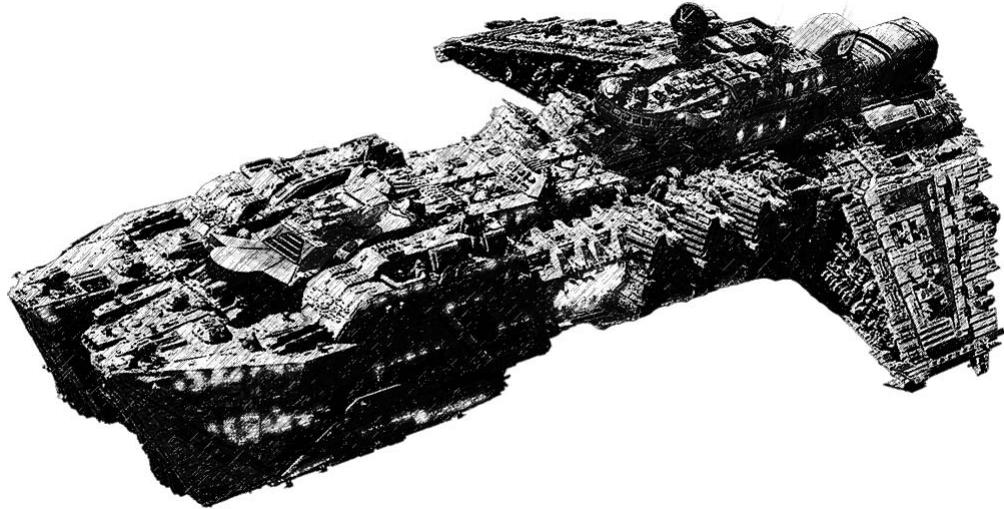


## **Chapter 15**



By the time Atton entered the *Spacer's Rest*, the officer's lounge on deck 17, he was still in a daze, so shocked by what had happened that he was completely oblivious to his surroundings. He stumbled up to the bar counter and signaled to Kerk for a drink. The bartender nodded and headed his way. "Maverick," he croaked.

"Sure."

"Hoi, motherfrekker, over here!" Gina called to him from the other end of the bar.

Atton turned and shook his head. *Not now Gina*, he thought, and looked away. He wasn't in the mood to deal with her. Not taking the hint, she made her way over to him and arrived just as Kerk sent a black maverick sailing down the counter into his open hand.

"You hear me?" Gina asked, tapping him roughly on the shoulder while taking an indecorous gulp from her own mug of beer.

"Put it on my tab," Atton said to the bartender, determined to ignore his XO. She reeked of beer, which was no small feat, since she couldn't have been in the lounge for more than twenty minutes. In that time only a third of the other pilots had made their way to the lounge. The others were likely catching up on sleep or grieving the dead in a less social way. Atton hadn't even had a chance to check their casualties. He was afraid to look and find someone he'd actually started to like missing from the Guardians' roster. *At least Gina's still around. But does she have to make that so painfully obvious?*

Atton turned and left the bar, heading for the most isolated part of the lounge so he could be alone.

Gina didn't let him get that far. She grabbed him by his shoulder and spun him to face her, forcing him to notice the fire burning in her amber eyes. He saw something

else there, too, but he didn't immediately recognize it. Then some of the fire in her eyes spilled to her cheeks, and he realized what it was.

"Frek you, Atton!" she spat, swiping angrily at her tears with the back of one hand. "You know a thank you would be nice."

Atton shook his head, uncomprehending. "For what?"

Gina's eyes flashed and she gave him a sudden shove which made him stumble backward a few steps. "For *what?*" she echoed.

Atton's own ire began to build. He recovered his balance with a scowl and loomed suddenly close to her face. "Watch yourself, Lieutenant. Would you care to explain that outburst?"

"Sure," she shrugged. "Why the frek not? You want to sit down for this, or take it standing up?"

"Just make it quick. I'm short on patience right now."

Gina's mouth curved in a bitter smile. "All right, let me summarize it for you. We're halfway to the *Intrepid* when we get ordered back out there to cover your ass. We're facing five to one odds, increasing by the second. Guardians lose Shafer and Tails on the first pass, but we manage to keep them off you. We give you your chance to get away so you can do whatever the frek it is you were doing out there. Then you go and get your ship disabled, and we're ordered to keep those fighters off your six until the *Intrepid* can grav you back in.

"Ordinarily no one pilot would be worth that kind of risk, but I guess being the admiral's stepson really does making you frekkin' special, because we're kept out there until the last frekking minute!"

"Gina, I . . ."

"I'm not done, Iceman! Not long after that, the *Intrepid* cloaks. They're still gravving you in so you'll be fine, but what about us? We can't even see the hangar! Orders come through to follow you in. I pick up three Shells along the way, and my wingmate gets the bright idea to peel off and distract them. He pulls off the impossible and sends all three to the netherworld with a pair of Hailfires. Just as he's coming back around to join the tail-end of our formation, hangar bay controllers pull the last Nova inside, leaving not even a trail of debris for him to follow. Then the Captain gives the order and we jump out, leaving him behind. Another few minutes and we would have been able to get him on board, too."

Atton felt like someone had dumped a bucket of ice over his head and now he was left shivering from the cold. He shook his head. "Saving one pilot wouldn't be worth the risk of sticking around."

"No? So why was saving your ass worth that risk? That man died for *you*. Because of *you*," she said, stabbing his chest with a finger.

"I . . ."

"Gettin' all choked up, are we, Iceman? No, your eyes are bone dry, aren't they? Bet you don't even have tear ducts."

Atton swallowed. "Who was it?"

"Perkins," she said with a brittle smile. A few more tears spilled to her cheeks and she shook her head. "It would just frekkin' figure that the one man who's actually better than he seems goes and gets himself killed for having such a big damn heart."

It wasn't lost on Atton that Gina and "Hawkeye" Perkins had been hooking up over the last week and that now Gina felt doubly bad—bad because he had meant something to her and now he was gone, and worse because of the mountain of guilt she felt over the fact that he'd saved her life only to be left for dead.

There was an even bigger mountain resting on Atton's shoulders. Three pilots in Guardian Squadron alone had lost their lives to rescue him. And who knew how many other officers had died while the *Intrepid* had slugged it out with Sythian warships, waiting for him to be pulled back on board. He'd already noticed several decks grayed out on lift tube control panels.

"Gina . . . I'm sorry," Atton managed in a thready whisper.

"You killed him."

"Tuner!"

Atton saw Ceyla Corbin come up behind Gina. "Leave him alone," she said.

"Why?" Gina asked, rounding on her. "Huh? What's he to you?" She gave Ceyla a shove, followed by another one, and—

Atton stepped between them and pushed them apart before Gina could find an excuse to start throwing punches.

Ceyla made an irritated noise in the back of her throat. "He's my commanding officer, and yours, too—or have you forgotten that?"

"A good commander should die for his men!" Gina spat, trying to get around Atton. "Not sit by and watch them all die for *him*!"

"It wasn't his fault. Captain's orders, remember? He couldn't even send comms, and he wasn't in charge of the squadron—you were."

"You frekkin' little slut . . . !"

Atton had to work hard to keep her away from Ceyla. "Hoi!" he yelled. "Cut it out Tuner! Frek it, Gina, I'm sorry, okay?" Atton said again, and he meant it. For some reason his eyes weren't supporting his apology with tears. He wasn't much of a crier, but that didn't mean he was as cold-hearted as Gina seemed to think.

"Frek you, Iceman!" Gina replied. "Couldn't have picked a better call sign for you if I'd asked your own mother to come up with it!"

Atton ignored her insults. "Look, if there's anything I can do . . . when's the memorial for . . . the people we lost?"

"You don't even remember their names, do you?"

Atton was ashamed to admit that was true. He did know his squad mates by name, but right now he couldn't remember which ones Gina had told him they'd lost. He'd had too many shocks in the last half hour to take it all in.

Gina took his silence for her answer. "That's what I thought!" she said, nodding slowly. "You know what, that's it! You want to make up for it? Let's see you put your own ass on the line. I'll be waiting in the ring, just in case you figure out what those ornaments dangling between your legs are for."

Atton watched, slack-jawed and wide-eyed as Gina turned and stalked away, heading for the ring on the other side of the bar. There in the distance, lay a square with high walls of red flexi-bars. Two miniature assault mechs stood awaiting activation in opposite corners of the ring, each of them almost as tall as a man, green status lights blinking on their chests in readiness. Those mechs were the avatars which officers typically used to settle their quarrels, but Gina had no intention of letting him hide behind a bot.

"She's just hurting, Commander," Ceyla said slowly. "Don't let it get to . . ." Atton strode by her, hot on Gina's heels.

"Hoi! Where are you going? Commander!" She caught up to him a second later. "Don't tell me you're actually going to fight her."

"That's exactly what I'm going to do," Atton replied.

"No offense, but she went through flight school and basic. She's trained in hand-to-hand combat. You didn't go through either basic or regular flight school, and you're *not* trained for this."

Atton turned to her with his eyebrows raised. "Since when is my training or lack thereof public knowledge?"

Ceyla grimaced. "Since Lieutenant Giord spent the last fifteen minutes telling everyone how unqualified you are to lead the squadron."

Atton sighed.

"I'm sorry, sir," Ceyla said. "I could be a witness if you want to file a report about her behavior."

"That's all right, Corbin."

"Don't fight her, sir. She's looking for someone to take it out on. You're not going to teach her to respect you by getting yourself beat within an inch of your life."

"I'm not going to teach *her* a lesson, Corbin. I'm going to teach myself one."

"What?! You feel guilty because some good men died following their orders to save you, and now you're going to punish yourself?"

They reached the ring right behind Gina. She turned to see Atton standing there and smirked. "Maybe they're not ornaments after all, hoi Commander?" With that, she turned to address everyone on deck, calling out, "Listen up! Commander Ortane's about to have his ass handed to him by myself and my two friends—" She held up both fists and waved them around. "'black,' and 'eye.' You don't want to miss this!"

Within seconds a crowd had gathered. Everyone in the lounge in fact—some fifteen men and women. Kerk the barman was nominated referee. He stepped up to Atton and handed him a pair of padded black gloves.

"Thanks," Atton said, accepting the gloves and undoing the straps to put them on.

Brawls weren't exactly against regulations. That was up to the captain of the ship, and most captains found that giving their crew a controlled way to hurt each other prevented more uncontrolled outbursts at less opportune times. Gina climbed through the padded flexi-bars surrounding the ring and clapped her fists together with a meaty smack. "Next one's for you, Iceman!" she said, lisping around a black mouth guard.

Kerk came up to Atton and patted him on the cheek to get his attention. "You know the rules?"

Atton shook his head. He'd never actually been in one of these fights, and he hadn't bothered to waste his sols betting on them.

"No eye gouging, no cheap shots, nothing below the belt, no elbows, and no kicks. Everything else is fair game. You want out, you tap the mat three times or say 'yield.' If no one yields, the winner is whoever can pin the other down for ten seconds or knock them out." Kerk handed him a blue mouth guard, and Atton popped it in. "You ready?"

He nodded.

"Atton . . ." Ceyla whispered, using his first name to get his attention. He turned to her and stared into her bright blue eyes for a long moment. "Don't do this," she pleaded.

"Sorry," he said, and with that, he ducked into the ring and went to stand in the corner opposite Gina.

"Frek him up!" someone yelled.

"Any bets?" Kerk asked, turning in a quick circle.

Atton saw a few hands shoot up. After that, Ceyla's hand went up, too, and Atton frowned. When he saw the bets go up on the holoscreen above the bar he noticed that Ceyla was betting on him to win. She'd put down 500 sols—half a month's pay at ten to one odds. He wanted to tell her not to be a skriff. She was the only one covering all the bets against him, meaning the winners would get to share out her paycheck—not that paychecks meant a whole lot now that they were going to spend the next four to five years stranded a thousand light years from Dark Space.

"All right! On the count of three," Kerk said. His count reached zero and Atton saw Gina come at him, stalking lithely with a sudden grace he'd somehow never noticed from her before.

He took a few steps forward to face off with her and brought his hands up in what he imagined to be a proper guard position to cover his face.

"Come on, Commander!" Ceyla called. She was all but drowned out by a dozen others rooting for Gina to beat the krak out of him.

"Hoi there, Iceman," Gina said as she took another step toward him.

Atton tightened up his guard.

Her right arm shot out in a blur and hit him in the gut, knocking the wind out of him. Atton grunted and took a step back. Cheers erupted from the audience. He brought up his guard again, this time with his left arm hanging slightly lower than his right to protect himself from any more blows aimed at his midsection. Gina came at him again, and she deliberately aimed for his left arm with hers, knocking it out of position so she could sneak in with a right cross to his face.

*Smack.*

That blow connected with the left side of his head, and he stumbled into the flexi-bars along the side of the ring. More cheering made it through the ringing in his ear. He just barely managed to duck another blow that was aimed for the back of his head. He ran away to face Gina from the opposite side of the ring. She grinned, revealing her shiny black mouth guard instead of teeth. "Come on!" she said. "Fight back!"

Atton took a quick step toward her as she approached. He ducked down to take a stab at her midsection, but she sidestepped the attack and hammered him on the back with both fists. He fell over and hit the springy floor with a *thud*. He wondered for a moment if Kerk had decided to stop refereeing, because the explosive ache he felt in his upper back felt like she'd hit him with her elbows rather than padded fists.

He tried to get up, only to have her land on top of him a second later. She got him in a choke hold and flipped him onto his back. His eyes began to bulge and his face turned red. He tried to pry her arm away, but part of him was resigned to it. Another few seconds and he could tap out. He began to count backward from ten inside his head.

"You know somethin' Ortane?" Gina interrupted. "I'm glad you turned me down. You're the last man on the planet I'd *ever* want to be with."

That hit a nerve. Atton gave a sudden shove, and Gina's arm came away from his throat. He twisted it with brute strength until she shrieked and let him go. He stumbled to his feet and turned to see her clutching her right arm to her body like a broken wing.

Seeing that he felt a sudden flash of regret, and he noticed Kerk walk up to Gina's side of the ring. "You okay to continue, Lieutenant?"

"I'm fine," she spat.

Atton was just about to yield when Gina let out a roar and ran at him. Unsure what to do, he just stood there, biding his time until she came within arm's reach so he could sidestep her momentum.

Somehow, she anticipated him and leapt to the same side he did, knocking him to the floor. His knees hit with a painful *thud*, and then Gina began pummeling his face with her fists. He tried to curl up into a fetal position to protect his head, but she actually pulled him to his feet and began hammering him in the stomach instead. He had the sense to double over and protect that area, but then the blows found his face

again, and pretty soon her fists were the only thing he could either see or hear. He ended up backed against the flexi-bars at the edge of the ring feebly trying to fend off alternating blows to his stomach and face.

"Gina, I'm sorry!" he croaked. He wasn't sure she heard him through all her grunting, but it didn't matter. Even if she forgave him, he wouldn't forgive himself. An untold number of officers had died to save him, and for what? The greater good? He wouldn't even have a chance to complete the mission they'd fought and died to help him accomplish. It was all for nothing. They'd died for nothing!

"That's enough!"

Atton heard that scream only dimly through the ringing in his ears. Through one badly swollen eye he saw Gina being lifted away from him, kicking and screaming. Then she was thrown to one side where she hit the floor with a *bang* and a roar of outrage. A blurry Ceyla Corbin turned to address the not-so-innocent bystanders. "You should be ashamed of yourselves! This isn't an honorable match! It's an excuse to beat up your commanding officer!"

"I'm going to kill you," Gina mumbled around her mouth guard. She bounced to her feet and started advancing on Ceyla, who for her part, took up a professional fighting stance and turned to face off with her commanding officer bare-handed. They were almost within striking range before Kerk magically appeared between the two women.

"Stand down, Tuner!" Kerk said, giving Gina a shove to emphasize his point. "Stand down! Corbin isn't part of this match."

For a moment, Gina looked like she was about to hit Kerk instead, but then she lowered her fists and stalked away. The barman was an old navy sentinel, forty plus, with a pair of artificial legs that had left him tending bar aboard the *Intrepid* during his rehab. He was a giant of a man with sledgehammers for fists. Atton saw Kerk stalking toward him with both of those hammers ready to go to work on him, and he irrationally assumed that's what the barman was going to use them for. He began struggling against the flexi-bars where he was still slumped, trying to regain his footing and get away.

When Kerk reached him, he winced in anticipation of the blow, but it never came. One of those giant hands opened up to land on his shoulder. "You all right there, Commander?"

"Awul eee wime," he slurred.

"How many fingers?" Kerk asked, holding up one hand with a dozen fingers.

"Fifteen?" Atton suggested.

Kerk shook his head and bent down to drape one of Atton's arms over his shoulders. He stood up, forcing Atton to his feet. "I'm calling it," he said, turning to address the crowd in a booming voice. "Tuner wins, but Green V's right—this was no match."

A few subdued cheers reached Atton's ears.

"Hoi!" Ceyla said. "That's it—pat yourselves on the back for kicking a man when he's down!"

After an indeterminate amount of time spent stumbling through the ring with Kerk, Atton noticed Ceyla Corbin appear on the other side of him. She draped his other arm over her shoulders and asked, "Is he going to be okay?"

"Doc will have to answer that. I'm no expert, but I'd say he's lightly concussed."

"What the frek were you thinking, Commander?" she asked. "You have a death wish or something? Why didn't you tap out?"

Atton smiled. He'd never heard Ceyla curse before. He tried to summon the energy for a reply but gave up when he realized how nauseated he was. When they carried him out through the bars on the other side of the ring he almost threw up on the deck.

"I'm fine," he finally managed as they half carried, half dragged him to the lift tubes at the far end of the lounge.

"No, you're not," Ceyla hissed.

And then the intercom buzzed and Atton heard Captain Caldin's voice begin echoing through the room to give everyone the bad news. After that, no one was fine. Kerk began cursing, and Ceyla abruptly lost her hold on his arm. Atton hit the deck and a spark of pain erupted in his coccyx; then he fell back and lay staring up at a blurry ceiling. He watched the room spin around his head a few times before his open eye drifted shut. The darkness found him, and he wondered for a moment if this was what it would look like if he stepped out an airlock into the dark nebula where the *Intrepid* was stranded. He was tempted to ask Ceyla to join him in the nebula, but before he could, his thoughts sailed away in a parade of nonsense.

\* \* \*



One day later . . .

Ethan sat on the overlarge bed in the honeymoon suite of the Vermillion Palace, his back propped up with a pair of thick pillows while he watched Karpathia One, the holonews station with the most up-to-date coverage of events. So far the Sythians hadn't shut down any of the news channels. Based on the news being reported, Ethan suspected he understood why. Right now the live news feed showed a few dozen meteors lighting up the night sky and raining fire down all over Karpathia City. Ethan's jaw hung open and his expression was frozen in horror as those meteors hit occupied buildings and expensive suburbs with explosive force, leveling them in seconds and leaving nothing but rising clouds of smoke, dust, and bright, flickering flames. When it was over, the camera panned to show columns of smoke rising into the night to punctuate the sky, and then it cut back to the reporter on scene, standing high above the city on a nearby escarpment.

"This marks the tenth group of runaways to be shot down since the occupation began. The Sythians' message is clear—if you run, we *will* catch you. As a fellow citizen of the former Imperium and a fellow human being, this reporter urges you, do *not* resist, and do *not* run. We—"

Ethan heard the bedroom door open and he waved his hand to turn off the holoscreen just seconds before Alara breezed in with a wan smile on her face. "Did you have a nice nap, darling?" she asked. Then her smile faded to a frown as she noticed his expression. "What's wrong?"

Ethan shook his head and forced a smile of his own. "Nothing, sweetheart."

Alara had spent the past day basking in denial. Humanity had lost its freedom and the war, and she appeared to be welcoming their Sythian masters with open arms. Ethan wasn't sure when she was going to snap out of it, but he couldn't sit around waiting for that to happen. He had to act before it was too late.

Until just five minutes ago, he'd been planning to lure Alara aboard their corvette and then lock her in a storeroom while he attempted to run through the Sythian blockade, but that plan was looking more and more hopeless as time went by. In the last day there had already been almost a hundred ships that had tried to flee, and not one of them had actually escaped. Ethan considered himself a good pilot—far better than the average with his 5A rating—but no one was good enough to run through an entire Sythian fleet all by themselves. Enemy ships could be cloaked and hiding anywhere in orbit, or even in the atmosphere. Anyone blasting off from the surface without a cloaking shield would be spotted and intercepted by Sythian forces immediately.

Alara held Ethan's gaze for a long moment before turning to look at the holoscreen sitting opposite the bed. Then she turned back to him with one eyebrow raised. "You've been watching the newscasts."

"Yes," he admitted.

"I thought we agreed not to watch them anymore. We agreed we were going to lie low up here and try to enjoy our honeymoon, because there's nothing we can do about anything that's going on."

"I agreed *we* would stop watching the news. I said nothing about watching it on my own."

Alara's violet eyes narrowed. "Fine. Any new developments you'd like to share?"

Ethan shook his head. "Just more of the same. Nothing you need to worry about."

She held his gaze a moment longer before her expression softened and she turned away with a shrug. "All right."

Ethan watched her walk into the bathroom and shut the door behind her. How could she be so blasé about everything that was happening? She should have been glued to the holoscreen, just like him. A moment later he heard the shower running, and he waved the holoscreen back on. Images swirled out of the screen. Karpathia One was still showing live footage of the burning capital. Then it switched to an earlier recording of a transport fleeing for orbit only to get struck down seconds after liftoff by a squadron of Shell Fighters which came swooping down out of the clouds. Those Shells flew past the holocam with a stuttering blast of *sonic booms* that rattled through the suite's sound system. Ethan raised his hand and snapped it shut, imitating a mouth closing with his hand. The volume of the newscast dropped swiftly, and he turned to eye the bathroom door, expecting Alara to burst out and see what the noise was about, but the shower stayed on, and the door stayed closed.

*Oblivious*, he thought, shaking his head. Alara's attitude was infuriating, but in some ways she was right. He'd just finished watching what happened to people like him—people who refused to give up. Those people got sent straight to the netherworld.

Ethan got up from the bed and walked over to the wall of windows on the far side of the suite. He stopped there and stood beside the suite's whirlpool tub to peer down through the breaks in the clouds to the town of Ostin far below. The city lights were dim and bleached of color by the thick blanket of smoke which hung over the town. Here and there, bright patches of orange peeked through the smoke. Ostin was on fire. Ethan knew from watching the news that most of the damage was from looters and rioters rather than crashed starships. The Sythians had a zero tolerance for disorderly conduct, but that didn't stop people from panicking and running away with whatever supplies they could find or steal.

People kept running, and the Sythians kept chasing. Planet- and space-bound runaways alike were all greeted with the same ruthless efficiency, and the same inevitable result.

A cold weight of despair settled in Ethan's gut, and suddenly he felt far older than his 46 years. He watched the fires of Ostin burn between dark puffs of cloud. From where he stood, high above the town at the top of White Cap Mountain, those fires looked like candles, flickering feebly against the night. As he watched, a new candle

flared to life, marking some other patch of resistance. Ethan shook his head, thinking about all the trillions of lives lost in the original invasion. He thought about the last few million humans in Dark Space, now throwing their lives away again in a stubborn bid for independence that they could never win. From up here it all seemed so pointless, and so futile. His thoughts turned to his son, Atton, and Ethan hoped that he'd had the sense to stand down when the order to surrender had come. He hoped that Atton was somewhere safe, biding his time until the resistance died down and everyone accepted the new status quo. And with those thoughts, Ethan realized that even he had given up. There was nothing any of them could do. Even if a lucky few made it as far as the entrance of Dark Space, they would just encounter more Sythians there and be intercepted before they could jump out.

*Alara's right,* Ethan thought, his eyes widening with the realization. His wife wasn't deluding herself the way he thought. She wasn't in denial, and she hadn't lost her mind. He was the one who'd been in denial—denying that the war was over, denying that the Sythians had won. *Alara's not happy about any of this; she's just smart enough not to fight a battle that can't be won . . . smart enough to make the best of a bad situation.* It wasn't as though the Sythians were promising death to everyone. They wanted loyal, trained soldiers and crews for their fleets. Humanity was going to give them that, just like the Gors once had. The Sythians would have their endless supply of officers. Humanity would give them their children until the end of time, because anyone who refused to serve them would be killed, and when faced with death, a life of servitude didn't look so bad.

Except that it was.

*What's life without freedom?* Ethan wondered. *Is that what we've come to? Living life for the sake of living it just one more day? Better to die fighting to be free than to live life in a cage.* Ethan had learned all about cages during his stay on the prison world of Etaris. The planet had no prison cells. It was run by criminals and populated by criminals. Certain trade restrictions applied, and no one was allowed to leave, but otherwise the prisoners there were free. During his sentence there, Ethan had learned that sometimes the strongest cages are the ones people build for themselves.

The strongest of those was despair.

Ethan began nodding slowly, his eyes narrowing on the smoke-clouded pinpricks of firelight raging through the town of Ostin below. *You want to clip my wings? You'll have to cut them off.* His jaw muscles bunched as he ground his teeth together. *Come and get me, Skull Faces.*