall I dress you, master?" Hera inquired.

"Please," Veras allowed Hera to drape his ceremonial robes over him. As the white fabric settled over his chest essence rippled through it. Golden highlights arranged themselves into a hollow circle with a smaller solid circle in the center. The mark signified his place in the Eclipse caste, but the resemblance to a target wasn't lost on him. At least the Unconquered Sun had a sense of humor.

He was rarely required to wear such formal attire, but today was a special occasion. Every year the Solar deliberative gathered at a great feast prepared by Salina. The event was held during Calibration, the chaotic five days that brought each year to a close. Nearly two hundred and sixty Solar were likely to attend. Only those with duties too delicate or too massive to pass off to underlings would be absent.

"Will you be dining this morning, young master? Or shall I fetch your cloak?" Hera gave a demure curtsy as she awaited his response.

"Just a cup of coffee, Hera. If you'd bring the cloak as well I'd be grateful," he smiled at the automaton, returning her bow. The scandalized look she shot him was surprisingly human. Mero often chided him for treating the automatons as people. The magical servants seemed just as uncomfortable being at the prospect.

Veras found it difficult treating them as anything else when they were clearly intelligent. They had feelings as well. It was one of many things he struggled to adjust to. He'd only been a member of the Deliberative for a handful of years, and remembered how different life had been before his Exaltation.

Not so long ago he'd lived as a street rat in Chiaroscuro. He'd scavenged scraps of food among the lowest rung of society. There'd been no servants, no plush clothing, and certainly no flying pagoda larger than any house he'd ever have dreamed of living in. All of that had come later and his appreciation for the perks his station commanded was still fresh. Most Solar had been exalted for at least several mortal lifetimes and simply accepted the adulation as their due.

"Your coffee, young master," Hera was still scandalized as she returned from the kitchen. It was amazing how much emotion an artificial servant could display through

body language. She held a small platter with a single fluted mug in one hand, and a golden cloak with white trim in the other.

"Thank you, Hera," Veras plucked the mug from the tray draining the contents. "My cloak please. Oh, and send some flowers to Sara, will you?"

"Her name was Miela, master," Hera corrected. Her mouth was turned down in as close to a frown as her robotic features could manage. Damn, he could have sworn the woman's name started with an *S*. Wait, Sara was the girl from the party at Mero's manner last week. Or was that Sierra?

"Send flowers to Miela. Oh and get something nice for yourself." he leaned over to kiss the automaton on her cheek, prompting a metallic gasp.

Hera draped the cloak over his shoulders and fastened the clasp. Mero had tried explaining how the artifact worked, but his research assistant was *very* distracting and Veras had missed most of it.

"I'll be late tonight. Don't worry about dinner," Veras passed a hand in front of the window and it shimmered out of existence. Clean, cool wind filled the room and he laughed as he dove through the wide opening. The ground rushed up at him at an alarming rate, tiny figures growing as he fell. He channeled a mote of essence into the cloak, and a pair of beautiful golden wings flared into existence.

Banking sharply he avoided a trio of young Dragon-Blooded who sailed by on soarboards. Veras angled his descent towards the palace marveling at its magnificence as he approached. Five broad domes clustered around the tallest tower in the city. Four chambers were devoted to a specific type of Exalt, the fifth held the banquet hall used for Salina's feast.

Veras angled towards the massive gold pavilion reserved for the Solar. Traffic thickened forcing him to weave around a number of airships on his final approach. Touching down near a pair of massive orichalum doors he banished his wings. The essence collapsed back into the cloak sending golden ripples across the cloth.

The structure was even more impressive up close than from the air. The tip of the dome towered nearly three hundred yards above him. Veras scaled the marble steps two at a time garnering looks from the more senior Solar. Their movements were stately and dignified, and they didn't appreciate his 'youthful exuberance'. He paid the old men no mind as he topped the steps and passed under the doors left open for any Solar wishing to enter.

The amphitheater was dominated by a raised dais in the center. Around it lay ever larger rings of seats broken in precise intervals by walkways. Soft sunlight filtered through the dome filling the place with warmth.

The dome was nearly empty though a few duos and trios dotted the room. Most were deep in conversation, none so much as glancing at his entrance. Not that they'd have reason to. Veras was by far the most junior member of the Deliberative. Most of his brethren would consider him wet behind the ears until he passed his fifth century.

"Veras," a familiar voice echoed from behind. He turned to find Mero hurrying towards him from the amphitheater's private rooms in the outer ring. His mentor wore a simple white robe similar to his own. Mero's only other accoutrements were a pair of orichalum bracers and a wide golden ribbon binding his midnight hair. "I'm glad you found time for me before the feast." His friend broke into a grin.

"I always have time for you, Mero. Look how much trouble I get into with you watching over me. I can't imagine how much worse it would be without your guidance," Veras chuckled. In the decade he'd served the Deliberative Mero had been his closest friend. The man was both mentor and surrogate father. Veras wanted nothing more than to make him proud.

"Most of what I taught you, you originally taught me," Mero laughed. Apparently Veras' last incarnation had been a close friend. They'd battled the primordials during the Great War. Both were powerful sorcerers who'd worked closely with Salina on her legendary working. Still, Veras couldn't get used to people equating him with a man he'd never met.

"I've always been the artificer and you've always been the sorcerer," Mero gave a grandfatherly smile.

"And will be again the way Salina drives me," Veras laughed, rolling his eyes.

"It's a great honor that she chose to tutor you personally, Veras. You realize that, don't you?" Mero raised a reproachful eyebrow. "You should focus more on your studies, and less on trying to get your hand up her skirt."

"If she wanted me to stop she'd ask me to. She's never discouraged me. Not once," he grinned. Nearly every sorcerer in creation held Salina in reverence, but it was impossible not to see her as a woman. She wasn't just beautiful, but brilliant as well. He had a thing for intelligent women, especially ones with eyes so wide you could fall into them.

"She tolerates your behavior because she thinks you'll grow out of it. And she's right," Mero wagged a finger in his direction. "Eventually you will. You always do. For the first few centuries you drink, gamble and sleep with any woman that will slow down long enough for you to seduce her. But that's not why I called you here. I have something for you."

"Oh?" Veras was surprised. The artifacts Mero created were legendary. Only a few of the man's peers could rival his skill and many Solar waited decades for one of his creations. "What did I do to deserve such an honor?"

"It's not an honor. It's a way for me to keep you out of trouble," the ghost of a smile played across Mero's features. "Here, take a look at these."

Mero unwrapped a silk bundle revealing a pair of hand held essence cannons. Each was crafted of a smooth white material Veras couldn't identify. The handles, trigger guard, and barrel were embossed with orichalum. He reached down reverently to pick them up.

Essence flowed into the weapons forging a link between them. They became an extension of his arm as he sighted down one the barrels. He'd never handled weapons so fine.

"Legendary work old friend. People will no doubt speak of these weapons for generations. I'm honored," he turned one of the pistols over in his hand studying it carefully. "So what do they do?"

"They're guns, Veras. I would think their use would be obvious," Mero chuckled.

"You know what I meant," Veras laughed. "You don't make simple things."

"I find simple boring," Mero shrugged. "And it's a good thing for you that I do. These are the finest pair of weapons I've ever created. My masterpiece if you will."

"Really? Given some of your other work that's one hell of a claim," Veras could barely contain his curiosity.

"The guns do many amazing things. The most challenging was the bonding. Took me nearly a decade to perfect the technique, but I've found a way to attach these guns to your Exaltation," Mero shone with pride.

"To my Exaltation? Is that even possible?"

"Possible?" his mentor snorted. "Of course not. Do you have any idea how many impossible things I had to do to create these? I spent months shaping the wyld into components that simply don't exist in creation."

"So how does it work?" Veras asked.

"The cannons use a form of divination to locate your divine Essence. Each time you re-Exalt they'll be close enough for you to touch. They'll always be in the right place at the right time," Mero paused a moment for his reaction. Veras gaped at him, and his mentor continued his explanation. "That won't be your favorite part, though. It has other powers you'll find of great use. The pistols cannot be detected by any means unless you wish them seen. As soon as you don them everyone else, myself included, will lose the ability to see them."

"So I can carry them anywhere? These are perfect. Mero, you're a genius," Veras clapped his friend on the back.

"I know, I know. I *am* a genius. You haven't heard the best part. The weapons function like the Great Orrery of Athainu. They detect probable causality affecting a positive outcome," Mero grinned like a proud father.

"So, they're lucky?" Veras asked.

"That's a quaint way of putting it, but in a nutshell yes. The guns make you lucky."

"Mero, they're amazing. I can't believe what you've accomplished. You made them for me? I don't even know what to say," Veras was overcome by affection for the older Solar. This was a gift beyond measure.

"We'll continue to Exalt through the ages. Someday they'll save the life of one of my future incarnations, of that I have no doubt. Think of it as a way to hedge my bet," Mero's grin was surprisingly boyish.

"Someday whoever I end up being will thank you I'm sure," Veras smiled.

"Should we head over to the feast? Salina will be giving her address soon. I'll have a chance to see up her dress from my seat and I don't want to miss it."

"Alright," Mero chuckled. "Sometimes I forget how amusing you can be when you're young. You have not a care in the world save wine, a set of dice, and as many woman as you can fit on your lap. "

"You say it like it's a bad thing," Veras smirked.

"Oh it's not necessarily bad. It's just amusing watching the changes you go through as you get older," Mero returned the smirk. "Someday you'll find *the* woman, and when you do you'll give up everything for her. You'll pine after her like a lost puppy swearing off other women to win her favor. That's how it starts. A couple centuries after that she'll actually turn you into a respectable citizen. You'll give up drinking and gambling."

"No," Veras was horrified. "Life would be so boring. It'll never happen."

"That's what you said last time," Mero's smirk grew into a grin. "Take a trip to the Chamber of Three Mirrors and look up your past memories if you don't believe me. They're all archived."

"The Unconquered Sun gave us free will," Veras quoted from one of the holy texts. "So this time I can choose a different, less boring, path."

"If you say so. Just remember who you should name as the best man at your wedding," Mero's sly grin was unnerving, but Veras refused to show a reaction. The ancient sorcerer made a habit out of being right. "Shall we head over to the Peace Pavilion for the ceremony? Better not let Salina catch you trying to look up her skirt."

"I never get caught. That's what charms are for," Veras laughed as they left the Dome and headed for the neighboring Peace Pavilion. A steady stream of Solar filtered into the Pavilion ahead of them and they joined the rough line as it wound inside.

The interior was as impressive as ever. A raised platform held sixty tables arrayed in a perfect circle. The tables at the head floated twenty feet off the floor, with each a bit lower than the last. The lowest sat on the marble floor opposite the highest. The finest cutlery and essence lamps decorated each table, and the soft scent of roses wafted through the room. Plush cushions had been arrayed for people to lounge on before and after the feast itself. Soft strains of orchestral music played through the room, though Veras couldn't identify the music's source.

The Solar would be seated according to seniority, which meant Veras sat at the lowest table directly opposite Salina. Perfect. He'd have an excellent view of her legs and she'd never even know he was looking. He scanned the crowd to see what she was wearing. There she was. The sorceress was speaking with several senior members of the Deliberative.

Salina was a flaxen haired beauty with wide blue eyes that made a man say yes no matter his intentions. She'd styled her hair in an elaborate coif wrapped in golden wire with little pearl studs. A strapless emerald gown of the finest silk hugged her waist flaring into a bell as it touched the carpet. It gave tantalizing glimpses of ivory ankles, though the curve of her neck and soft shoulders were even more enticing.

"I'm heading to my seat. We'll talk after the opening ceremony," Mero clapped Veras on the back and headed to his place at the table neighboring Salina's. As one of the oldest living Solar he was accorded a much more prestigious seating than Veras. He circled the tables stopping to speak with Salina before taking his seat. The pair exchanged words for several minutes with Salina bursting into gales of laughter as Mero pointed in his direction. Damn, he'd kill to know what they were saying. He should probably research a charm to do that, now that he thought about it.

Veras slid into his seat and tucked his napkin into his lap. He helped himself to the ever flowing goblet of wine, and popped a stuffed mushroom into his mouth. He couldn't identify the vintage, but whatever it was certainly tasted better than last year's swill. The plate of mushrooms was tastier than the crab dip they'd served the year prior.

"Veras," an acidic voice came from behind. He turned to see a plain faced woman in similar robes save the symbol adorning the chest. Ah, it was Melinda. She was the second most junior senator in the deliberative. Despite her plain face she was well endowed, so not a complete loss. Plus, she had a sour disposition and those kind were nearly always worth the effort.

As a Twilight caste sorcery was her purview. The fact that he'd mastered spells more quickly than she was a splinter in her crew that she couldn't quite reach.

"Hello Melinda," he pulled her chair out for her and smiled politely.

"Don't pretend to be friendly. I won't sleep with you," she growled, but accepted his help in seating herself.

"Yet," he breathed into her ear before seating himself.

"Pig. I heard you've been after that poor Raksi girl. She's scarcely old enough to marry. Have you no shame?"

"Not really. She wasn't interested anyway," he sighed.

"I guess you aren't as charming as you think. You're certainly no Desus," she invoked the name of the one man she knew he envied. He was famous or infamous depending on whom you listened to, and Veras wished he had a fraction of the man's charm.

"You're right," he kept his voice contrite.

"I'm right? You're admitting I'm right?" She goggled like he'd grown a third eye.

"I'm no Desus. What I need is practice. Now if you'd join me for dinner..." he shot her a wink.

"I knew it," she groaned, rolling her eyes. "You are such a child."

"That's not a no," he grinned. She pointedly turned away from him to chat with the neighbor on her right leaving Veras with no one to talk to.

He took another sip of wine and glanced at the head table. Salina had glided to her feet and was about to begin her speech. Perfect timing. His grin was childish enough that it would have scandalized Melinda had she been paying attention. Veras whispered the words to a spell he'd researched. For a dizzying moment his perception was divorced from his body. When he could see again his perspective was completely different. The spell gave him control of a nearly invisible floating eye, and a tiny ethereal hand.

He maneuvered the eye near one of Salina's ankles sliding the hand around the hem of her dress. A slight tug lifted it just enough for the eye to peek under the rich green silk. What did she wear underneath? He'd nearly answered that question when his vision spun wildly. The eye was staring Salina right in the face. She'd found it and was holding it in her hand!

He hurriedly cancelled the spell and busied himself with the salad one of the servants had just delivered. He glanced up to see if she was watching him. She was. Salina's fiery gaze beaded his brow with sweat making him sick to his stomach. He shot back a weak smile and pointed at Melinda mouthing, "It was her."

Salina's ire melted into a faint smile. Still, he was going to hear about this at his next lesson. Veras watched as she tapped her fluted crystal glass. The clear tone echoed through the chamber drawing all eyes to the beautiful sorceress.

"Honored champions of the Deliberative thank you for joining us. This feast is a symbol of our conviction..." Salina began.

Veras lost track of her words when agony shot through his temples. He seized his head with both hands gritting his teeth as waves of pain crashed over him. Another flare overwhelmed him and he staggered to his feet dizzily. What was happening?

Melinda's hand was on his arm and she was saying something. He couldn't grasp the words. Her expression shifted from annoyance to concern as the world spun crazily and he crashed to the floor. This couldn't be good. Something was wrong with him.

Melinda's cool hands settled over his brow as she crouched next to him, but did nothing to quiet the pain. The sorceress gave a worried look as she rose to her feet and turned to address Salina.

"A thousand pardons for interrupting, mother," Melinda's voice rang across the room. An ethereal swan of pure sunlight rose gracefully into the air above her as she activated her anima banner.

"What is it, my child?" Salina's placid demeanor never changed. If the interruption bothered her she gave no sign.

"Veras has been poisoned, but his care is beyond my abilities. I need the aid of a physician. Is someone willing to help?" she scanned the assembly looking for aid.

"Assembled guests excuse the interruption," Salina gave a regal curtsy to the room. "I'll tend to this myself. Please, enjoy the refreshments."

The sorceress circled the ring of tables until she'd reached Melinda and Veras. Kneeling next to him she placed a hand on his brow, and her frown deepened. Leaning closer she breathed into his ear, "If this is an act I'm going to make you very, very sorry."

"Erk," Veras croaked through a throat that grew tighter by the second. Blackness nibbled at the edges of his vision.

"I don't think he's faking," Melinda whispered.

Out of the corner of his eye Veras saw Mero squat next to him. The trio talked in low urgent voices but the pain grew so intense he couldn't follow their conversation. It faded into a faint droning, drowned out by the drumbeat of his temples. A cool hand settled on his brow and he gasped as ice flowed through his entire body. A spasm wracked him as the poison in his veins boiled away. The pain and nausea faded and his breathing slowed to a normal pace.

"He'll be alright now," Salina breathed a sigh of relief. He blinked a few times as control returned, sitting up slowly. Salina knelt beside him providing a wonderful view down the front of her dress.

"Thank you," Veras rasped. "What did you do?"

"I cleansed the poison from your blood stream," Salina wore a mask of calm, but he saw the cracks in her confidence. She was more alarmed than she let on. Veras was considering a response when Melinda's hands shot to her temples with a cry. Salina wasted no time pressing Melinda flat onto her back. Her face tightened in concentration for several seconds. "There. She should be alright now. It was the same poison. Melinda, did you use any essence in the last few minutes?"

"When Veras collapsed I invoked my sorcerer's sight," she said after a moment's consideration. "Do you think there's a connection?"

"Melascano venom?" Salina turned to ask Mero.

He absently stroked his goatee, "It makes sense. It's odorless, tasteless and will only activate when the host uses essence. The question I want answered is how it was administered. It must be something in our immediate vicinity since it affected both of them. Veras, have you interacted with Melinda in the last few days?"

"Not in the way I'd like to," he croaked. Salina's eyes narrowed and he hastily amended his reply, "I haven't seen her in over a week. We only talked for a few moments before Salina's speech. It must be something in the food, or possibly the wine."

"Mero, would you test the food please? I'll address the assembly," Salina strode purposefully back to her seat at the head table. Every eye followed her and the crowd waited expectantly for her next words.

"Two members of the Deliberative have been poisoned. Both used essence shortly before exhibiting symptoms and we suspect the use of Melascano venom," the room broke into shocked murmurs. Salina waited for the clamor to die down before continuing. "Mero is testing both the food and the wine but for now please refrain from eating or drinking. If you've tasted of either avoid the use of any charms or spells."

"Salina," Mero's voice rang out. He cradled a goblet of wine in his right hand raising it for the assembly to see. "The poison is present in both goblets. I believe there is a high likelihood we'll find more of the same if we test them."

"I see," Salina's mouth tightened into a firm line. "Those of you with the ability to test for Melascano do so now."

Shocked gasps echoed through the room as person after person discovered the same thing. All the wine had been poisoned. How could this possibly be so widespread? Who would poison so many Solar at once? What did they hope to gain?

"Those of you with the power to cleanse this venom please help those in need," Salina's clear voice rang through the chamber once more. Each attendant moved to help those suffering the effects of the venom. Salina beckoned the senior Solar to attend her. Mero was one of them and gave Veras a squeeze before hurrying off.

The group surrounding the sorceress wore heavy frowns and worry rolled off of them in waves. Veras had never seen *any* of that group lose their calm. That frightened him more than the poison. Most were old enough to remember the surrender of the Primordials, and many of the grandest accomplishments of the age could be attributed to one or more.

The earlier pain he'd experienced was nothing compared to the agony that crashed over him now. Veras collapsed to his knees covering his ears with his hands. It did little to blot out the painful shrieking boring into his brain. He'd studied the Canata of Empty Voices and knew what the spell was capable of. It sent out a blaring shriek so powerful it damaged the hearing eventually killing anyone affected.

He'd dismissed it as not worth learning, but suddenly understood why the spell was so feared. Veras instinctively called on his essence and performed the Sapphire Countermagic spell Salina had taught him. The pain didn't slacken in the slightest. Impossible. Why didn't his counterspell work?

He wasn't the only one asking that question. At least three dozen sorcerers throughout the room also used countermagic, though none had any more effect than he did. Sticky wetness leaked from each ear, and sound disappeared as his eardrums cracked with a painful pop. Veras could feel the sonic pulse of the spell slowly liquefying his insides, but his ears were so badly damaged he could no longer hear it.

Nearly every Solar in the room was wracked by pain. Some had succumbed and collapsed where they stood, while others activated charms or spells to aid them. Of the latter many collapsed with a shriek as the effects of the Melascano venom brutally punished them for their use of essence.

Each Solar called upon the essence that fueled their god like powers unleashing their anima banner, a brilliant display unique to each. A golden falcon spread its wings over Veras, and several feet away a golden bull stamped and reared over Salina. The

brilliance flooded the room as the animas of so many Solar bled together. Squinting against the glare Veras stumbled through the room searching for Mero. There. He stood near the double doors, eyes closed in concentration as he mouthed the words to a spell. Snapping his arms over his head a dome of pure white light formed around him.

Veras stumbled inside the dome and the cacophony liquefying his insides finally subsided. Someone grabbed his shoulder and he spun to find himself facing Salina. She was saying something, but with his eardrums destroyed there was no way for him to understand her.

Salina placed a hand over each of Veras' ears, and ice flowed through every part of his body at once. He jerked erect with a gasp as the essence surged through him, and when it had run its course all pain was gone. More importantly he could hear again.

"Are you alright?" Salina asked in obvious concern.

"I'm fine," Veras replied wiping still drying blood from his ears. "The host couldn't have done this on their own. Who masterminded the attack?"

"The only group powerful enough to orchestrate this are the Lunar or the Sidereal," Salina mused. "Right now it doesn't matter which. We need to get out of here."

Rubble rained from above as blast after blast bit into the golden dome from the barrage going on outside. The ceiling wasn't going to last long, and if they were here when it fell all of them were dead. Salina was right.

"Who's the senior most Dawn left standing?" Veras asked. A few more stragglers stumbled into the dome of light that Mero had erected. The sorcerer stood in the center with eyes closed.

"I am," barked a man that Veras had seen, but never met. Gensa Verkaren was known as the Third Coming of the Auspicious Dawn. His hair had been cut to short black stubble, and his eyes were the hard green of the ocean. He wore a suit of orichalum plate, and a daiklaive was belted at his side.

"We need to get the elders out of here," Veras explained.

"Agreed, and I already have a plan little brother," Gensa nodded. He turned to address the handful of Solar who'd taken sanctuary beneath the dome. "It's time we showed these mewling terrestrials why *we* are the chosen of the Unconquered Sun. Get ready for a fight, because we're launching our counter attack shortly." He boomed.

"We're going to punch through that hole there," the Dawn pointed at a massive fissure forming in the ceiling. "When it collapses we use the hole to launch a counter attack. Iria, Gor and myself will deal with the initial assault. As soon as we punch a hole Salina and Veras will use the distraction to flee. The rest of us will cover their escape."

Veras was only half listening as he stared at Mero. Beads of sweat traced lines down his jaw and neck. How long could he hold the spell? It protected them from the effects of the Canata, but the strain must be enormous.

"Veras," Gensa barked at him. "You're going to take Salina and flee. If she uses her essence the Sidereal will be on her before you can blink. That means you're responsible for her safety. Think you can handle that?"

Veras looked at Salina. The elders *had* to survive, or the rule of the Solar was effectively over. Younger Solar like him weren't much of a loss, as his essence would find a new host within a year or two. Those with thousands of years of experience, on the

other hand, were irreplaceable. They'd be vital in gathering the Solar together for a counterstrike.

"I'll handle it," Veras steeled himself. "As long as you can give us a distraction."

"That's the spirit," Gensa grinned like a madman. "I have just the thing." He closed his eyes and golden light flared around him.

A portal to elsewhere opened, and pieces of armor far larger than anything a person might wear shot out. They surrounded Gensa in a swirling ball of golden light so bright that Veras shielded his eyes. When the light faded the Dawn was gone. In his place stood a Royal Warstrider, a twenty-five foot tall humanoid killing machine.

"Everyone make your peace," Gensa bellowed through the Warstrider's voice amplification system. "We move out in thirty seconds."

"I have the keystone to Mero's manse to teleport us out of here. Is it worth the risk?" Veras asked. No one knew the ins and outs of sorcery like Salina, and she could tell him to the second how long it would take their enemies to respond.

"All teleportation in Meru is tracked. They'll be on us quickly," Salina cautioned.

"Will it buy us a few minutes? That might be enough to get you somewhere safe," Veras asked.

"One way to find out," Salina grinned. Wait, was she enjoying this? Damn the woman was crazy. "If we can get outside the warded area I can open a portal to Yu-Shan. I have to reach the Unconquered Sun. He must be told."

"Agreed. Save your essence unless we're attacked by an advisor. I can handle the Dragon-Blooded," Veras boasted, and not idly. As powerful as the Dragon-Blooded were they were merely terrestrial Exalts. They couldn't compare to the perfect power of the Solar.

"Alright," she rolled her eyes. "You must *love* the fact that you get to take care of me while I sit here helpless."

"I wouldn't do this for anyone else. You know that right?" Veras laughed.

"Unless she was wearing a low cut dress," the sorceress shot back. Damn her for being right.

Veras reached into his pocket and drew out a small Orichalum charm. Mero had given it to him a few years ago, and he'd carried it with pride ever since. It was an expression of the older Solar's trust that he allowed Veras access to his most private retreat, "Ready?"

"Do it," Salina ordered. Veras pulled her against him and channeled a mote of essence into the charm. His vision blurred and a wave of vertigo passed over him. When it passed they were standing on a marble dais in a large open room. They'd made it inside Mero's manse.

"Mero keeps an airship in the docking ring on the roof. If we can get there we should be able to escape in the confusion," Veras stepped off the dais and headed for the mahogany doors on the north wall. Other pairs decorated each of the cardinal directions. Mero had a fondness for wood and used more than most of his contemporaries.

"Wait," Salina grabbed his arm as he passed by. "During the feast you used a spell to look up my dress didn't you?"

"Uh. Maybe. I mean anything is possible. With all the confusion I can't remember," his eyes widened as her grip tightened painfully. Why was she bringing this up now?

"You researched a *Celestial circle* spell just to look up my skirt, didn't you?" she growled.

"I worked hard on that spell," he shot back. "Besides, you're always after me about using my creativity."

A ringing slap knocked his head back hard enough for his teeth to click together, "That's for using the Unconquered Sun's power for something so petty."

"You hit like a Yeddim," he rubbed his cheek. Damn, she was stronger than she looked. "And it wasn't petty. Have you *seen* your legs?"

"You are so much like him," Salina sighed in what he took for fondness. Was she talking about his former incarnation? What had their relationship been?

"If you hadn't cast that spell far more of us would have ingested the Melascano. We'd have been defenseless. This is for giving us a chance," Salina seized a handful of his hair and pulled him into a rough kiss, "If we get out of here I'll take you down to Chiaroscuro for a weekend. We'll see about making a man out of you."

A thundering crash echoed from the front door of the manor. Then another. The Dragon-Blooded host had arrived.

"Time to go," they said in Unison. Salina waved a hand over her dress and it shrank into a pair of form fitting pants capped by a comfortable blouse. It looked a lot more comfortable for running, but the way it hugged her curves was distracting.

The pair sprinted to the door which slid open at their approach. On the other side a long tiled hallway led to a spiral staircase that climbed out of sight. They hurled past the hallway and up the stairwell, which emerged into a garden of roses in all different shapes and colors. Many of the flowers began to sing as they entered.

"Where is the landing bay?" Salina panted as they ran.

"This way," Veras sprinted through the flowers taking a left at the hallway on the other side. It led to a flight of stairs which they took two at a time. At the top Veras darted down a narrow passageway ending at a heavy silver door. He laid his palm flat on the center and a pulse of golden light passed from his hand into the warm metal. It slid open like an iris and he stepped through. "The hangar is two floors above. Mero takes off from the roof."

*Thump. Thump.* A pair of immensely heavy somethings settled on the roof. From below he heard shouts inside the house. The host had made it inside and their escape route to the roof was blocked. They were trapped.

"Do you have any spells that might help? Otherwise this is going to get ugly," Veras skidded to a halt in front of the next door. He was reluctant to open it as it led to the stairwell that would take them to the roof.

"The fact that they found us so quickly confirms that the Sidereal are helping them," Salina sighed. "I need to save my strength to deal with their assault. I promise you it's coming, and when it does I'll need everything I have to deal with whomever they send."

"Looks like it's up to me then. Hold on," Veras didn't give her time to respond. He scooped Salina up in both arms and charged the stained glass window overlooking the hallway. It gave easily in a shower of multicolored shards, and just like that they were plummeting towards the ground thousands of feet below.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Salina yelled over the rushing wind. "And get your hand off of my ass."

"Sorry, I can't. If I let go I'll drop you," Veras grinned.

"Do you have to keep squeezing it like that?" Salina sighed in resignation.

"We'll probably be dead soon. That makes me the last man to appreciate your beauty, and I owe it to my fellow man to see that the opportunity isn't lost," Veras laughed. Salina rolled her eyes. He concentrated a mote of essence into the cloak unfurling the golden wings behind him.

The imperial city was gone. Dozens of warships glittered in the noon day sun where no ship of their kind was ever allowed to go. The heavy cruisers ringed the Peace Pavilion and rained barrage after barrage reducing the streets around the palace to white hot slag.

Hundreds of warbirds darted around the cruisers flying in tight formation. The one man craft resembled a falcon with the pilot perched on the bird's back. They carried an essence cannon capable of killing even a Solar in a single shot. Entire wings of the lithe attack craft coordinated strafing runs on any Solar brave enough to emerge from the dome. More often than not they fell to arrows or bolts of essence that streaked up from the ground. At least the Solar were fighting back.

Hundreds of thousands of Dragon-Blooded soldiers clogged the streets for miles in every direction, but they'd suffered catastrophic losses. Countless bodies littered the grounds around the palace. More and more fell before the might of the angry demigods as the Solar they sought to contain plunged deeper into their ranks.

Veras noted the entire scene in a second or two. "Is anyone following us?"

"Seven warbirds and twice that many skysleds are moving in our direction. We need to land before they catch us. Find us a tower and see if you can get us inside," she commanded.

A scarlet beam burned by his right leg. *Guess they were closer than he thought.* The second bolt blazed past his shoulder leaving a wave of heat in its wake. He juked straight up twisting to the right as a hail of bolts passed through the area he'd vacated. They made a small target for the airships trailing them, but the attacking craft were fast closing the gap.

"I have a plan," he leaned close to be heard over the howling wind.

"Does it involve taking your hand off my ass?" she called back with a laugh. Yup, she was definitely crazy.

"Of course not," he mouthed into her ear. Banking sharply he dropped towards a narrow spire jutting into the sky above them. The pristine surface was patterned with neat rows of windows and the occasional narrow balcony. Small apartments most likely. He darted around the building using it to break sight with their pursuers as another stream of essence blazed by them.

One of the ruby shots washed over his back sending up a flare of agony. The bulk of the blast hit the cloak searing through it and into his back. He suppressed the wave of agony, focusing instead on survival. The control unit in his cloak ceased to exist, and both wings flickered out sending them into a freefall.

"Is this part of the plan?" Salina taunted. "If so I'm not impressed."

"Patience," Veras shot back through gritted teeth. "Isn't that what you're always telling me to cultivate?"

Veras channeled his essence activating one of his most powerful charms. Whether *The Trance of Unhesitating Speed* slowed everyone else down or sped him up

didn't matter. The end result was the same. Time slowed to a standstill as their fall was very nearly arrested. Salina's hair writhed like a mass of flaxen snakes, and she twisted so slowly she barely appeared to move.

Glancing up he spotted a warbird inching into view around the corner of the building. The pilot wore a look of intense concentration as he scanned the area seeking his target. His armor shone with the black and red of the 11th legion, and the knot of stars on his left shoulder identified him as a member of the highly elite Warhawks.

Had Veras not activated the Trance the legionnaire would have gunned them down with ease. Instead Veras had all the time in the world to react before the man was aware of their presence. There was no way for him to get a clear shot at the pilot, because the bastard kept his body low against the back of the warbird. Guess he'd just have to get creative.

Veras ripped his pistol from its holster and fired at one of the windows the pilot was passing. The knot of golden essence reflected off of the mirrored surface, ricocheting to impact against the Dragon-Blooded's temple. The strength of the impact was so great it ripped the pilot from his seat hurling him into the open sky. His body twisted like a leaf in a strong storm as he plummeted towards the street hundreds of feet below.

Trance still active Veras turned to acquire his next target. A flagpole jutted from the side of the building like a thin needle. *Perfect.* He aimed his cannon at the window above gently stroking the trigger. The weapon roared as it belched forth a fist sized knot of essence which shattered the window. *Damn, these things were more powerful than he'd expected.*

Veras and Salina fell in slow motion giving him all the time in the world to plan his next action. The flagpole bent as they landed, but held under their combined weight. He hurled Salina through the gaping window and she somersaulted to her feet next to a surprised family enjoying their breakfast. One of the children's eyes widened, and she sat stupefied with a spoon clutched like a talisman.

Time returned to its normal flow, but the Trance had done its work. Veras leapt straight up grabbing the tail of the now rider less warbird. Slings himself over the wing he landed lightly in the pilot's seat. He seized the controls in both hands whipping the craft around to hover next to the gaping hole he'd hurled Salina through.

"Come on," he yelled over the rumbling of the warbird's essence engine. "We have to get out of here."

Salina sprinted across the room and dove out the window. Veras tilted the craft in her direction and she landed behind him. The warbird was designed to hold two passengers, but she squeezed pleasantly close anyway.

"I suppose your plan wasn't so bad after all," Salina's hot breath washed over his ear.

He dropped the lean attack craft into a steep dive as several more warbirds whipped around the lip of the building. They sent a continuous stream of scarlet blasts in his direction, but none came even close. There were many things Veras was good at, but his prowess as a pilot was on another level. Only a few Solar could match him, and none of the Dragon-Blooded had even a fraction of his skill.

He squeezed the throttle coaxing more speed until he was forced to grip the craft tightly with his legs to avoid being ripped off its back. The warbirds pursuing them

accelerated smoothly to match their pace. Their piloting was superb, but they were only Dragon-Blooded. *Let's see how they deal with this.*

Veras banked sharply guiding the craft into a thick line of ships fleeing the destruction enveloping the city. He swung around a transport as three enemy craft plunged past them. Falling in behind them Veras stroked the trigger sending a hail of ruby bolts that caught all three pilots in the back. The riderless craft careened off in different directions exploding against neighboring buildings. That left three more warbirds in close pursuit.

Renewing his dive Veras leaned heavily on the throttle coaxing as much speed as he could. The ground rushed up at them at an alarming rate, but Veras did nothing to slow their flight. At the very last second he leveled their descent, nearly scraping the smooth white tiles of the street below. One of their pursuers wasn't fast enough and cratered the street in a fiery explosion.

"You sure know how to show a girl a good time," Salina laughed wildly.

The remaining pair of warbirds pulled up in time to avoid crashing, and whipped after them down the city street. Veras darted between abandoned carts as bursts of ruby essence shot past them. Leaning on the left pedal he whipped the craft down a narrow alley between a massive tower and a squat warehouse. The tip of each wing struck sparks from the walls as they careened wildly down the alley. If he slipped even an inch it would rip the wing from the craft killing both of them on impact.

One of the pursuers made the mistake of following. He was a superb pilot and nearly made it through the alley, but something struck his wing sending him cart wheeling into the warehouse wall in a fiery blossom. The other pursuer banked skyward falling further behind but keeping them in sight. If he was following procedure he'd be calling for backup, and soon that noose would draw closed around them.

"They'll be on us quickly," Veras called over his shoulder. "Before we leave the alley I want you to dive through that doorway. Call a portal to Yu-Shan and see if you can escape into heaven."

"What about you?" she called over the tortured shriek of the wings as they scraped the walls.

"I'm going to die heroically so you feel bad about not sleeping with me," he shot back a grin.

Salina stiffened but before she could protest Veras put his plan into action. Releasing the controls he seized Salina's hand yanking her from her seat and hurling her towards a closed door near the end of the alley. She twisted midair kicking the door into a shower of splinters and sailing into the room beyond.

Flipping off the warbird Veras peppered the craft with shots from his new pistols until it exited the alleyway as a ball of flame. That should throw them off the scent, even if only for a few seconds. Hopefully that was enough.

Veras slid into the trance again and time slowed to a near stop. Both feet touched the tower to the right and he sprinted straight up the wall in a blur of essence. Drawing even with the last warbird he kicked off the building and launched a spinning roundhouse at the pilot. It connected with the woman's helmet knocking her from her seat to plummet to the street below.

Landing in the pilot's seat Veras jerked the controls sending the warbird into a power climb. He kept as close to the side of the building as possible, while eyeing the

massive warship moving into position above. The behemoth had no doubt been dispatched to coordinate the hunt for Salina, and that meant it had to go.

The warship pivoted its nose in his direction and waves of cerulean essence rippled across the barrel of a huge essence cannon embedded near the prow. Essence accumulators fed the pool of crackling energy until it finally discharged in a thick beam. The warbird glided out of the way, but his hair stood on end as the rush of heat passed by. The beam struck the base of the building severing metal cables and ceramic walls. The top two hundred floors toppled towards him with a thunderous crash, and he laughed in excitement. This would do nicely.

Guiding the warbird as close to the building as he dared Veras sped along the falling tower as it plummeted. The massive fragment hid his movements from the heavy warship, and when he popped out from under it they were completely unprepared. They no doubt expected him to flee instead of engaging a warship with his tiny fighter.

Dozens of smaller essence cannons sent barrage after barrage in his direction, but he wove through the hail of essence flawlessly. Pouring on speed he blurred by the skysleds and enemy warbirds before they could get a lock. They pivoted to follow but were a few critical seconds too late.

Maneuvering as close as he could Veras sped along the heavy cruiser's hull. Keeping that close would make it difficult for his pursuers to fire on him, as they risked hitting their own ship if they did. Veras followed the hull flipping around a wide lip and onto the upper side of the ship. There. He'd finally spotted his target, the bridge.

Stroking the trigger Veras fired a stream of pulses at the shielded window that served as a viewport for the people on the bridge. Cracks spider webbed along the window, and the Dragon-Blooded behind it scrambled for cover. They were aware of him, but didn't have time to get out of the way. He squeezed the accelerator a final time coaxing as much speed as the craft was capable of.

Veras aimed the nose of his craft at the window ahead of him. Leaping from the saddle at the last moment he watched as the warbird impacted. Both wings were sheared off as the body of the fighter blew through the window. It exploded on impact filling the bridge with fragments of super heated metal.

Most of the artificers lining the room were killed instantly, leaving only a handful to moan in pain. Veras tucked his legs against his body, and rolled through the opening he'd created. Landing amidst the debris he flipped to his feet and prepared to battle the survivors.

Only, there were none. Bodies were strewn across the room, many partially covered in sheets of metal from the body of the warbird. A few moans echoed through the room, but no one looked ready to oppose him. He could hear the pounding of footsteps from the hallway outside. *Damn, that was fast.* Guards were already on the way.

Veras squeezed off several hurried shots at the doorway. He was rewarded with a sharp curse from the soldiers on the other side as they dove for cover. He sprinted across the room sliding into the captain's chair. Veras slammed his hands down on the spinning vortex of essence imbedded in each of the chair's arms.

A tingle passed over him as his essence bonded with the ship. He became aware of it in the same way he was aware of his own limbs, and used that control to close every

door and hangar bay on the ship. That should slow down his pursuers long enough for him to do what needed to be done.

A perfect sphere of multi colored light appeared before him as he summoned the vessel's battle map. Inside dozens of blue dots floated in tiny clouds, and near the base of the sphere a few red dots moved around the miniature representation of the Peace Pavilion.

"Catalogue all Sunrunner class vessels in our immediate vicinity," Veras commanded the ship. All cruisers were equipped with artificial intelligences meant to augment the captain's abilities.

"Unable to comply," chirped a cheerful female voice. "Authorization denied."

Closing his eyes Veras flared his caste mark, revealing himself as a Solar. Every ship in the Realm recognized the Solar as their rightful masters.

"Authorization granted. Honor to serve, Lawgiver," the voice chirped happily. The globe expanded and nearly thirty ships pulsed a deep green, each identical to the one in which he sat. Veras studied the layout of the ships and weighed his chances. He couldn't take them all, but at least he'd go down swinging.

Veras pivoted the battleship towards the dozens of cruisers circling the smoking ruins of Meru, "Computer, channel all available essence into the main cannon."

"Procedure is not recommended," the voice chirped back.

"Override," he snarled.

"Of course, Lawgiver. Honor to serve," the voice agreed. The essence lighting around him dimmed as every mote of essence was channeled into the massive cannon embedded in the vessel's prow. Crackling blue lightning arced around the growing pool of energy forming at the tip of the cannon.

Behind him the center of the door leading onto the bridge glowed white hot. The Dragon-Blooded were nearly through and he was running out of time. Channeling his personal essence through the controls he activated one of the most devastating charms he knew, the Arrow Storm. It divided one shot into many hitting up to fifteen targets at once.

Fifteen identical blue beams blazed towards the fleet hovering over Meru. Most were caught completely by surprise. Essence washed over their hulls melting plating and fusing the essence engines into solid lumps of metal and gemstone. Fifteen ships plummeted from the sky to shatter what remained of the city underneath them.

A cracking far louder than thunder washed over the ship, and it took him a moment to identify the source. Three ships had impacted in the same area of the city and the resulting explosion tore the foundations of Meru itself. A slice of the disk holding the city aloft split, dumping hundreds of thousands of citizens to their deaths on the slopes of Mount Meru.

The two dozen remaining warships charged their weapons and took aim at his ship. Behind him the door finally opened with a crash, and Dragon-Blooded poured into the room. Which threat to deal with first? He couldn't stop both.

Veras removed his right hand from the control sphere in the arm of the command chair. Yanking one of his new pistols from his belt he filled the air with essence blasts. The first wave of troops fell like wheat before the scythe, but dozens more flooded into the control room as they leapt over the bodies of their fallen companions.

Outside the ship the enemy fleet released a torrent of cerulean beams that burned a straight line towards him. The ship shuddered as a shot impacted on the underside liquefying armor and destroying many of the warbirds still circling. Another shot carved a fiery scar along the hull passing dangerously close to the bridge. A third beam washed over the barrel of the main gun melting it to slag.

Deep tremors passed through the hull as warning claxons sounded all over the ship. Most of the Dragon-Blooded rushing into the room were thrown to the floor as the ship canted at a crazy angle. The city floor rushed up at him as the ship fell from the sky.

"I knew a woman would be the death of me. You'd better appreciate this, Salina." Veras laughed as he angled the nose of the ship towards the closest enemy vessel. Making peace with death Veras whispered a prayer to the Unconquered Sun. His life would be accounted short for a Celestial Exalted, but he'd lived nearly forty years and had loved almost all of them. Dying was something he could accept, especially if it helped Salina escape the hell Meru had become.

Veras engaged the remaining thruster and the titanic vessel shuddered as it picked up speed. Fueling the ship with the last of his essence he aimed the nose towards the closest battleship, continuing to accelerate as he closed. His target finally seemed aware of his intentions, and the enemy vessel began turning away. Too little, too late.

With a final burst from the thrusters the prow of the ship pierced its companion sending a flurry of explosions through both ships. The tortured screech of metal screamed all around him, but he kept doggedly on course embedding his vessel further into the enemy ship.

"Teesha, can you hear me?" a voice crackled across the bridge from the speaking tube. He recognized the voice as Chejop Kejak, one of the senior Advisors. "What in the bloody hell is going on up there? You just took out over half of the 5th fleet."

Secondary explosions wracked the ship and Veras knew he had only a few seconds before a catastrophic explosion consumed both ships. May as well have a little fun before he died. "Teesha is unavailable right now, advisor. Is there something I can help you with?"

"Who is this?" the voice demanded angrily.

"Come now Chejop, you must remember me. You were so upset when I slept with your daughter," he grinned.

"Veras," Chejop bit back a curse.

"I wanted you to know it was me who destroyed your fleet, and that Salina has escaped. She's somewhere you'll never reach her," Veras taunted the Sidereal.

"It had to be done, Veras. I'm sorry," Chejop said. Surprisingly he sounded as if he meant it.

"Sorry? You're sorry?" Veras screamed through the speaking tube. "You've broken three millennia of Solar rule. Our capital lies in ruins and you're sorry? Enjoy your victory, because its temporary. We'll return one day Chejop, and you'd best find the biggest rock you can hide under when that day comes."

A tremendous wave of heat built beneath him. The explosion blinded anyone looking skyward as it consumed both warships. Veras last thought was of Salina. He wondered what she wore under that dress.